Swahili Poetry's Digital Geographies: WhatsApp and the Forming of Cultural Space

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Introduction

Every time a new member is added to the mobile messaging group *Majagina wa Ushairi* – a name which translates roughly to "Poetry's Heroes" – one of the group's administrators posts an eighteen-point list detailing the rules for participation. The list has been modified a few times since the group was created in 2014 on the digital messaging platform WhatsApp, but the central tenets have remained the same. Among them: you must post in Kiswahili; you must post in verse; you must adhere to the conventions of traditional Swahili prosody; and if you break the rules, you will be removed.

Majagina wa Ushairi's rigid boundaries on rhetorical form are its defining feature, a point of pride for its administrators and one which distinguishes the group from other virtual literary communities of East Africans. Indeed, *Majagina* constitutes just one example from the veritable explosion of social media and messaging groups for the composition, circulation and consumption of poetry in Kiswahili in the last decade and a half. And compared to Facebook groups like *Kisima cha Mashairi*, for instance, which boasts over 20,000 followers, *Majagina wa Ushairi* is a modest community; its numbers fluctuate, but as of writing, the group includes just over 160 members primarily in Tanzania and Kenya, with a few members of the Kiswahili-speaking diaspora in other parts of the continent and the Middle East.

Despite the small size and self-proclaimed exceptionalism of its membership, however, and the unusual rigidity of the rules that govern it, *Majagina wa Ushairi* is more than a curious anomaly. The group offers a potent example, first, of the particular social and political work accomplished by literary and linguistic form in East Africa, and, second, of the entanglements between the boundaries of these forms and the imagined boundaries of social and cultural space, even in the supposed groundlessness of the digital ether. In fact, it is perhaps precisely within the apparently deterritorialized realm of the digital

that the spatiality of social relations, indeed the construction of space itself, is the most transparently visible. In this article I hope to lay out the ways in which the circumscription of literary, linguistic and discursive forms permitted within the *Majagina wa Ushairi* group operates in complex and intertwined relationship with the construction of social and spatial boundaries within the context of the discourse itself. Further, I hope to reveal how the group's members evoke the geographic, even as they appeal to the post-territoriality of the digital context, erecting protective (and familiarizing) barriers even as they struggle against the containment they themselves impose.

Entering Ujaginani, Becoming Jagina

The eighteen rules for membership in *Majagina wa Ushairi*, constitute a foreboding mass of text, posted as a block (in a single text bubble) by one of the group's administrators every time a new member is added to theWhatsApp group:

KANUNI NA SHERIA ZA KUNDI LA MAJAGINA WA USHAIRI

1. Hairuhusiwi kuandika kwa kifupi mfano C badala ya SI, 2 badala ya Unaruhusiwa kutumia aina na bahari yeyote ya ushairi wa Kiswahili (kimapokeo).
2. . Inkisari ya sheria za mashairi ndio inaruhusiwa.
3. Matumizi ya lugha za kigeni nje ya kiswahili hayaruhusiwi ikiwa hakuna ulazima wa kufanya hivyo.
4. Matusi hayaruhusiwi.
5. Jagina ni lazima achangie ili tupate mawazo na michango yake, kama una dharura toa taarifa.
6. Tabia ya kubagua mada za kuchangia haitakiwi (Unatakiwa kuchangia bila kujali nani aliyetuma)Soma kila utungo husika kwa usahihi kabla ya kuchangia (Ili kuepusha migongano ya mawazo)

RULES AND REGULATIONS OF THE *MAJAGINA WA USHAIRI* GROUP

1. Writing in abbreviations, for example C instead of SI, 2 instead of TU, is not permitted. Condensing syllables according to poetic convention is permitted.
2. The use of foreign languages other than Kiswahili is not permitted if there is no necessity in doing so.
3. Profanity is not permitted.
4. Every *jagina* must contribute so that we might benefit from their ideas and contributions. If you have an emergency, give notice.
5. Discrimination in deciding which topics to contribute to is undesirable (you are expected to contribute without concern for who has suggested the topic).
6. You are permitted to use any (received) form of Swahili poetry.

7. Unapomkaribisha mgeni (kumuongeza) hakikisha unampa sheria ili azifahamu kwa usahihi.

8. Jinsia na dini ziheshimiwe (Hili kundi sio la dini fulani) Shairi linalohusu dini lisikwaze dini nyingine.

9. Jinsia na dini ziheshimiwe (Hili kundi sio la dini fulani) Shairi linalohusu dini lisikwaze dini nyingine.

10. Mada zisizohusiana na kundi haziruhusiwi.

11. Sheria na kanuni hizi zinaweza kubadilika, kuongezeka au kupungua muda wowote itakapobidi kufanya hivyo

12. Kila mtu huenda ana chama chake cha siasa, hili kundi sio sehemu ya kampeni.

13. Picha na video zisizokuwa na maadili mazuri haziruhusiwi kutumwa kwenye kundi hili.

14. Hairuhusiwi kwa mtu yeyote kubadilisha picha au jina la kundi isipokuwa awe Admini kama unahitaji mabadiliko yeyote mtumie Admini halafu yeye ndio atabadilisha.

15. Matangazo ya biashara yasiyohusiana na ushairi hayaruhusiwi.

16. Lazima kuandika kwa mfumo wa kishairi tu. Isipokuwa kwenye darasa, kikaango, mjadala maalumu wa jukwaa au kutoa tangazo/taarifa.

17. Wakati wa DARASA LA USHAIRI ambao ni kila juma mosi saa 2:30 - 4:30 usiku, mwanachama haruhusiwi kutuma kitu chochote ambacho kitakuwa hakiendani na darasa labda kiwe cha dharura au Kamati ya Taaluma ikitoa tangazo kama darasa halitakuwepo siku hiyo.

18. Mtu atakayevunja sheria mara ya kwanza ataonywa (ikiwa si kwa makusudi), na akirudia mara ya pili atatolewa. Isipokuwa sheria namba 3, 9, 12, 13, 14 na 15 atatolewa hapohapo hata ikiwa ndio mara ya kwanza mpaka uongozi utakapomfikiria kumrudisha tena.

7. Read every poem under discussion accurately before contributing (to avoid disagreements)

8. When welcoming (adding) a newcomer, be sure you give them the rules so that they have an accurate understanding of them.

