Some time in the late 1600s, a man named ʿAbd Allāh b. Aḥmad Jamal al-Layl died at sea somewhere between the islands of Grande Comore and Nosy Be off the northern coast of Madagascar. As was customary, ʿAbd Allāh was shrouded for burial, and by dawn, the crew prepared to commit his body to the sea. Just as the sun rose on the eastern horizon, a big flock of birds appeared and landed on the body – one after the other, until they were so many that they covered it entirely. To the astonishment of the assembled group, the birds flew off with the body, out to the open sea and soon disappearing on the horizon. The deceased ʿAbd Allāh b. Aḥmad was posthumously given the title Ṣāḥīb al-Ṭuyūr, the “Master of Birds”.

This narrative is related in several printed works, and is often retold by representatives of the Jamal al-Layl family even today.¹ It is in other words a well-known element in a wider historical narrative of the Haḍramī ʿAlawīs in East Africa, aiming to incorporate the “Master of Birds” into the web of the ‘Alawī diaspora. The narrative locates him among the “climbers of the rock face”, to use the phrase of E. Ho, whereby each generation is linked to the next through a set of genealogical or intellectual connections.² Portraying a miraculous event, the narrative also makes a claim to sainthood, emphasizing the perceived position of the deceased in his own time, and not least: in his own place.

Place being the key word here, we may also read the story as discussion of location in the world of seaborne Islam. When he died, the “Master of Birds” was nowhere in particular, literally in an intermediate position. If we assume that the birds flocked to take ʿAbd Allāh’s body away to its rightful burial ground, they would have many destinations to choose from, as the deceased

¹ Al-Mashhūr, Shams al-ẓahīra al-ḍāḥiyya al-munīra fī nasab wa-silsila ahl al-bayt al-nabawī, 2nd ed., edited by Muḥammad Ḍiyāʾ Shihāb, Jiddah (ʿĀlam al-Maʿrifa), 1984, 492–493; Interviews with Bin Sumayt Khitamy, Muscat 1999 and 2001–2002, Muhdar Khitamy, Mombasa April 2010 and Ahmad and Aydaroos Badawi, Lamu, July 2010 and December 2011. The versions of the story are somewhat different. In some versions the birds simply land on the body, then fly off, in which case their presence can be interpreted as an homage to the deceased. In the version where the birds fly off with the body, the narrative problematizes the question of homeland, expressed through burial site.

² E. Ho, The Graves of Tarim, 140–141.
had family connections all around the western Indian Ocean. ‘Abd Allāh’s grandfather, Hārūn b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Āl Jamal al-Layl (known as Mwenye Hasan or Mwenye Ba Hasan) had left the Ḥaḍramawt in the late sixteenth century and settled in Pate. Hārūn did not migrate alone, but brought with him his son Ahmad, later to become the father of ‘Abd Allāh. The “Master of Birds” was, in other words, the first of his lineage to be born in East Africa (probably to an East African mother), while his father and grandfather were both Ḥaḍramī born.³