

## CHANGING SWAHILI CULTURES IN A GLOBALISING WORLD: AN APPROACH FROM ANTHROPOLOGY

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This article considers what might be meant by Swahili cultures and Swahili identities. It regards neither concept as fixed, but as constituting a repertoire from which people choose strategically, depending not only upon location and historical time, but also upon social context. The processes of constituting cultures and identities are part of the making of meaning, a process in which, as will be seen, there are important continuities, ruptures and contradictions. With its attention to detail and its ability to give voice to the local, ethnography plays an important role in understanding the construction of both cultures and identities. In this paper, ethnographic examples are drawn both from my own fieldwork on Mafia Island, Tanzania, begun in 1965, and from the work of other anthropologists and scholars who have carried out research on the East African coast and islands.

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### Introduction

This paper considers what is meant by Swahili cultures and Swahili identities. It regards neither concept as fixed, but as constituting a repertoire on which people draw, depending not only upon location and historical time, but also upon social context. The processes of constituting cultures and identities form part of the making of meaning, a process in which, as will be seen, there are important continuities, ruptures and contradictions.

In recent years the concept of culture, for long at the heart of anthropology, particularly as practised in North America<sup>1</sup>, has been much criticised by social scientists, especially anthropologists, as tending towards reification and a fixity which can rarely be established in the practices of everyday life. Rather, culture tends nowadays to be seen as contested and negotiated, often highly politicised and never monolithic. Yet paradoxically the term has at the same time been adopted by many outside of the social sciences and used in a variety of ways, not least as an explanatory device: “they do that because of their culture”.

One way of dealing with issues of culture is through ethnography. With its attention to detail and its ability to give voice to the local, ethnography plays an important role in understanding the

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<sup>1</sup> Historically, anthropology in North America has had a four-fold division which includes cultural anthropology, whereas British anthropology has focused more on the social. Today British anthropology includes both social and cultural (as well as physical anthropology, which is less widely taught).

construction of both cultures and identities. In this paper, ethnographic examples will be drawn both from my own fieldwork among the Swahili on Mafia Island, Tanzania, begun in 1965, and from the work of other anthropologists and scholars who have carried out research on the East African coast and islands.

While culture and identity are both the subject of contestation, and are thus clearly political, this paper explores them via a limited number of selected key concepts recognisable to most people who would define themselves and be defined by others as ‘Swahili’. These include various notions of time and space, of personhood and identities, and of *ngoma* (literally drum or dance) – rituals which form part of cults of affliction. All of these concepts have to be viewed in the ever-present context of the changing nature of Islam among the Swahili and the perceived tensions between *mila* (custom) and *sheria/sunna* (sometimes glossed as *dini* – (Islamic) religion). They also have to be understood in the further context of a rapidly changing world in which ‘Swahili-ness’ is not confined primarily to the East Coast and Islands, or even the Indian Ocean, but has expanded into a global diaspora, and in which the Swahili homeland itself has been subjected to multifarious external influences as it has experienced migration from further inland and elsewhere.

### **Scholarly Debates on Who the Swahili Are**

There is a long-standing debate about who the Swahili are. When Prins wrote his book on the Swahili in 1961, the issue was considered fairly unproblematic, yet a re-reading of Prins suggests that he associated ‘Swahili-ness’ primarily with the northern Kenyan coast, especially around Lamu. Eastman’s eponymous article “Who are the Waswahili?” (1971), published just ten years later, raises a question which has continued to be posed regularly since then (see also Arens 1975).

Three possible kinds of answer may be distinguished. The first, which suggests that Swahili culture arose largely because of the arrival of Persians or Arabs who founded city states, has largely been superseded. As a young undergraduate sent to Tanzania to improve my Swahili in 1962, I worked for the archaeologist Neville Chittick on the Kilwa ruins, which he was convinced had been built by non-Africans, rather as the ruins at Greater Zimbabwe were for long supposed to be the work of immigrants (Chittick 1974).

