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Colonialism, heritage and conservation: Zanzibari perceptions of the collapse of the House of Wonders

Sarah Longair [a], Fatma Said [b] and Stephanie Wynne-Jones [c]

[a]Department of History, Lincoln University, Lincoln, UK; [b]Department of Tourism and Heritage, State University of Zanzibar, Zanzibar, Tanzania; [c]Department of Archaeology, University of York, York, UK

ABSTRACT

The House of Wonders (or Beit al-Ajaib), one of the iconic buildings of Zanzibar's waterfront, partially collapsed on 25th December 2020. This catastrophic incident, which included the famous clocktower, killed two people who had been inside the building and injured several others. The House of Wonders has prompted fascination and admiration since its construction as part of a redevelopment of Zanzibar's waterfront by Sultan Barghash in 1883. Its collapse attracted worldwide media attention. This article explores the dynamics of history and heritage in Zanzibar, using the collapse of the House of Wonders as the catalyst for analysing the ways that Zanzibaris feel about the presentation of the past. The research involved a series of interviews with residents of Stone Town in which participants discussed the collapse of the House of Wonders and themes of history, identity and tourism. Our project reveals the layered associations with the House of Wonders, one which acknowledges the building's Omani origins and colonial use but simultaneously its centrality as an icon of Zanzibar. The article also discusses what these findings about the House of Wonders reveal about the complex relationship between perceptions of Zanzibari cultural heritage and the role of tourism.

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Zanzibar; cultural heritage; identity; tourism; Swahili

The House of Wonders (or Beit al-Ajaib), one of the iconic buildings of Zanzibar's waterfront, partially collapsed on 25 December 2020 (Figure 1). This catastrophic incident, which included the famous clocktower, killed two people who had been inside the building and injured several others. Alongside expressions of grief, Zanzibari residents on social media described disappointment and anger at the fact the building had become so precarious.[1] The House of Wonders is described as 'one of the outstanding monuments in the Stone Town of Zanzibar' by UNESCO and reports of the collapse stressed its importance both to tourism and to local pride.[2] The building was already due for refurbishment following an earlier collapse on 2 December 2012, which had left the structure weakened. Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman had in 2020 left $15m in his will to restore the House of

CONTACT Sarah Longair SLongair@lincoln.ac.uk University of Lincoln, Brayford Pool, Lincoln, Lincolnshire, LN6 7TS

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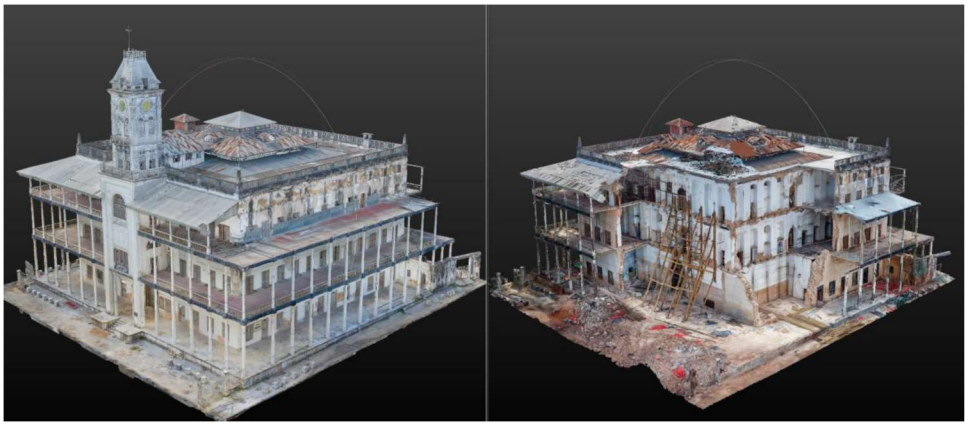

Figure 1. House of Wonders before and after collapse (image produced by the Zamani Project, reproduced with permission).

Wonders, although Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Tourism stressed that work on the structure had not yet begun and was not a contributing factor.[3]

The House of Wonders has prompted fascination and admiration since its construction by Sultan Barghash in 1883, part of a wholesale development of Zanzibar's waterfront. The building's architecture was unlike anything previously built in Zanzibar, a ceremonial palace with wide verandas supported by cast-iron columns and notably high ceilings.[4] The door was reportedly created to be big enough to ride through on an elephant.[5] The clock tower was added in 1897 following the British bombardment of the seafront in 1896 which destroyed the lighthouse that stood on the shore.[6] The busy streets of Stone Town are home to numerous impressive nineteenth- and twentieth-century constructions and the House of Wonders was the latest in a series built by the Omani rulers on the island.[7] Yet it stands out even amongst other palaces for its unique architectural features and scale. The wide exterior galleries, supported by iron pillars forged in England, contrast with the enclosed facades previously characteristic of Swahili and Omani architecture in Zanzibar.[8] As Meier explains, the building was designed by a German adventurer, paid for by Sultan Barghash, 'overseen by South Asian masons, and constructed by enslaved Africans', and 'stood at the intersection of ancient and new ways of making an architecture of power'.[9] Its huge chandeliers were powered by an electric generator, the first in sub-Saharan Africa, and it housed East Africa's first elevator.[10] It deployed European engineering and gained its name – 'Beit el Ajaib' or 'House of Wonders' as it struck Zanzibaris as 'a marvel of modernity'.[11] Beginning as a ceremonial palace for Sultan Barghash in the 1880s, it became in 1913 the Secretariat of the British colonial government until the 1960s.

The advent of independence in Zanzibar naturally altered the use of such buildings. The Zanzibar Revolution of 1964 led to the overthrow of the island's first postcolonial government, followed by a period during which islanders identified as Arab were targeted for violent retribution. The revolutionary Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) then sought a cultural transformation promoting redistribution of power and wealth largely at the expense of Arab and South Asian inhabitants.[12] The House of Wonders was at this time transformed into an ASP Ideological Training College and Party Museum, with an exhibition created

by North Koreans in the 'Great Leader' tradition.[13] It became the National Museum of Zanzibar in the early 2000s. It is therefore bound up with many layers of Zanzibar's history, not only the Omani and colonial era.