9. Gender and religion should be respected (this is not a group of any particular religion). Religious poems should not slander other religions.

10. Topics not relating to the group are not permitted.

11. These rules and regulations are subject to change, to be added to or subtracted from at any time that it becomes necessary to do so

12. Every person may have their own political party, but this group is not for campaigning.

13. Pictures and videos that are disrespectful are not permitted to be distributed within this group.

14. It is not permitted for anyone to change the picture or name of this group other than an Admin; if you require a change of any kind, send to the Admin and they will make the changes.

15. Business advertisements unrelated to poetry are not allowed.

16. It is required to write only in poetic form. Other than during “class” time, during the “frying pan” forum, during special debates on the stage or when making announcements.

17. During POETRY CLASS time, which is every Saturday night from 8:30-10:30, no participant is permitted to send anything that does not pertain to the class unless it is an emergency or the Education Committee makes an announcement that class will not be held that day.

18. Anyone who breaks a rule will be given a warning the first time (if it is not deliberate), and if they repeat the breach a second time, they will be removed. The exceptions are rules number 3, 9, 12, 13, 14, and 15, in which case they will be removed immediately even on the first instance until the administration decides to allow them to return. decides to allow them to return.

The list dominates the message thread, re-posted every time a new member is added, or a rule is broken, sometimes multiple times in a row. Scrolling through a week or two of the group feed, the list appears as a recurrent interruption of the flow of conversation between members, an insistent visual reminder of the rhetorical boundaries imposed on discourse within the group and of the authority of its administrators.

Alongside this repeated posting of boundaries, however, a newcomer is often greeted – in an entirely different tone – by a welcome in verse from one of the other members. Rule number eight suggests, after all, that to add a new member to the group is indeed "kukaribisha mgeni" (to welcome a guest or a stranger). One such welcome poem, originally written by poet Dotto Rangimoto, has been posted on multiple occasions with the addition of a new member to the group. The poem, titled simply "Karibu, Jagina, Karibu" (Welcome, Jagina, Welcome) begins like this:[1]

1 Karibu ndugu karibu, jisikie u nyumbani, Keti upate kababu, toa shaka mtimani, Umepewa taratibu, soma ziweke kitwani. Jagina karibu ndani, karibu wetu sahibu.	1 Welcome, sister [sibling, relation], welcome, feel you are at home, Sit and have a bite to eat, let your soul release any doubt, You've been given a description of our rules, read them and internalize them [keep them in your head]. *Jagina,* welcome inside; welcome, our friend.
2 Jina la baba na babu, tutajie hadharani, Sisaahu na lakabu, unotumia dimbani, Ukipenda na muhibu, aliye mwako kichwani. Jagina karibu ndani, karibu wetu sahibu.	2 Please tell us in public the names of your father and grandfather, And don't forget to give us the nickname you use in the arena, If you want you can name your sweetheart, the one who occupies your mind. *Jagina,* welcome inside; welcome, our friend
3 Naomba nipe sababu, zakupenda hino fani, Unambie taratibu, nielewe kwa undani, Sinione nina gubu, kukujua natamani, Jagina karibu ndani, karibu wetu sahibu.	3 Please give me your reasons for loving this craft, Take your time so I can understand deeply Don't think I am looking for faults, I only want to know you, *Jagina*, welcome inside; welcome, our friend

(4/25/16, 2:54 pm; 4/20/16, 7:08 pm; 5/3/16, 9:56 am, etc.)

From its opening lines, Rangimoto's poem performs a social embrace. The terms of address he uses – ndugu (sibling), sahibu (friend) – work to reduce the social distance between himself and the newcomer. His appeal for personal details, for knowledge and understanding, and his promise of a deep and thoughtful listening communicate care and familial intimacy. The poet's repeated reassurances against doubt or fear of judgment seem leveraged as counterbalance to the austerity of the rules for participation. As if to say, "we are strict here, but you are accepted!" Indeed, the welcome poem makes of the invitee an immediately title-bearing member of the group, addressed from the outset as "jagina."

More than just a note of familiarity and encouragement, however, Rangimoto's poem also explicitly conjures space. The opening lines invite motion inward, toward an intimate interior; welcome *ndani*, it says in the first stanza, "sit and eat," "feel you are at home." The "inside" implies an "out there" from which the stranger has come. These spatializing gestures are both lexical and grammatic; the recurring final syllable -ni that creates the poem's final rhyme performs a locative function in many of the lines. This suffix transforms the object into container, context, site of relations. "Nyumbani," for instance, is not the house (nyumba) itself but the space within and surrounding it, and more importantly, the *place* of "home"; -ni added to "kichwa" or "kitwa" (head) makes of tissue and bone a locus of names and memories, a storage place for knowledge. In the process, Rangimoto situates poet and reader, welcomer and welcomed, in physical and social space.

This evocation of space and physical drawing inward recurs in the welcome poems of other members as well, with the performance of welcoming often explicitly narrated:

Karibu ukaribie	Welcome, come close
Na kiti ukikalie	And take this chair to sit
Pashida uvumilie	Where there's a problem, be patient
Pamoya tutatulie	Together we will solve it
Ukae na utulie	Sit and relax
Ulonavyo tugawie	Whatever you have let's share it
-Jasmin Ally Kinga	
(11/21/2017, 11:50 pm)	

In many of the poems the term "Majagina" describes not just the members of the group but the place itself. In one, by poet Njonjolo Mudhihir, the dimensions of this place called "Majagina" are emphasized by narrations of physical motion and descriptions of bodily proximity:

Asubuhi meamka,	This morning I awoke
Nipitie majagina,	And decided to pass by Majagina
Basi nikafurahika,	And oh how I was happy
Kuna jina nimeona,	To see a new name
Metandika na mkeka,	I have spread out the woven mat,
Mgeni karibu sana,	Guest, you are very welcome.
Karibia Odo wangu,	Please come close, my Odo,
Hapa ndipo Majagina.	This place is indeed Majagina.

(10/22/16, 7:33 am)

The additional locative forms of "pa" and "po" in Mudhihir's final line again signal physical space, pinning the rhetorical "mkeka" (woven mat) to the specific location he names "Majagina."