The period of Busaidi dominance, from 1744 to until the Revolution of 1964, was central to Zanzibar's architectural development. In 1840 the capital of Oman was moved to Zanzibar Stone Town. The writing of Zanzibar's Omani history simultaneously recognises this as a period of domination by a foreign ruler including the trade and exploitation of many thousands of enslaved Africans and celebrates it as the period of Zanzibar's global authority.[14] This ambiguity around Omani rule is reflected in the ways Zanzibar's heritage is presented and interpreted. Zanzibar has been particularly successful at marketing that heritage, with ~200,000 tourists visiting the archipelago each year; cultural heritage tourism draws on Stone Town's historic fabric, largely dating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in addition to other Omani monuments across the archipelago such as the Marahubi Palace and Persian baths.[15] The collapse of the House of Wonders thus drew the attention of the world's press, as a central feature of Zanzibar's globally renowned heritage landscape.

In this article we explore the dynamics of history and heritage in Zanzibar, using the collapse of the House of Wonders as the focus for discussion of the ways that Zanzibaris feel about the island's built heritage and presentation of the past. At a time when the legacies of slavery are being debated globally, this example is illuminating. Sayyid Barghash bin Said al-Busaidi, for whom the House of Wonders was built, was an owner of enslaved people with his own harem and allowed the trade to continue in his territories until reluctantly signing a British treaty of abolition.[16] In contemporary Zanzibari society, those of Omani and African descent, among others, have created a distinctive island identity which celebrates the creole history of the archipelago.[17] For us the collapse was also a catalyst to explore how Zanzibaris perceive cultural heritage more generally, and the ways that historic buildings and monuments have become symbols of the islands. We report on a series of interviews with residents of Stone Town which relate to the collapse of the House of Wonders and touch on themes of history, identity and tourism. We wanted to know how residents of Zanzibar feel about the building, its current state, and its place as part of Zanzibar's wider heritage landscape. In this we recognise the importance of acknowledging the affective impact of heritage, a growing area of heritage studies.[18]

Heritage and future history

The concept of 'heritage' is notoriously elusive and culturally relative. The word itself is commonly applied to buildings, sometimes specified as 'built heritage'; archaeological sites including buried remains; elements of personal identity and ethnicity; customs and traditions. These aspects are now recognised in heritage legislation through notions of tangible (buildings, objects, sites) and intangible (customs, language, traditions, history) heritage; in addition, natural sites are increasingly recognised as a form of biocultural heritage. 'Heritage is everywhere' writes David Lowenthal in his discussion of the 'cult of heritage' evident in contemporary society and politics.[19] The importance of the past in the present is seen in the ways that history is evoked, claimed and contested. The recent 'Rhodes must fall' and 'Black Lives Matter' movements have highlighted powerfully the importance of what a society chooses to memorialise,

and how it affects individual and group dynamics of those who encounter it.[20] Lewis Borck calls this the 'future history', constructed in the present through practices of archaeology and heritage decision-making.[21] In economic terms, the value of the past in the present is most powerfully seen in the enormous growth in heritage tourism over the last 20 years.[22] The value of heritage to local economies in many parts of the world is found in the historic fabric: a 'mode of cultural production that gives the endangered or outmoded a second life as an exhibition of itself'.[23] Recognition by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site valorises and accelerates this process, and can lead to tangible growth in tourist traffic and revenue that can transform local economies.[24]

In Zanzibar, the future history projected by heritage agendas revolves around the creation of multi-cultural and cosmopolitan society. The inscription of Stone Town on the World Heritage list in 2000 rests upon its status as 'an outstanding material manifestation of cultural fusion and harmonization'.[25] In this it draws on a long history of immigration from many other parts of the world, including mainland Africa and South Asia. There is also a profound nostalgia that underpins the ways heritage is presented here: 'the word heritage itself has political cachet, that it conveys pedigree, tradition and positively gives voice to colonialism'.[26] Physically, this is manifest in the monuments of the Omani and British colonial period, leading to a combination of orientalising rhetoric and colonial nostalgia.[27] Tourist itineraries benefit from this vision, engaging with seductive concepts such as 'Arabian nights' or 'spice island'; this stands strangely at odds with the several sites that memorialise the trade in enslaved persons through Zanzibar.[28] Rhodes has demonstrated how the narratives and interpretation surrounding sites associated with the enslaved on the East African coast often echo a European colonial vision of 'Arab slave owner, African slave, and European emancipator', when the reality was much more complex. These narratives, as legacies of historical colonialism, also reflect 'cultural brokerage and contemporary tourist demands'.[29] These tensions over heritage in Zanzibar form the backdrop to this study.

Methods and approach

The major collapse of the House of Wonders in December 2020 destroyed a large part of the fabric of the building as can be seen from Figure 1. The impact of recent destruction of cultural heritage has been most thoroughly analysed by scholars in relation to warfare, including aspects such as physical and digital preservation and cultural memory.[30] While Zanzibar is of course not a conflict zone, there are some commonalities in terms of our approach; in particular we hoped to explore how destruction of built heritage can catalyse people's engagement with place. In this case, we wanted to use the rupture caused by this iconic building's collapse to explore Zanzibaris' relationship to the built environment and heritage landscape.

The study interviewed 40 residents who live in Zanzibar Stone Town including 13 women and 27 men, aged between 18 and 76 (Table 1). All 40 were long-term residents of Stone Town; 38 had lived there since birth. Ten of the interviewees worked in the tourist industry; this proportion (25%) is about average for the Zanzibar urban population, although exact figures are difficult to calculate.[31] We undertook the study in March 2021 as we hoped to capture responses as soon as possible after the collapse of the building. This, however, had a direct impact on our method. As the data collection

Table 1. List of interview respondents showing gender, age and occupation.