Kiswahili's expansive capacity for grammatical spatialization (a feature of Bantu languages) is further employed by poet R.A. Khamis—known in the group by his literary alias, Abuu Abii. In another set of welcome poems, he emphasizes both intimacy and interiority by use of the class prefix "m-" and the demonstrative "humu," which together designate a specifically interior location, a state of being within. The verses read:

Karibu *mwetu* kundini, *mwetu* kundi majagina,	Welcome into our group, inside our group *majagina*
Ustafidi kwa fani, fani iliyo mwanana,	Benefit from this craft, a gentle craft
Ela uchunge kanuni, zichunge dada Merina	Be sure you heed the rules, heed them sister Merina
Karibu kwa majagina	Welcome to the place of the *majagina*

(4/10/18, 1:35 pm; emphasis mine)

Karibu ewe jagina, *humu* ndo ujaginani,	Welcome o *jagina*, this interior (inside here) is the *jagina* place,
Ni kundi la waungwana, wanaendeleza fani,	It is a group for the cultured, advancing the craft
Majungu nazo fitina, *humu* hazitakikani,	Gossip and strife are not wanted here inside
Karibu ewe kijana	Welcome o young one

(4/10/18, 2:00 pm; emphasis mine)

Majagina wa Ushairi emerges in these poems as something more than a network of individuals with a common interest; *Majagina* is an (imagined) destination in and of itself, a bounded space, both physical and social, into which newcomers are welcomed and received, and a *place* with nuanced significance to the writers of these poems. The delineation of physical space in the poetic discourse is thus intimately intertwined with social relations. As the newcomer is drawn into the space, they are addressed in terms that impart belonging. The direct address of "ewe jagina" alongside the place-naming of "humu" as "ujaginani" (literally, the place of bravery or heroism) makes explicit

that entrance into the intimate interior of the *Majagina* abode imparts inclusion in the designation of the *jagina* title.

In some cases the illocutionary force of the naming has the effect almost of incantation. One poem not only repeats Abuu Abii's apostrophe ("ewe jagina"), but claims the newcomer on behalf of the group, engulfing her in the first-person plural. The verse consists almost entirely of performative utterances:

Karibu wetu jagina, mbora ulo tulia, Sisi twakupenda sana, hakika twakuridhia, Sisi hatuna hiyana, mwenzetu twakuambia, Ewe jagina Merina, sisi tumekupokea. -Omary Athuman Thabit (4/10/2018, 2:49 pm)	Welcome *jagina* of ours, you good, gentle person, We love you very much, truly we accept you We tell you our fellow, we have no treachery O *jagina* Merina, we receive you.

"We love you," "we accept you," "we receive you." With these speech acts, Merina is almost ceremonially conferred as a fellow member and anointed with the qualities—goodness, gentleness—of poetic heroism. Entry into the place of "Majagina" or "Ujaginani" begets the naming of "jagina," a naming that imparts the characteristics necessary for the title, and dissolves the individual into the unity of the first person plural.

The welcome poems thus perform with words in multiple ways. At its most basic the act of welcoming is a social practice, the execution of which performs a particular kind of social relation and describes a particular kind of social space. This is space as a verb, as cultural geographers would have it.[2] As Gillian Rose argues, drawing on Judith Butler, "space is … a doing … it does not pre-exist its doing, and … its doing is the articulation of relational performances" (248). The first lines of Rangimoto's poem quoted above, for instance, construct "home" not just by naming the space "nyumbani," but by mimicking its social imperatives. Social actions, at least the poetic narration of such actions – rolling out the mat, offering the metaphorical "something to eat" – form the very contours of the *majagina* place. "[S]pace is practiced, a matrix of play, dynamic and iterative, its forms and shapes produced through the citational performance of self-other relations" (Rose 248).

Yet another welcome exchange between group administrator Idd Mwimbe and the then newly added Aunt Bim Abeid makes explicit the role of poetry itself in defining these relations:

Ukaribie mgeni, anti yangu bimkubwa, Japokuwa ni wa Pwani, hapa hakuna ubwabwa, Bali pamejaa ghani, na tungo pia zibebwa, Karibu ukaribie, jisikie furahani. -Idd Mwimbe (10/22/16, 7:40 am)	Welcome, guest, my respected Aunty, Although I am from the coast, this place has no rice to offer, Instead it is full of sung poems, and written ones are also brought to you, Welcome, please come close, feel you are in a place of happiness.

Ghani mithili ubwabwa, Mwimbe kipenzi sikia Zina viojo vikubwa, vya ladha ukitambua Kidogo huwa kikubwa, walumbi wakipania Ghani Ni Kama ubwabwa, wa Mpishi anojua -Aunt Bim Abeid (10/22/16, 8:02am)	Sung poetry is just like rice, my dear, Mwimbe, listen It has a very sweet taste if you know how to recognize it Small things become momentous, when performers take them up Sung poetry is just like rice, when cooked by a chef with skill

This exchange performs a substitution: the traditional substance of the welcome act is swapped out for the stuff of poetic language. The social cohesion fostered by a shared meal, here marked as a food "from the coast," is projected upon the shared experience of a poetic performance. Both, interchangeably, operate as what Gill Valentine calls "collective acts of consumption":

> …food is one way of acting out a fiction of community and of struggling against imagined forces of disintegration, but it is also a linking process, a way of expressing cultural unity, of not just composing but also recomposing boundaries. (53)

Poetry, in this formulation, constitutes the shared substrate of community and its abundance signals that community's reintegration.

At the same time, the ceremony surrounding naming (of both place and members) suggests that the work of the *Majagina wa Ushairi* group goes beyond community building and may be better described as a project of social or cultural identity formation. Writing about the creative expressions of African diasporic communities, and particularly Black women, Katherine McKittrick has described the "naming of place" as a "process of self-assertion" and "an act of naming the self" (xxii). She writes: "if one moves through, rebuilds, contests, or even 'says' space, 'natural' geographic arrangements are called into question" (146). While the members of *Majagina* perform a familiar understanding of "home," they simultaneously name it and themselves anew, articulating the boundaries of a new set of relations, specifically dependent upon poetic dialogue. This place is Ujaginani,

where the mat is spread out to welcome you, where poet-heroes gather like family and feast on poetry.

Geographies of Coast and Mainland

Mwimbe and Abeid's coding of poetry as food of the coast already gestures to geographies beyond the imagined confines of the *Majagina* abode. Indeed, the intimate and egalitarian "home" described by the poems I have quoted so far is not the only space formed by the "doings" of the *Majagina wa Ushairi* group. The construction of Ujaginani as a space of "nyumbani" intersects (and sometimes collides) with multiple other spatial articulations that emerge from the poetic discourse on the platform. But understanding the interplay of these spatial imaginaries requires first a consideration of the geographies of Swahili literary history.

The metered verse forms that the *Majagina* administrators mark as "kimapokeo" (received or conventional poetry) in rule number six have their origin in the unique syncretic culture that formed out of centuries of interchange between the indigenous residents of a thin strip of the East African coast – from modern-day southern Somalia to northern Mozambique –and traders from across the Indian ocean – Arab, Persian and Indian – who some scholars believe began arriving as early as the 1st century AD (Mazrui). Poetry, and particularly dialogic poetry, has played a central role in Swahili coastal culture for centuries—the earliest manuscripts of recorded poetry date back to the 1600s with the practice (both oral and written) generally believed to have emerged much earlier. The tradition includes roughly a dozen unique verse forms, each with its own set of prosodic rules regarding rhyme, meter, stanzaic structure and patterns of repetition (Nabahany; Shariff, Tungo Zetu). Poetic exchange has long played an important role in Swahili society in the solidification of interpersonal relationships and the resolution of conflict, among both individuals and larger communities.

The choice of the name "jagina" itself quietly gestures to this cultural history. In interviews about the group, Mwimbe has explained his use of "majagina" to denote more than brave ones or heroes, but also "wataalamu," "magwiji," "waliobobea" – experts, specialists, virtuosos of poetic composition. This merging of poetic ability with heroism evokes the most widely celebrated epic hero of the Swahili tradition, Fumo Liyongo, who legendarily used his poetic prowess to escape imprisonment. As Swahili scholar Ibrahim Noor Shariff has written:

> The figure of Fumo Liyongo remains deeply embedded in the cultural imagination of the Swahili people, having become an almost iconic representation of the depth, the achievement, and the ambience of the

> culture as a whole. That he lived a thousand years ago, more or less, has come to symbolize the longevity of the poetic tradition as well as the early achievement of excellence within this tradition. That Fumo Liyongo was at once a major poet and a "hero" in the social world makes him, for the collective imagination, the embodiment of that combination of the poetic utterance and social practice which epitomizes the Swahili ideal of a fully developed human potential. (153-4)

While these traditions of formal verse and poetic exchange grew out of the specific cultural milieu of the East African coast and were pivotal to the development of a Swahili ethnocultural identity that persists today, the composition of Swahili poetry has long moved outside the confines of these communities into wider national and regional spheres. As the Kiswahili language itself spread inland via expanded trade networks in the nineteenth century and the interventions of colonial governments and missionary educators, poetry followed. The emergence of print newspaper circulation from the late nineteenth century further increased the circulation of poetry in Kiswahili and provided new venues for poetic dialogue (Askew 515–16). In the twentieth century, Shaaban Robert, a poet native to the northern coast of Tanzania, played a critical role in engaging popular audiences outside his coastal community by simplifying poetic forms and using a poetic diction closer to the newly standardized Kiswahili than to any of the myriad dialects spoken in the particular locations along the coast where poetic practice had originally thrived. Along with the promotion of Kiswahili to the status of national language in the newly independent Tanzania under Julius Nyerere, Swahili poetry, and particularly the poetic forms of *ushairi* and *utenzi* were strongly promoted as an integral part of national cultural policy and thus appropriated as a symbol of national rather than ethnic or territorial affiliation. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, then, particularly after a group of students and faculty at the University of Dar es Salaam began experimenting with writing free verse in Kiswahili, a fierce debate flowered surrounding the appropriate modes of poetic discourse in Kiswahili. Poets closely tied to the ruling party in Tanzania defended the formal prosodic tradition as a marker of national unity and decolonization. Others, from Swahili coastal communities themselves, responded by laying public claim to Kiswahili language and literature, arguing that the best bearers of the authentic Swahili tradition (and thus the appropriate producers of Swahili literature) were not the people from the mainland who acquired so-called “Swahili” identity by political means but those who had been raised within the geographic boundaries of traditional Swahili communities (see Arenberg 2019). Debates over poetic form in Kiswahili continued for decades, in literature classrooms and at university conferences, in newspaper poetry sections and on radio programs, and in the prefaces of countless books of poetry and criticism.

Majagina wa Ushairi’s rigid rules pertaining to language and prosody cannot be understood independently from this history of

contention surrounding poetic form in Kiswahili. The rules that govern communication on the thread reproduce and extend the generic constraints of formal Swahili poetry. The conformity of utterance to established guidelines of language, rhyme and meter is mandated alongside social conformities of other kinds. Like all borders, the ones established here both protect and threaten. The heroic bravery suggested by the name "jagina" – even as it nods to the heroes of Swahili epics of old – implies a protective role in the present, guardians of traditional culture and language, of established norms of poetic practice, social practice, and of the community defined (and encircled) by their adherence to these forms.

As such, *Majagina wa Ushairi* performs a version of an idealized traditional Swahili coastal community, a community where, as Sharif has described Swahili societies, dialogic poetry "arises as a cumulative effect out of [the] widespread social pursuit of literary excellence in everyday speech" (139), where "[v]irtually anyone … is able to compose poems with a shared texture of metaphoric expression," and where "[v]ersification and the development of symbolic language … emerge as shared attributes of [the] society as a whole, not as the specialized skills of a separate category of literate persons" (199-200). According to the group's welcome poems, everyone in Ujaginani is "jagina" – linguistically homogenous and inherently agile-tongued.

But even as the group adheres to a very culturally specific form of poetic discourse originating in the Swahili coast and exalting the acknowledged masters from that cultural origin, the group carefully redraws the boundaries of the poetic community – of the "home" of Ujaginani – beyond the geographic confines of the Swahili coast. The pluralism of the community is also a topic of frequent refrain. As another one of Mwimbe's welcome poems reads:

Karibu wetu mgeni, karibia jukwaani, Humu tunao wa pwani, hata bara wamo ndani, Washairi wa nchini, pia na nchi jirani, Karibu ukaribie, ujihisi unyumbani. (4/24/16, 2:12pm)	Welcome our guest, welcome to the stage In(side) here we have people from the coast, from the mainland, and people from neighboring countries. Welcome, come close, feel you are at home.