Respondent number	Gender	Age	Occupation	Respondent number	Gender	Age	Occupation
1	M	25	student	21	M	73	ministry
2	F	42	tourism	22	M	38	tourism
3	M	75	unknown	23	F	18	student
4	M	50	tourism	24	F	22	student
5	M	58	unknown	25	M	31	tourism
6	M	23	student	26	M	50	fisherman
7	M	18	student	27	F	26	business
8	F	23	unknown	28	F	25	business
9	M	26	tourism	29	F	33	business
10	M	45	tourism	30	F	23	student
11	M	24	student	31	M	22	business
12	M	27	student	32	F	31	tourism
13	M	32	tourism	33	M	36	cleaner
14	F	24	student	34	M	22	student
15	F	26	unknown	35	M	21	student
16	F	55	none	36	M	20	student
17	M	24	student	37	F	43	business
18	M	36	business	38	M	69	ministry
19	M	76	laundry	39	M	51	taxi
20	M	50	tourism	40	M	72	ZSTCDA

process took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, face-to-face interviews were deemed too risky because of health restrictions. Instead, a video WhatsApp interview was chosen for the safety of both interviewee and interviewer. The task of data collection was conducted by students at the State University of Zanzibar (SUZA): Mahmoud Maktuba Haji; Bibiana Amos Diamond; Abubakar Assaa Jaffar; Haji Maktuba Haji; and Salma Salum Juma. Hassan Mrisho, the IT tutor from SUZA was temporarily hired to train students on how to record video WhatsApp calls by using other applications such as Screen recorder and Video call recorder.

Due to the pandemic, we were limited in our method for inviting participants – an open call was deemed unlikely to solicit much response, and we relied upon the team in SUZA and their personal networks and recommendations, with strong support from Fatma Ali Juma (SUZA admissions officer) who was born and lives in Stone Town and was able to recommend many potential interviewees. After the initial interviews we asked for more recommendations, creating a snowball effect. This approach naturally had an impact on the range of participants but the team were careful to invite interviewees from a range of age groups, as equal a representation of gender as was practicable, and a range of different professions – including those involved in heritage such as tour guides, but also business owners and taxi drivers. The team also interviewed participants from across different *shehia* (administrative areas) of the town.

The interviews were conducted in kiSwahili. We wanted to interviewees to express themselves as freely as possible, particularly given the constraints of the technology. Interviews were later translated into English by the SUZA team, with the kiSwahili versions retained for checking phrases or terms used. Before interviewing, we shared the consent form via WhatsApp messenger and only booked interviews with those who consented to the work.[32] In general, this method was successful, enabling respondents to answer questions and providing a video record of each interview. We asked a standard set of questions as this fitted best with the virtual format; long discursive conversations were not possible.

There were drawbacks to this method. The use of WhatsApp was challenged by an intermittent mobile network and internet connection to access video conversations. Some areas within Stone Town have limited mobile network coverage, resulting in low quality or failed video recordings. Unfortunately interviews with the staff of the Department of Antiquities were some of those that failed. Moreover, this method excluded non-WhatsApp subscribers such as more elderly people who might have a different perspective, having lived through the Zanzibar Revolution.

Heritage and tourism are inextricably interwoven in Zanzibar. Anticipating this, our questions asked about tourism and heritage sites. This sometimes took us in directions we had not meant to travel; we often received answers about people visiting beaches and small islands rather than historical sites. This is fascinating in terms of the ways heritage is perceived, but it was often difficult to disentangle respondents' feelings about the cultural and natural heritage of the archipelago. Finally, the question about who had responsibility for the monument was mostly answered in terms of whose jurisdiction (i.e. government of Zanzibar) instead of cultural identification. A semi-structured approach would, in future, provide more opportunities for follow-up questions.[33]

WhatsApp was not the only challenge to this type of research. The political setting and history of Zanzibar can make it difficult for some people to explain some of the historical events which involve human tragedies and disasters.[34] There was reticence by some participants in answering the historical questions – which could have been because their ancestors were victims of slavery, victims of racism or victims of the 1964 Revolution. The competing legacies of colonialism, Omani presence, enslavement and the Revolution complicate questions of identity and inform contemporary interpretations of Zanzibar's past.[35] Our interviews hinted at how these issues play out at an individual level for local Zanzibaris.

Nevertheless, standardised questions enabled easy comparison and analysis of results, using the same categories across groups. The video footage helped interpret meaning through the gestures and facial expressions of respondents. For example, in the question asking 'how do you feel about the collapse of House of Wonders', it was clear that in several cases respondents replied sorrowfully. We analyse these responses by first examining perceptions of the building and its collapse. Drawing on the themes that emerged from the interviews, we then discuss tourism and economic factors, colonialism and colonial heritage, and world heritage in a local context. Overall, the discussion throws up insights into nationalism, ethnic identity and the role of heritage in creating future histories. These inform the final discussion.

'A symbol of Zanzibar': perceptions of the House of Wonders and its collapse

Our interviews sought to establish the meaning of the House of Wonders to local residents. Almost all (35 out of 40) had visited the building, even where they had not visited other historical sites. The respondents used a variety of ways to describe the building, repeatedly highlighting that it was 'unique' and in the words of one respondent 'an image or icon which represents our country'.[36] A 50-year-old male respondent felt pride in the building and explained that 'even the first president of Zanzibar was proud by saying that "Stone town buildings should not be demolished because they reflect our

history and they are important for the tourism sector"'.[37] Here, his memory of the first president's words was used to highlight the dual significance of the building – to Zanzibar's history and to tourism. A 50-year-old male summed up its meaning – 'we depend much on the House of Wonders'.[38] This focus on tourism is returned to below, but the ways people felt about the building's international reputation went beyond economic concerns and were a source of significant pride. One interviewee highlighted the fact that it was 'known outside Zanzibar', and this international recognition is meaningful for Zanzibaris.[39] Another felt it summed up what she perceived as the meaning of heritage: 'a memory which shows us where we are coming from and where we are going'.[40] This latter comment beautifully illustrates the concept of future history, projecting the idea of Zanzibari achievements and multiculturalism into the future of the region.

We were interested in exploring how respondents related to the building – how well they knew its interior as well as its imposing exterior. Five had not been inside the building and several had only been inside once. They nonetheless had strong impressions of it: a 22-year-old female who admitted her visit had been a 'long time ago' still praised the 'wonderful and unique' contents, such as the elevator and the old cars. She went on to say that when her friends from overseas came to visit, the House of Wonders was the first thing she would take them to see.[41]

Those who were more familiar with the interior and the museum's contents were either tour guides or those undertaking academic study in tourist or associated subjects. Of those who knew the building and were familiar with its displays, they were largely supportive of its contents and the narratives that it told. This may well be in part thanks to the work of Prof Abdul Sheriff and subsequent curators who sought to bring Zanzibari voices into the permanent displays.[42] When asked if there was any other information the museum should contain, respondent 13, a 32-year-old tour guide himself, believed that 'adding new things is like erasing its authenticity' and hoped it would stay in its current state. In a rare expression of a political viewpoint in these interviews, respondent 27, a 26-year-old female, said she would like to see included 'the history and life of the famous leader of the opposition party', referring to Seif Sharif Hamad, the first Vice President of Zanzibar and former leader of the CUF party, who had recently died at the time of the interviews. This was an isolated perspective; the majority of respondents did not wish to see the museum changed – rather they believed its contents and exhibitions were themselves part of the heritage that should be preserved.

Our questions also revealed other memories and uses of the site. One 42-year-old female respondent noted that she had visited many times, recalling that she 'used to play there in … childhood'.[43] Another also said he had been 'playing there since my childhood'.[44] The courtyard in front of the building is still used by children as a place to play, reminding us of this building's varied values and uses. In a city with large numbers of residents in subdivided tall buildings, outside space is rare and thus the space the museum offers for children to play is appreciated. A 76-year-old male respondent recalled that during Ramadhan, 'we went there to listen to radio programmes – there were few radios in that time', indicating the way in which the site was co-opted by the people of Zanzibar, possibly before the boom in tourism.[45]

The building's significance is also indicated by how respondents described their emotional response to its collapse. A tangible sense of pain and loss was articulated by many respondents about the collapse of the building. Respondent 9, a 26-year-old

male taxi driver who regularly brought tourists to the site, described how he felt 'painful for its absence', and looks forward to feeling proud when it is renovated. A 20-year-old male respondent likened the collapse to losing 'an important person in a family'.[46] One 24-year-old male respondent was critical of the government and blamed them for the collapse.[47] Another respondent had a personal memory of the collapse as he was 'one among the first five people to be there and rescue the patients'.[48] He was one of only three who mentioned the deaths caused by the collapse. Many expressed their sadness at the damage to what one described as 'a unique building which represents our nation (*taifa*)'.[49] There is a sense of Zanzibari, as opposed to Tanzanian, nationalism here – the building being a symbol of Zanzibar specifically. The political situation of Zanzibar and its status as part of Tanzania is complex and scholars such as Brown and Killian recognise 'sovereignty of the state (Zanzibar vs. Tanzania)' as a source of tension in contemporary politics.[50] Without overstating what we can glean from these responses, it is notable that these perceptions of Zanzibari heritage implicitly reflect a live political issue yet divorced from specific political allegiances or parties.

Tourism in Zanzibar

Beyond descriptions of the unique status of the House of Wonders, the second most common response was to highlight the centrality of the building to the tourist economy. Many of the responses focus on the external gaze: the ways the House of Wonders acts as a symbol of Zanzibar for the outside world and for visitors to the region. Although the interviewees may be thought of as an 'internal' or local audience for the building, their responses suggest that tourism – and the view from the outside – is a central concern. Twenty-six of the 40 respondents cited tourism as one of the reasons they valued the structure, along with the economic value of bringing visitors. A 38-year-old male tour guide highlighted the loss of profit to the tourism sector since the collapse.[51] People in Zanzibar consider heritage resources as economically critical because tourists bring foreign currencies through payment of fees and fares. The tourism sector on the island contributes about 29.5% of its GDP and 82% of foreign currencies which are valuable for international trade.[52] A study conducted by Chami and Kaminyoge found that the closed House of Wonders museum has affected the level of tourist satisfaction, as well as affecting tour operators, community and tour guides economically.[53] Respondent 15 (26-year-old female) directly stated that the 'House of Wonders is the reason we receive tourists and earn foreign exchanges'. It is difficult to verify this statement as the figures for tourist income are not specific about motivation for travel. The tourist economy continues to grow on the island, but the largest growth is in non-urban coastal areas, when measured as numbers of hotel beds or share of tourist income.[54] Nevertheless, the historic appeal of Stone Town may be part of what brings tourists to the island; what is significant here is that this respondent certainly perceives it as such. The economically driven answers of the interviewees may also be due the phrasing of the interview question: 'what is the value (*thamani*) of the House of Wonders today?' inviting such responses.

The answers to our survey suggest that awareness and visits to Zanzibar's heritage focus on nineteenth century heritage sites and those associated with the Omani era of dominance. Mtoni, Marahubi and the Palace Museum (all Omani monuments) were

all common responses to questions about which sites the respondents themselves had visited or would recommend to others. The area of Prison Island was also commonly mentioned, which includes a very different picture of (European) colonialism and control alongside a beach and nature attractions. Mangapwani slave cave was a common recommendation, sometimes in conjunction with Kuumbi cave. Overall, there was a broad mix of historical sites and natural features. Several respondents mentioned feeling unqualified to answer and expressed regret that they did not know more about Zanzibar's heritage and history (5 out of 40). Eleven of the 40 felt uncertain of their own knowledge and would like to have more information themselves. More than half (24 out of 40) felt that the information given at heritage sites by guides was either inadequate, incorrect, or variable. 'The stories given to tourists make me feel ashamed'.[55]

This feeling of inadequacy about tour guide interpretations is worth discussing in more detail. Rhodes discusses the accuracy of narratives of enslavement and their association with historical sites and it is important to note here that residents as well as scholars are unsatisfied with these interpretations.[56] There was a general feeling among respondents that historical information available for tourists, mostly via tour guides, needed to be more thorough. Six described it as inadequate, 7 felt it was of variable quality, and 6 felt the information given was mostly incorrect. One qualified his conviction by noting that these stories were 'true except for some areas which have controversial history like Mkunazini Anglican Church and some Sultanate ruins'.[57] Others displayed much more scepticism: 'most of them are not correct'.[58] A tour guide, more familiar with the smaller islands than the built heritage of Zanzibar, noted the incorrect information told to tourists about Prison Island – 'some people claim that prisoners were once kept in Prison island, when the reality is that no prisoner has ever been kept there'.[59]

Alongside the built heritage mentioned were ecological features, such as Jozani and Kiwengwa forests, Zanzibar Butterfly Park, Kijichi Spice Farms or numerous beaches.[60] This reflects a focus on 'sites' of tourism and the ways that visitors experience Zanzibar through a combination of historical and natural heritage attractions. It may also be partly about the ways that the word 'heritage' may be construed. In both the popular imagination and increasingly in the academic literature, heritage is a concept that might include elements of the natural environment and cultural aspects such as art, music or food.[61] The kiSwahili term used in the question – *maeneo ya urithi* (sites of heritage) – did not, for these participants, automatically refer to historical sites or architectural structures.