Another, by Abuu Abii, appropriates the term "waungwana" (cultured or civilized people) – which was historically used specifically to distinguish members of the Islamic coastal society from the inland peoples they described as "washenzi" (uncivilized or barbarous people) – to describe all the members of the group regardless of origin:

Karibu dada Habiba, hapa ndio majagina Kwa mishororo si haba, wamejaa waungwana Zenji, Dar, na Bukoba, Tanga, Kenya twajuana Karibu utunge sana, mistari ya maana. (10/30/2017, 3:48pm)	Welcome sister Habiba, this place is indeed majagina There is no shortage of verses, and cultured people abound Zanzibar, Dar, and Bukoba, Tanga, Kenya we all know each other Welcome and may you compose prolifically poetic lines with meaning.

Whereas Shariff has characterized participation in the dialogic literary community contingent upon a cultural upbringing, within communities "sufficiently cohesive to possess a shared set of values and symbols, so that if one party employs a certain symbol, the other can immediately grasp the meaning and will then compose an appropriate reply," Majagina profers an in-group status to all its members ("Function of Dialogue Poetry" 199).

Even so, the necessity of rules – prohibiting profanity, "immoral" pictures and videos, and the abbreviations associated with text messaging, for instance – and the rigid policing of those rules by the administrators of the group, suggest that among the *majagina* a shared set of values and symbols cannot be so readily assumed. Indeed, the intimate social "home" where everyone is a poetic expert is as yet an aspiration for *Majagina wa Ushairi*, and the group exists in a state of constant formation. It is in its aspiration to *create* a cultural community of poetic experts that Ujaginani's spatialization as "home" begins to rub up against other articulations of the space.

Ujaginani as Darasani

While Idd Mwimbe describes multiple intentions leading to the creation of the *Majagina wa Ushairi* group, chief among them is the spread of the craft of Swahili poetry. He often laments the fact that young people in East Africa no longer value poetry and speaks of *Majagina*'s unique role in providing a forum for young and inexperienced poets to learn and practice the art of poetic composition. Rule number 17 makes explicit this intention, specifying weekly hours for a formal "darasa la ushairi" (poetry class). During the weeks that poetry class is held, one of the committee members sends a pre-written lecture on a topic related to Swahili poetry and poetics, and members are invited to ask questions—one of the few times prose messages are permitted on the group's thread.

While such a space of instruction is not inherently incompatible with the welcoming gestures of the opening poems, and indeed resonates with some of those poems' messages of acceptance and non-

judgment, the delineation of the classroom does begin to transform the intimate and horizontal social space of the woven mat into a differentiated space of elevated "knowers" presiding over "learners," presumed to need instruction. And while the administrators delineate an official time for "darasa," the spatialization of darasani emerges in myriad ways throughout the daily discourse within the group, overflowing the boundaries specified for it in the rules.

Among the ways that the space of "darasani" is formed is in frequent appeals for deference to elders and forebearers who carry with them the wisdom of tradition. Such calls appear in the welcome poems themselves at times:

Karibu ndugu jagina, Humu ndimo twafunzana, Tangu jadi majagina, Wamekuwa kifaana, -Mwalim Kimathi (10/22/16, 7:37am)	Welcome brother/sister *jagina* Here inside we teach each other Since the days of our ancestors *majagina* Have been helpful to one another
Sheria zifwatilie, utata uepukane, Mafunzo hufurahie, elimu tele uvune, Wakubwa tuheshimie, koja nasi tuvishane, Karibu sana mwendani, kundini mwa majagina. -Mwalim Kimathi (10/22/16, 7:47am)	Follow the rules, and avoid any problems Enjoy the teachings, and reap an education Let's respect the elders, and we too can dress each other with pearls, Welcome friend, into the group of *majagina*

Here the social practices that marked the relations of the "home" give way to those of the "classroom": teaching and educating, following and respecting.

But unlike in the traditional vertical hierarchies of poetic mastery, in *Ujaginani* –where everyone is jagina – who is deemed knower and who is deemed learner is often a matter of contention. The relative anonymity of the WhatsApp medium makes it difficult to know the age and experience of members – who indeed should be considered "elder" – nor, unless they volunteer the information, exactly where they are from. While administrators and "educators" may reveal themselves as such through their posting of rules and lectures, individual members must decide for themselves who among their fellow majagina is to be learned from and respected, and who is not. This is cause for concern among some members, leading to some calls for naming of quite a different nature than the ceremonial naming described above:

Adimini lile lile,jinalo ninakuita Kwani tangu siku hile,jengine hatwelipata Shauri lisikilile majaginani naleta Ukiwaunga twambile, majina yao malenga	Admin, I call you by that same name As since that day you've given us no other This advice I bring to the majagina place: If you add new poets, tell us their names
Naomba isiwe namba,pekee haitatosha Kwa majina ungepamba,sisi kututambulisha Tutaitana wajomba,kumbe vile mwanaisha Ukiwaunga twambile majina yao malenga	I pray you; alone, [phone] numbers are not enough If you would decorate with their names, to introduce us Lest we call each other uncle, and find that its Aisha If you add new poets, tell us their names
Ungetia na irabu,nahau kukamilisha Wanapotoka mababu,na mabibi tambulisha Mastuhu sije jibu,kwa yasiyofurahisha Ukiwaunga twambile,majina yao malenga -Abbass Ali Juma (9/9/2017, 11:25 am)	It would be best to add the vowels, as the idiom goes When grandfathers and grandmothers enter, introduce them So that I don't answer in a way that displeases If you add new poets, tell us their names

Anxiety here about the hierarchies of social relations outside Ujaginani unsettles the egalitarian impulses of the earlier poems.