Colonialism and colonial heritage

A key aim of our questions was to explore Zanzibaris' relationship to colonialism and colonial heritage. The teaching and study of history has been contentious since the colonial era. History as taught during the British period in government schools was a vision constructed by colonial anthropologists and administrators.[62] The use of history played a significant part in nationalist discourse and history teaching was banned after the Revolution in Zanzibar's schools by the new socialist government.[63] The Revolution and its legacy have an important influence on how the colonial era is remembered and articulated, a theme which emerged during our interviews.

The relationship of Zanzibar to Oman, the story of global influences across the Indian Ocean and British colonial history, is embodied in the House of Wonders building. We

sought our interviewees' perspective by asking first if the building was Omani or Zanzibari and questioning whether the building was 'a colonial monument'.[64] We did not specify too closely what we meant by this, hoping for a free interpretation by participants. As noted above, however, some interviewees asked for clarification and the interviewers directed them towards the nineteenth century and British period. We were interested in whether the Omani era was considered 'colonial'. What became evident from the interviews was that while it might not specifically be regarded as 'colonial' it was certainly seen as the work of outsiders. But, one that was entirely compatible with Zanzibar today.

The complexity of these multilateral connections was clear. For many interviewees, its construction by Sultan Barghash did not make the building inappropriate as a symbol of Zanzibar – in contrast this made it, for one participant, even more reflective of Zanzibar: 'It's true that the building was built by Omanis but it belongs to Zanzibar. No matter it comprises different culture like Arab culture, Swahili culture, Indian culture and European, still it is ours'.[65] Like others, this respondent noted that in spite of its varied history, since the time of the Revolution it was no longer a colonial monument. Another described it as belonging to both Oman and Zanzibar.[66] As described emphatically by respondent 6 (23-year-old male), 'This is Zanzibar property because once after the Revolution, everything has come under Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar'. Similar sentiments were echoed by other respondents. The biography of the building was also acknowledged in several interviews: 'it was built by the Arabs, and after the revolution, it was used by the *Serikali ya Mapinduzi ya Zanzibar* (Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar) for various official activities before turning into a Museum'.[67] While the museum displays created in the 2000s as part of the major refurbishment – which remained in place until the collapse – only mentioned the Revolution minimally, the building's post-colonial history is significant for some in claiming it as a post-Revolution Zanzibari monument.[68]

A tour-guide respondent stated that it belongs to Zanzibar as it was built at the expense of Zanzibaris which in effect is true as it was built by the labour of Zanzibaris and from the wealth of the Omani Sultanate reaped from the slave and clove trade.[69] The same respondent believed that the opulent building reflected 'how wealthy we Zanzibaris were' and 'how wealthy our country was during that time'. The elision of the wealth of the Omani Sultanate and of Zanzibar here – 'we Zanzibaris' – is important – indicating that for this interviewee, Zanzibari's nineteenth-century commercial heyday was something shared by Omanis and locals. This respondent also stated that it was the first building 'with electricity and water which was not possible even for Tanganyika, Kenya and Uganda'. Sultan Barghash pioneered the use of electricity in Zanzibar and promoted clean water.[70] Several aspects of the building's history have been conflated or exaggerated in these responses. It is notable, however, how pride in the building derives from Zanzibar's relative modernity in the nineteenth century compared with its East African neighbours who now play a more significant role on the world stage.

In considering colonialism, some respondents challenged the question – two stating that it was an 'Arabian' monument not a colonial monument so there is no clear consensus on viewing notion of the Omani sultans as colonialists or rulers.[71] A 50-year-old woman asserted that: 'historically we can say that it is a colonial monument, but currently I can say that it belongs to Zanzibar'.[72] Here the definition of 'colonial' seems to refer to outsiders – whether British or Omani. The 'coming of outside rulers' was seen as a key

factor of Zanzibar's history.[73] Respondent 7 (18-year-old male) alluded to the complex way in which history and identity are deployed and claimed by different groups:

> For Zanzibar's history, I think everybody is explaining it according to their own interests. For example, if I originate from Oman, I can explain Zanzibar's history in a way of appreciating Arabs, likewise non-Arabs will give different stories based on their group interests.

Certainly, Zanzibar's history has constantly been written and rewritten by different groups. Glassman has shown that in the late colonial era, interpretations of this history were integral to the different nationalist groups while Rhodes expands on this observation with reference to enslavement.[74] Our respondent clearly saw this as a phenomenon that continues into contemporary communities, who might all make different claims on the Zanzibari past; he accepted the existence of multiple narratives from different communities. One who did not regard it as a colonial monument was emphatic that it was Zanzibari as 'we are the ones benefitting by it through tourism'.[75]

It is useful to consider these interviewees' perception of many layers of meaning in the House of Wonders, as well as recognition of the contributions of Zanzibaris to its construction. Their interpretation aligns much more clearly with what Meier describes as the 'architecture of elsewhere'. Rather than being out of place in Zanzibar, the House of Wonders 'is in fact central to the narration of local culture – precisely because, as a monument to bricolage, it manifests the fact that coastal architecture has always been about making claims to cultures and places that are not entirely "local"'.[76] From our evidence, it is clear that the residents have a much more fluid approach to what the House of Wonders means and its sense of belonging. This theme is picked up in the discussion, below.