Some poets express discontent with the teaching available within the space, denouncing the quality of the poems posted on the thread as an indication of inadequate guidance. Elaborating a series of metaphors for incompetence, poet Swahibul Iman laments a lack of skilled authority among the group's membership:

Nauliza washairi Si wa leo wa zamani Muloghibu mudhihiri Kumeingia tufani Nahodha hucha bahari Nani mshika sukani.	I ask the poets not of today, but the ones of long ago You who have disappeared, make yourselves known! A tempest has descended If the captain fears the ocean, who will steer the helm?
Watunzi mulo mahiri Kumekucha amkeni Tena muwe na nadhari Mungiapo uwandani Muinda hulicha pori Atashika nyama gani.	You poets with skill, dawn has broken, arise! Moreover, be thoughtful as you enter the arena, If a hunter fears the bush, what animal can he capture?
Muko wapi waandishi Watungo za kimakini Ambao hamuchokeshi Mutungapo burudani Muje muone mpishi Hucha kungia jikoni.	Attentive writers, poets, where are you? Those among you who don't bore when you compose Come see the chef who's afraid to enter the kitchen.
Nataka walo wavyele Wenye akili kitwani Wakutoka mzi mle Hadi Lamu kisiwani Tabibu hucha muwele Mtoa dawa nnani.	I want the elders, the ones with sense in their heads From the old city of Mombasa or the island of Lamu, If the healer fears the patient, who will give the medicine?
Nataka walobobeya Sio wa vichochoroni Waje hapa kutwambiya Mbona waitupa fani Mwenye mato kupoteya Kipofu atatendani.	I want those who have expertise, not these others from the back alleys Let them come here and tell us why they've left the craft If the one with eyes is lost, what will happen to the blind?
Pametosheza hapano Mbele sitoendeleya Machache yangu maneno Wala sitoyarudiya Uzi uso na sindano Ni yupi atashoneya. -Swahibul Iman Babake Kiram (10/9/17 12:29 am)	That's enough, I won't go on And I won't repeat the few words I've spoken If the string has no needle, who will do the sewing?

Poems like these suggest not only an undermining of the administrators' authority, but a destabilizing of the group's central conceit; the poet's repetition of fear is a trenchant refusal of the claim to heroics. Further, the poet's references to the historic Swahili cultural centers of Mombasa and Lamu are a pointed return to a specific poetic geography, rejecting the capacious identity proffered in the welcome poems. Poetic authority, mastery, indeed heroism, come from a particular place (and a previous era) and are lamented as absent from the group.

In a similar lamentation, Ibrahim Hemed bemoans a lack of

leadership by returning to the coding of poetry as food, and rejecting the cooking of "today's" poets as devoid of sweetness:

Tungo za Leo	Today's poems
[…]	[…]
Japo kuwa wausema, ushairi mapokeo, Hauvuti unazama, umejazwa ya kileo, Kwa kukosa kuwandama, sharuti na mwelekeo, Kuusoma ni jukumu, si wa ladha si wa tamu !	Although they call it "received poetry," These poems don't appeal. They sink instead, so full of modernisms For lack of guidance, rules or direction Reading them is a chore, they have no taste or sweetness!
Umetiwa usanifu, usokiri kuwiana, Hautibu ukakifu, maneno yanagongana, Japo wawe wauswifu, wauona bora sana, Kuusoma ni jukumu, si wa ladha si wa tamu !	So full of standard language they refuse to harmonize, These poems don't heal or satisfy, the words collide Even if people praise them, call them superior Reading them is a chore, they have no taste or sweetness!
Utunzi wa ki*ungwana*, wa lahaja za ki*kwetu*, Waswahili tukifana, tulumbanapo na watu, Leo umekosekana, twasoma yasiyo kitu, Kuyasoma ni jukumu, si ya ladha si ya tamu !	Refined poetry written in the dialects of our place Where we Swahili triumph in every poetic exchange, These days it no longer exists, these poems we read have no value, Reading them is a chore, they have no taste or sweetness!
-Ibrahim Hemed, Malindi, Kenya (5/2/16, 10:49 pm; my emphasis)	

Like Iman, Hemed points to geographic locations, defined here linguistically by their non-standard dialects, outside the majagina space. "Kwetu" (our place) assumes a "we" which is similarly external to the community defined by the group's welcome poems and positioned against a "they" who produce tasteless unharmonious poetry. This "we" is pointedly named "Swahili," not "majagina," and it is this "we" that is deemed capable of producing poetry befitting the title of "ungwana."

Iman and Hemed's poems also point to a critique of reception – a concern not just for the skill of poets but for the judgment of readers and listeners, "the ones with eyes." Referring back to the exchange between Mwimbe and Aunt Bim Abeid, above, the necessity of taste, of "knowing how to recognize" sweetness becomes a critical (and for these poets, a *missing*) element in social and cultural cohesion, and a sign of the success or failure of the classroom. It is also in this turn to the question of audience that we can begin to see yet another

spatialization of the *Majagina wa Ushairi* WhatsApp group emerge: jukwaani, the space of the stage.

Ujaginani as Jukwaani

Although WhatsApp operates primarily as a text platform, and the majority of poems circulated on the *Majagina wa Ushairi* thread are posted as written text, the technical capacity of the platform to attach sound, image and video files significantly expands the possibilities for using the group text as a space of oral performance. Majagina members' use of the term "jukwaani" (the space of the stage) thus has the capacity to encompass both written and recited/sung poetry, including those composed by others.

Returning to one of Mwimbe's aforementioned welcome poems, we can see the spatialization of Ujaganani as a deterritorialized "home" to be understood by some members as in no way inconsistent with its articulation as the space of the stage:

Karibu wetu mgeni, karibia *jukwaani*, Humu tunao wa pwani, hata bara wamo ndani, Washairi wa nchini, pia na nchi jirani, Karibu ukaribie, ujihisi u*nyumbani*. (4/24/16, 2:12 pm; my emphasis)	Welcome our guest, welcome to the stage In(side) here we have people from the coast, from the mainland, and people from neighboring countries. Welcome, come close, feel you are at home.