World heritage in a local context

The feeling of ownership and identification that Zanzibaris have with the House of Wonders make it unsurprising that 38 of 40 respondents stated that Zanzibar/Tanzania should pay for the restoration as part of the preservation of national heritage. This stands in contrast to the actual situation in which Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Tourism is funding the restoration, albeit in collaboration with Zanzibari and international partners. The House of Wonders is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Zanzibar town (or Stone Town). It was listed by UNESCO in 2000 for how it symbolised the long-term urban history of the Swahili coast and the Omani, European and Indian elements that characterise Stone Town in particular.[77] The UNESCO designation reflects the global importance of Zanzibar's heritage and history; it also amplifies it for potential international donors. It was interesting, therefore, how few residents mentioned ideas of world heritage. Only one resident, a tour guide, mentioned UNESCO at all.[78]

Conservation projects funded by international bodies have transformed Zanzibar's waterfront over the last few decades, with large-scale restoration of nineteenth-century buildings including the House of Wonders, Old Fort, Livingstone House and the Old Dispensary, and the Anglican Cathedral and Tippu Tip's House elsewhere in Stone Town (Figure 2). Jasinski observed that much of the public architecture has been restored while neglecting the everyday buildings inhabited by residents, which are less attractive to tourists.[79] With the limited funds available, the buildings that are given attention are

Figure 2. Zanzibar Stone Town waterfront in 2013. Of the buildings and sites visible in this image, several have been part of major restoration projects including Forodhani Gardens, the House of Wonders and the Palace Museum. The former Customs House in the British colonial era (the balconied building to the left) was restored and transformed into a hotel in 2014. Wikimedia Commons: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Stone_Town_Waterfront,_Zanzibar_%2810163203685%29.jpg.

usually public buildings, which are also often those associated by the donors with Zanzibar's global role and cosmopolitan culture, or elements representative of Zanzibari architectural 'styles'. The Old Dispensary, for example, was the first building to be restored by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture on the Zanzibar waterfront. It is described by them as 'a symbol of multi-cultural Zanzibari architecture … an astonishing hybrid of styles', combining Indian and European neo-classical ornamentation, local coral rag and lime construction.[80] The global connections inherent in Zanzibari architecture are clearly highlighted here as central to the building's significance.

There is a subtle difference between the ways that UNESCO and the international audience describe Zanzibari heritage as containing characteristics of other places, and the attitudes revealed by our survey that viewed this as a domestic Zanzibari trait. Bissell has argued that external consultants brought in to advise on the conservation of Stone Town architecture 'read the outward and visual form of buildings much like phenotypical features, relying on elements of design or style to place structures in their "appropriate" categories – which in the context of Zanzibar were routinely understood in racialized terms', such as African, Arab and Indian.[81] For example, the World Monuments Fund website describes the House of Wonders as conveying 'the cultural and architectural influences of Zanzibar, Britain, Portugal, and Oman over the centuries'.[82] This can be contrasted with how respondents described the building as a 'symbol' or 'image' of Zanzibar. This is a subtle difference, which fits with a long history of western perceptions of Zanzibar as a syncretic mix of other Indian Ocean

cultures which Zanzibaris have seen simply as part of their local setting.[83] Prestholdt describes this as a difference between 'parallel Western and Zanzibari cosmopolitanisms', describing the ways Zanzibari cosmopolitanism 'incorporated the symbols of myriad places without importing the values of those places'.[84] The difference is in positionality, rather than content.

Beyond these large-scale renovation projects, the heritage of Zanzibar town is found in the residential areas, where inhabitants are struggling to maintain and repair their homes. International investment can also be a challenge for these residents, as the living heritage of Stone Town is being transformed by contemporary developments, such as converting historical buildings into hotels, restaurants, art galleries and other tourism-related offices. Zanzibar's policy frameworks encourage investment in historical sites as a means of urban development and economic growth. For example, while the 2015 Indicative Structure Plan for Zanzibar Municipality and Urban development policy emphasises the 'city centre upgrade', the Zanzibar Development Vision 2050 emphasises 'attracting private and community investments to urban developments'. These and other policy frameworks have attracted investors to renovate and rent the buildings in poor condition for business purposes. UNESCO/ICOMOS criticise these policies as they encourage the leasing of historic buildings for business interests.[85] Until now, out of 2711 total buildings of Stone Town, 63 buildings mostly in poor condition have been renovated and converted into tourist accommodation.[86] Respondent 38, a retired 69-year-old man, claimed that 'potential historical buildings like Mambo Msiige (one of the grand Arab mansions) have been modified to Park Hyatt hotel'. As a result, the 2019 UNESCO state of conservation report expressed disappointment about the violation of the renovation guidelines for this building, following increases to the height of the hotel above the original building.[87] Respondent 27, a 26-year-old woman, was equally cynical about care for heritage and the expansion of hotels: 'The government should make frequent repairs and restoration without waiting for their collapse and turning them into hotels'.

Locally, the heritage landscape of Zanzibar is overseen by the Zanzibar Department of Antiquities and Museums, part of the Ministry of Tourism and Heritage. In addition, Zanzibar Stone Town has been protected as a conservation area since 1985. Administrative responsibility for Zanzibar Stone Town is shared: the Department of Housing and Human Settlement has overall planning responsibilities, while the Stone Town Conservation and Development Authority (STCDA) has responsibility for safeguarding, conserving and developing values of the Stone Town.[88] Meanwhile, several buildings are also protected by the Waqf Commission (Islamic charitable institution) which administers Muslim buildings donated for religious or charitable purposes.[89] This structure reflects not only multiple overlapping spheres of authority, but also potential conflicts between, for example, promotion of tourism, preservation of heritage, and the maintenance of historic homes of Stone Town residents.

These tensions were reflected in our respondents' attitudes towards conservation. A clear sense of collective responsibility for Zanzibar's built heritage emerged from three perspectives. Some of the respondents believe that regulatory authorities are responsible for preservation; 'the government under STCDA is responsible for preservation and monitoring'.[90] Others highlighted that this is the responsibility of both central government and citizens.[91] As pinpointed by the student of Tourism and Heritage studies 'it is the responsibility of the government and Zanzibaris themselves … Oman can only

assist if they are willing'.[92] Meanwhile, others think that Stone Town dwellers themselves are responsible for preserving these buildings.[93]

The emphasis from our respondents was that internal and local agencies should be responsible for conservation, while in reality, overseas agencies and bodies play a major role.[94] Among the notable organisations is the Ministry of Heritage and Culture of the Sultanate of Oman (MHCSO) which sponsors the renovation of Oman-based royal palaces, open spaces and residential houses. They have contributed several times to the restoration of the House of Wonders, including the current campaign. In fact, since the process of Stone Town conservation began in the 1980s, half of the renovated buildings have been funded by the government of Oman.[95] This of course contributes to the agenda of what is conserved, with a strong focus on Omani legacies in the town. As noted earlier, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) also promotes the conservation and reuse of historic buildings of Stone Town. Until now, it has restored and repaired the Old Dispensary; an Ismaili caravanserai; and two historical public spaces of Kelele square and Forodhani Gardens. Most importantly, AKTC published a handbook for the 'Conservation and Design Guidelines for Zanzibar Stone Town' which highlights the principles and methods of restoration.[96] In addition, the Swedish Development Agency (SIDA) has financed the renovations of around 500 flats under the programme of Stone Town Urban Housing Rehabilitation.[97]

Respondents recognised a reliance on international donors and raised concerns around the low priority given to secure endangered historical buildings by local agencies. Three respondents blamed the responsible authorities' slow pace and negligence of renovation as a contributing factor to collapsing Stone Town buildings: 'most heritage structures are not repaired until they collapse'.[98] This was echoed in respondent 6's (23-year-old male) comments: 'other heritage structures need to be maintained and repaired to avoid costs of renovation later'. Buildings across Stone Town require repair because they are too old to survive both natural deterioration and damage from generations of use. Respondent 13 (32-year-old male) blamed these delays for the House of Wonders collapse: 'House of Wonders needed repair for a long time because of its long-time associated cracks'. STCDA's own monitoring had discovered severe decay in the lower rail supporting the cast-iron balustrading.[99] Meanwhile, several respondents regretted a lack of pre-emptive action, believing that it would have prevented some of the most serious and expensive damage. As described by respondent 22 (58-year-old male), 'they are often not maintained and reach dangerous levels before attention is paid. A vivid example can be traced in the Palace Museum which needs serious repair currently'.

These discussions about Stone Town's heritage take place against a backdrop of numerous contradictions in the use and management of the urban space. As Bissell explains, the government's configuration of Stone Town as 'cultural property' focuses on its use as 'a historic site, asset, and attraction that can promote a new tourist economy'.[100] However, these 'restorations' have excluded long-term residents or pushed them to the outskirts of the town.[101] In this context, the NGO Zanzibar Stone Town Heritage Society (ZSTHS) has encouraged community involvement in the maintenance of historic buildings. However, Lwoga et al point out that residents' support must involve trust in conservation authorities and perceived benefits, which is challenging in the Stone Town setting where residents can feel excluded from access to conservation funding and support.[102] Tensions thus abound in the maintenance and use of

Stone Town's buildings, from global recognition via UNESCO World Heritage designation on one hand, and the ramifications of that status in terms of heritage agendas on the other side. The collapse of the House of Wonders and our interviewees' responses highlighted both the fragility of the structures and the challenges inherent in the preservation of heritage in this complex and multi-layered funding landscape.

Conclusion: 'a house of many wonders'

The House of Wonders is, according to respondent 7 – an 18-year-old male – 'a house of many wonders'. This paper has exposed its myriad meanings for Zanzibaris, in particular in relation to colonialism, tourism and heritage. The House of Wonders is a metonym for Zanzibari built heritage more generally, a symbol and an embodiment of Zanzibari cosmopolitanism from the nineteenth century to today.[103] From the responses, it is clear that Zanzibaris have layered associations with this building. They acknowledge its Omani origins and British colonial use, but this for our interviewees does not detract from its centrality as an icon of Zanzibar. There were mixed responses as to whether it might be seen as a 'colonial monument' with a far greater number regarding it as Zanzibari. A distinctive aspect of this discussion was the way that our respondents thought of 'colonial' as a historical attribution, only one part of the building's biography. Unlike other forms of memorial, buildings' changing uses mean associations with potentially contentious periods in history are overlain and reclaimed. This aligns with heritage discourse surrounding historical memory and imagination, as monuments can mean different things in different historical settings; it also points to the future meaning of the House of Wonders, which was alluded to in our interviews.

Several respondents noted the significance of the Revolution in this building 'becoming' Zanzibari. The work of Marie-Aude Fouéré and William Bissell has interrogated the complex ways in which memories of the Revolution are expressed and the shifting narratives associated with the event. Of particular relevance here is their observation that official commemoration of the Revolution in the heritage landscape is notably sparse. They note that while the House of Wonders and the Sultan's Palace Museum celebrate the era of the Omani Sultanate, only two items in the former recall the Revolution: the first President Karume's car and a kanga displayed near the car, with words exhorting the president.[104] For several of our interviewees, however, the building itself is now a Zanzibari monument due to the Revolution.

More than half of the respondents in this study expressed emotional responses to the collapse of the House of Wonders due to the loss of peoples' lives, loss of Zanzibar identity and loss of valuable contents. These powerful responses demonstrated the importance of the building as a symbol of Zanzibar. That sense of Zanzibari identity came across strongly in the interviews. As discussed above, there has often been a distinctive way that Zanzibaris regard their identity – what Prestholdt refers to as Zanzibari cosmopolitanism – in a way that is able to contain multiple international influences that might be in tension with each other. The House of Wonders symbolises this cosmopolitanism for many of our respondents, which is a Zanzibari, rather than Tanzanian identity. These responses suggest a rewarding future line of enquiry would be to interrogate in more depth the way in which ideas around heritage and nationalism intersect in Zanzibar and Tanzania.

As well as considering the meaning of the House of Wonders, our survey allowed a reflection on the wider context of Zanzibar's heritage landscape. The tension between different factors is readily apparent. In the alternative uses of the building discussed by residents, such as a site for play for children or a forum in which to gather to listen to one of the few radios in Zanzibar during Ramadhan, we see residents appropriating and interpreting the building according to their own needs and we are reminded that this is a public space at the heart of a living town. For many, their needs are economic and integrally connected to tourism. While the most pressing concerns for residents may not be the nature of representation of Zanzibar's past, the maintenance of tourist sites and the sustained influx of overseas visitors are essential to many livelihoods. The interplay of local and international demands, of tourist and local needs, underpinned many of the comments and position the significance of tourism for Zanzibaris alongside the conflicting economic and ideological struggles that such a reliance imposes on local people.