Indeed, in some poems the spaces of "home," "classroom," and "stage" are simultaneously evoked. As Aunt Bim Abedi writes among her series of replies to Mwimbe's welcome in October 2016:

Nami nimekaribia, kwenye jukwaa adhimu Sheria taziendea, nisifanye udhalimu Tuli tuli tatulia, kuendeleza nidhamu Nimi bint Abeid, jukwaani naingia Shukurani ninatoa, Kwa kunivuta kitoni Nami nitajiachia, kuchangia jukwaani Ila ninapokosea, chonde ndugu nambieni Nimi bint Abeid, jagina nipokeeni. - Aunt Bim Abeid (10/22/16, 7:56 am)	I too have come close, onto this important stage I will follow the laws, so I don't go wrong I will be tranquil and calm, to help maintain order I am the daughter of Abeid, I am entering the stage I give thanks, for drawing me into this valuable place And I will let myself loose to contribute on the stage However, if I err, please fellows let me know I am the daughter of Abeid, please accept me as *jagina*

But the digital space's capacity to collapse the intimacy of the home, the didacticism of the classroom, and the public performance of the stage also leads to tension in the social relations that play out there, in ways both divisive and generative. As I have observed elsewhere in the context of Facebook – and which may be even more pronounced in the ambiguity of the WhatsApp group – the blurring of public and private in these still new digital spaces demands renegotiation of established social and cultural practice (Arenberg 2016).

To fully illustrate this phenomenon requires quoting at greater length a full dialogue as it plays out on the thread between multiple voices. In this example, poet Miriam Khamis Masoud is mocked after posting a sound file of herself (alongside another voice) reciting a poem, a practice known as "kughani" in Kiswahili. The mocking – by a poet who calls himself initially only Jamal but later includes their full name, Mwl. Swalehe Ndimbe – begins as a near inverse of the welcome poems from earlier sections:

Huyu nae ni wa nani, Ni wapi ametokea,	And who does this one belong to? Where did she come from?
Kamuacha mume ndani, Na mboga inaungua,	Leaving her husband inside, and the vegetables burning [on the stove],
Kakimbilia kughani, Hajui anakosea,	She runs out to recite poetry, she doesn't know her own errors,
Kughani dada hujui, Taarabu watwimbia	My sister, you don't know how to recite. You are singing us Taarab.
Kughani jama kipaji, Kutoka kwake Jalia,	Recitation is a special talent, a gift from God
Kule atakako jaji, Wewe utaelekea,	A gift from the place of judgement, where you too will go
Usiukaze mkwiji, Kughani utajinyea,	Don't strain your windbag, You're liable to soil yourself
Kughani wengi wabovu, Wachache wanaojua	Many are bad at reciting, Very few know how to do it

(9/10/2017, 1:29 am)

A searing reminder of the gendered differentiation inherent in the very notion of "home," Ndimbe's poem explodes the interiority of Ujaginani by chastising Miriam's apparent movement *out* of the home and into the public sphere of the stage. His reference to Taarab, a popular music form of sung poetry (which in its modern iteration is primarily sung by women), is also gendered, implying that such performances belong in a less elevated poetic sphere than the *Majagina* forum.

Despite the harshness of the critique, Miriam's replies are confident – even acerbic – resisting Ndimbe's claims of authority and appealing to the pluralism evoked in earlier poems:

Kweli hujui maghani ndipo ukapata tabu	Truly you must not know recitations and that's why you are having difficulty
Naona umo shidani	I see you are having a problem
Hakika wangu swahibu	Undoubtedly that is why, my friend
Hebu njoo visiwani	Why don't you come to the islands
Utajifunza muhibu	You will learn, my love
Hizo ndo tungo njema kama huviji ulizi [sic]	That those are indeed beautiful poems If you don't come, just ask
(1:58 am)	
Naomba nifahamishe kughani	I beg you, teach me how to sing poetry
Naomba nifahamishe kughani ni kitu gani	Please explain to me what kind of thing sung poetry is
Moyo wangu usafishe uniweke kweupeni	Please, purify my heart and leave me pristine
Maghani mbadilishe Sauti tele jamani	Singers you should change
Kiumbe ubadilike sio hiyo ya zamani	There are many kinds of voices Human, you should change it's not the way it was in the past
Hebu njoo visiwani Mepya utajionea	Why don't you come to the islands
Sauti zimesheheni nzuri za kuvutia	You will see many new things
Si ile yaredioni tu uloizowea	There are many voices, beautiful and attractive
Kaka tembea uone usibakie kudhani	It's not just the one on the radio that you have gotten used to
(2:08 am)	Brother, travel and see, don't just sit and ponder

Miriam's reply also evokes a geography outside the *Majagina* space, but here "visiwani" (the space of the islands) often used alongside "pwani" (the space of the coast) as a metonym for Swahili cultural purity, becomes a marker of Swahili diversity, rather than cultural uniformity.

In his next reply, Ndimbe ("Jamal") includes his full name and location, pointedly appended with the abbreviated title for teacher ("Mwl" for Mwalimu). The poet balks at Miriam's evocation of "visiwani" and at the suggestion that she may have something to teach him, and he again chastises her shamelessness in daring to perform publicly:

Hujui yake maana, Kubisha wabisha nini, Kisiwani waitana, Wataka unipe nini, Hebu ondoa utwana, Hujui kughani yani, Achia wanaojua, Nyie kaeni pembeni	You don't know what it means, What are you arguing about, Inviting people to the islands, what do you want to give me? Give up this supplication, You don't know how to recite, Leave it to those who know, You (pl) step aside
Tukiomba wanoghani,Tukutane ngome kongwe Hivi nawe bila soni,Utakuja tukupange, Ili uwe mshindani,Na Kijoka umfunge, Achia wanaojua,Nyie kaeni pembeni	If we call for reciters, to meet at the old fort You too without shame will come to be put on the list So that you can be winner, beating out Kijoka Leave it to those who know, You (pl) step aside

-Mwl. Swalehe Ndimbe, Mabibo Dar Rombo kikazi

(2:18 am)

As the exchange continues, Miriam satirizes Ndimbe's self-characterization as teacher, asking facetiously for further correction:

Pole kaka pole sana kubishana umelenga Unajiona wa mana eti nawe umalenga Kasoro sijaiona Ndipo suali hasonga Kunijuza ingefana vipi nilivyo bananga ndipo hauliza mana kunijuza ningependa (2:25 am)	I'm sorry, brother, it's too bad you aim to argue You fancy yourself important, a poet-master I don't see the defect That's why I asked the question What would make it good and how have I spoiled it here? That's why I asked you, I'd love for you to enlighten me