Notes

1. Global Voices, "Iconic House of Wonders."
2. UNESCO, *UNESCO and Zanzibar Cooperate*.
3. The National, "Oman to Investigate Collapse."
4. Sheriff, *Architectural History*, 78.
5. Battle, "Old Dispensary," 94.
6. https://www.archnet.org/sites/3787 (access 10/7/2023).
7. Rhodes Breen, and Forsythe, "Zanzibar."
8. Sheriff, *Zanzibar Stone Town*, 78.
9. Meier, *Swahili Port Cities*, 19.
10. Sheriff, *Zanzibar Stone Town*, 78.
11. Bissell, "Casting a Long Shadow."
12. Burgess, "The Zanzibar Revolution."
13. Bissell and Fouéré, "Memory, Media, and Mapinduzi," 13; Sheriff, Voogt, and Luhila, *Zanzibar House of Wonders*, 25.
14. Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory*; Sheriff, *Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam*; Croucher, *Capitalism and Cloves*.
15. Boswell, *Re-Presenting Heritage*; Kasfir, "Tourist Aesthetics in the Global Flow."
16. Wahab, "Emancipation and Post-Emancipation," 48.
17. Keshodkar, *Tourism and Social Change*; Simpson and Kresse, *Struggling with History*.
18. See for example, Tolia-Kelly et al. *Heritage, Affect and Emotion*.
19. Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*.
20. Kwoba, Chantiluke, and Nkopo, *Rhodes Must Fall*; Knudsen and Andersen, "Affective Politics and Colonial Heritage."
21. Borck, "Constructing the Future History".
22. Zhu and Salazar, "Heritage and Tourism."
23. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "World Heritage and Cultural Economics," 168.
24. Meskell, "World Heritage Convention at 40"; Holtorf, "Heritage Futures, Prefiguration and World Heritage"; Meskell and Brumann, "UNESCO and New World Orders"; Holtorf, "Heritage Futures, Prefiguration and World Heritage."
25. UNESCO, *Stone Town of Zanzibar*.
26. Boswell, "Re-Imagining Identity," 123, see also Bissell, "Engaging Colonial Nostalgia."
27. Bissell, "Engaging Colonial Nostalgia"; Kasfir, "Tourist Aesthetics in the Global Flow."
28. Boswell, *Re-Presenting Heritage*.
29. Rhodes, "History, Materialization, and Presentation," 185–6.

30. Recent examples include numerous articles in the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* related to destruction by IS in the 2010s, and Newson and Young, *Post-Conflict Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*.
31. Gössling and Schulz, "Tourism-Related Migration"; Lange, "Tourism in Zanzibar."
32. Veal, *Research Methods*.
33. Jones, "Wrestling with Social Value."
34. Minde, Roop, and Tronyoll, "Turbulent Political History."
35. Rhodes, "History, Materialization, and Presentation."
36. Respondent 25: 31-year-old male. For consistency, the age and gender of the participants will be given and their profession will be indicated where relevant in interpreting their comment.
37. Respondent 20.
38. Respondent 26.
39. Respondent 16: 55-year-old female.
40. Respondent 24: 22-year-old female.
41. Respondent 8.
42. Sheriff, Voogt, and Luhila, *Zanzibar House of Wonders*.
43. Respondent 2.
44. Respondent 10: 45-year-old male.
45. Respondent 19.
46. Respondent 36.
47. Respondent 11.
48. Respondent 25: 31-year-old male.
49. Respondent 14: 24-year-old female.
50. Killian, "The State and Identity Politics," 99; Brown, "Political Tensions in Zanzibar."
51. Respondent 22.
52. Lange, "Tourism in Zanzibar."
53. Chami and Kaminyoge, "Closed House of Wonders."
54. Lange, "Tourism in Zanzibar."
55. Respondent 39: 51-year-old male.
56. Rhodes, "History, Materialization, and Presentation."
57. Respondent 1: 25-year-old male.
58. Respondent 2: 42-year-old female.
59. Respondent 4: 50-year-old male.
60. Respondents 7, 10, 14, 15, 18, 20, 22, 23.
61. Díaz-Andreu, "Heritage Values and the Public."
62. Longair, *Cracks in the Dome*.
63. Glassman, *War of Words,* 5.
64. Questions in kiSwahili: "Unafikiri Beit al-Ajaab ni la Zanzibar zaidi au la Oman?" and "Unafikiri ni jengo la kikoloni?."
65. Respondent 1: 25-year-old male.
66. Respondent 40: 72-year-old male.
67. Respondent 23: 23-year-old female.
68. Bissell and Fouéré, "Memory, Media, and Mapinduzi," 15–16.
69. Respondent 22: 38-year-old male.
70. Sheriff, *Zanzibar Stone Town*, 78–80.
71. Respondent 10.
72. Respondent 16.
73. Respondent 6: 23-year-old male.
74. Rhodes, "History, Materialization, and Presentation."
75. Respondent 28: 25-year-old female.
76. Meier, *Swahili Port Cities*, 24. For examples of 'bricolage' in Swahili buildings, see Rhodes, "Building Colonialism."
77. UNESCO, *Stone Town of Zanzibar*, Boswell, "Re-Imagining Identity," 123.

78. Respondent 13: 32-year-old male.
79. Jasiński, "Colors of Stone Town."
80. Aga Khan Trust, "Old Dispensary Restoration."
81. Bissell, "Casting a Long Shadow," 184; 191.
82. World Monuments Fund, "Zanzibar."
83. Meier, *Swahili Port Cities*.
84. Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*, 91.
85. Awadh, "Tourism and Heritage Conservation."
86. Sheriff, "Contradictions in Heritagization of Zanzibar Stone Town."
87. UNESCO, *Zanzibar Stone Town Report*.
88. Sheriff, *History and Conservation*.
89. Sheriff, "Contradiction in the Heritagization."
90. Respondent 2: 42-year-old female.
91. Respondents 4, 5, 33 and 39.
92. Respondent1: 25-year-old male.
93. Respondent 40: 72-year-old male.
94. See Rhodes, "Slavery, Materialization and Presentation," 81, on the involvement of outside agencies in the memorialization of slavery.
95. Sheriff, "Contradictions in the Heritagization."
96. Battle and Steel, *Conservation and Design Guidelines*.
97. Hemer, "A Future for the Past."
98. Respondent 5: 58-year-old male.
99. STCDA survey report.
100. Bissell, "Casting a Long Shadow," 182.
101. Ibid., 182.
102. Lwoga and Mwitondi, "Challenges."
103. Meier, *Swahili Port Cities*, 105.
104. Bissell and Fouéré, "Memory, Media, and Mapinduzi," 15–16.

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ORCID

Sarah Longair http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6659-7725
Stephanie Wynne-Jones http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3005-8647

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