In response to this, Ndimbe intensifies his critique of Miriam and her friend's performance:

Sikutaka kubishana,Ukweli ulo bayana, Sauti zinapishana,Kughani hujui bwana, Yako pua unabana,Tajuidi kaka huna, Sawa na mmejaribu,Achieni wanojua (2:43 am)	I wasn't intending to argue a truth that is obvious Your voices don't go together, You don't know how to recite You squeeze the sound through your nose, you have no sense of Tajwid You (two) have tried, now leave it to those who know [how]

A few minutes later, Ndimbe re-posts an earlier posted recording from another member, offering this example as a positive illustration of recitation practice against which Miriam's recording is compared and once again found inadequate. The gentle appeals in the poems quoted above to respect elders and reap knowledge from one another are here transformed into firm admonishment:

Sikiliza kitu hiki,Kimenata kama Uzi, Sauti imesitiki,Waweza kuweka wazi, Sio nyie hamtiki,Mwakoloma kama mbuzi, Sikiza wanaojua,Uuchukue ujuzi (2:49 am)	Listen to this thing, It holds together like a string The voice sticks, You can put it plainly It's not like you (two) who don't flow, You bellow like goats Listen to those who know, You can learn from them

But even as Ndimbe seems to characterize his critique as the final word on the matter, and the immediate exchange ends, the final insult in this last stanza – characterizing Miriam's performance as closer to animal sound than to human art – spins out into a theme that is revisited in the poems that appear in the forum in the hours and days that follow. In these later contributions, the questions that lie at the heart of Miriam and Ndimbe's quarrel are offered back up to the group, inviting re-consideration of the terms of relation between members and conformity with received convention:

Kila mtu na sautiye, bora aipe mahadhi, Vyovyote na atuimbiye, naghama tutairidhi, Alo jaji ajuliye, sauti si maradhi, Hata chura anakidhi, seuze chiriku aliye. -Hassan Ismail Machemba (9/10/2017, 3:03 am)	Every person has their own voice, better to give each respect However they sing to us, we'll benefit from their uniqueness, Whoever is judge should know, a voice is not a disease Even a frog's fulfills, to say nothing of the canary's.

Ni kweli usemavyo, kila sauti na hadhi yake Iweje vinginevyo, ni Mungu kazi yake - Patrick Michael Ogeto (9/10/2017, 3:13 am)	It's true what you say Every voice has its own value How could it be different It is the work of God

Ninauliza waghani,nataka jibu bayana, Ili nipate baini,mnieleze la mana, Pindipo mnapoghani,naona mwaigiana, Kuiga ndivyo asili,ama kubuni hamwezi? *	I am asking the poetry singers, I want a transparent answer, So that I can be clear please explain the meaning When you sing your poems, I see that you copy each other Is copying a tradition, or are you just uncreative?
Sauti ni zilezile,hatuoni mapinduzi, Walizobuni wakale,nyengine hamzijazi, Mumebaki palepale,hata hamjiongezi, Kuiga ndivyo asili,ama kubuni hamwezi? *	The voice is always the same, we never see a revolution, What the ancestors invented, you don't ever build on it, You stay right there, you don't ever add anything new Is copying a tradition, or are you just uncreative?
Sanaa ni ubunifu,waghani mjiongeze, Mjitume maradufu,sauti mjitangaze, Zakuiga zatukifu,za kwenu tusikilize, Kuiga ndivyo asili,ama kubuni hamwezi? *	Art is creativity, poet singers, add something of yourselves, Work double hard and let your voices advertise you. We've had enough of the copying, let us hear your own Is copying a tradition, or are you just uncreative?
Kama sauti za vyura,mnafanana waghani, Kubuni ndiko imara,za kwenu zitumieni, Mwonekani kwa hadhira,wenu mwonekano duni, Kuiga ndivyo asili,ama kubuni hamwezi? *	Like the voices of frogs you all sound the same Being creative is stronger, use your own voice Be noticed by the public, you are barely seen Is copying a tradition, or are you just uncreative?
Kama usia mseme,mliousiwa tangu, Kuwaiga mjitume,mdumaze ulimwengu, Mtujibu tutazame,tujue tamu na chungu, Kuiga ndivyo asili,ama kubuni hamwezi? -Ally Sufiani (10/5/2017, 4:51 am)	If it was a will you inherited say so, those who've inherited from long ago Try hard to emulate them, but you inhibit the growth of the world Answer us let us see so we can where it is sweet and where it is bitter Is copying a tradition, or are you just uncreative?

In this final example from poet Ally Sufiani, the insult is inverted, suggesting that it is in fact the conforming poets who sing like animals, rather than the unconventional ones nudging the boundaries of tradition.

The tensions played out here between valuing newness and creativity and respecting acknowledged experts and tradition are not limited to the *Majagina wa Ushairi*; they echo the dynamics I have previously written about in less rigid and more public forums on Facebook, and surely occur in "offline" conversations across the Kiswahili-speaking world (see Arenberg 2016). But the ways in which the digital context of these poetry groups pushes into the open competing imaginaries of social and cultural space seems to lend itself

to the kind of generative conflict we see in this example, which in turn pushes the limits of conventional poetic practice.

In laying out the group's rules for participation, the administrators of *Majagina wa Ushairi* find themselves stirring other boundary lines – artistic, geographic and epistemic – that overlay the constraints of conventional prosody in Kiswahili. Through their renaming of themselves and one another and their relational performances, they construct space, reinforcing those boundaries but also creating the terrain on which to contest them. Irreducible to a network or digital community of poets, Ujaginani is thus home, classroom, stage. But it is also more than that: it is a notional realm beyond the geographic limits of coast and mainland, and coast and mainland itself; it is a site of return to traditional artistic practice and site of cultural identity reimagined. In the process of these spatial constructions, the relations between the majagina themselves are also examined, contested and refigured, some undoubtedly in ways that would not have been possible outside the digital context.

Notes

1. All quoted poetic texts have been included with permission from the poets and the *Majagina* administrators; all translations are my own.

2. See, for instance, Doreen Massey (2005), Marcus Doel (2000), Gillian Rose (1999), Katherine McKittrick (2006).

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