The second answer, which became increasingly dominant in the 1960s and subsequently, was that Swahili culture is primarily African, as can be demonstrated through linguistic analysis (Swahili is a Bantu language) and in other ways. Sheriff (2006) has recently criticised this view as somewhat myopic, since a focus on Africa alone divorces Swahili culture from the sea and the Indian Ocean. He sees this trend as arising from the political needs of the 1960s, when it was thought important to discover and establish the agency of Africans. However, other local scholars have argued strongly that the Swahili are unequivocally ‘African’ (see Mazrui & Mazrui 1995 and

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Mazrui & Shariff 1994), with Ali Mazrui (1986) even suggesting that the Arabian Peninsula should be considered a part of Africa (see also Caplan 2007a). Moreover, recent archaeology (e.g. Chami 1994, Chami & Pwiti 2002), also demonstrates that early coastal settlements and their material culture were created by people emanating from the interior of Africa and not simply imposed by outsiders coming from the sea.

The third answer is that the Swahili have a ‘dual heritage’, based on both inland and overseas influences and immigration. However, some commentators who have espoused this view appear to suggest that the duality in this heritage has been problematic. Implicit, even explicit, in some of the literature is a perceived tension between Africa and Arabia which has led to a ‘tormented’ history<sup>2</sup>. Others regard the Swahili as a prime example of a hybrid, creole or cosmopolitan culture, with shifting boundaries in time and space, and with links to both the Indian Ocean littoral (which of course includes the Arabian Gulf and Peninsula) as well as the interior of Africa. This is more the position taken by Middleton (1992) and by Horton and Middleton (2000), as well as the recent collections edited by Caplan and Topan (2004) and Loimeier and Seesemann (2006). The latter note “The Swahili have been cosmopolitan for a long time” (ibid: 11) and one of their contributors, Abdul Sheriff, argues that “there is a maritime ethos, a distinctive maritime culture that differs fundamentally from a continental one, with complex cosmopolitan cultures.” (2006: 29).

Scholars have identified a number of key features of Swahili identity, which includes both being a primary speaker of the language and the practice of Islam, although each is exceedingly diverse.

The Swahili language, as many readers will be well aware, has many variants. The Swahili I had to learn in the field on Mafia Island was very different from the standard Swahili (mainly based on Kiunguja) which I had first learned as a student at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), or the Kiamu I had studied in Swahili literature. Later, I had to learn yet another form of Swahili if I wanted to be able to read newspapers or follow political speeches, and I confess to never having mastered urban colloquial ‘youth’ Swahili to any great degree. But the Mafian form of Swahili I had learned, which included familiarity with spirit possession cults with their highly specialised vocabulary, proved too difficult for a London-based native Swahili speaker who was employed by the BBC to transcribe the footage we had shot in 1976 on Mafia and he abandoned the task. However, there was yet another form of Mafian Swahili which I only came to understand with some difficulty and that was what the linguist Ahmed Kipacha (2004) later came to term the Kingome dialect, spoken in northern Mafia mainly by older people, especially women. In other words, there are many kinds of Swahili, even in the same area, although increasingly there is a

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<sup>2</sup> See Dubresson (1988) “Politique Africaine Noirs et Arabes: une histoire tormentee”; Caplan and Le Guennec-Coppens (1991) “Les Swahili Entre Afrique et Arabie”; and a special edition of *Journal des Africanistes* (1992) entitled “Afrique-Arabie, d’une rive a l’autre en mer erythree”.

standard form which is spoken and understood throughout Tanzania and Kenya, and also in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda.

Even so, the linguistic history of the two major Swahili-speaking nations, Tanzania and Kenya, is somewhat different. Soon after independence, Tanzania took the decision to have Swahili as its national language (see Whiteley 1969), but Kenya's classification of Swahili as an official language came somewhat later and even in the late 1970s, children were still being taught mainly in English.<sup>3</sup> However, if we were to use language as a referent of identity, there would be now many 'Swahili' in the form of primary speakers of that language, although not all would describe themselves as such. Furthermore, the development of Kenyan and Tanzanian Swahili identities is complicated by their respective political histories. The so-called Ten-Mile Strip in Kenya was part of the domain of the Sultan of Zanzibar during the colonial period. In the post-independence period, however, many coastal Swahili have felt themselves to be dispossessed not only of resources such as beach lands (see for example Parkin 1972) but also of power and influence, as the ruling parties have been unequivocally Christian and with leaders from mainland ethnic groups. In Tanzania, the situation has been rather different. The coastal area of Tanzania has never been as differentiated from the mainland as in Kenya, although the status of Tanzania, a union of the former Tanganyika and the islands of Zanzibar, has been questioned in recent years, with on-going debates on both the islands and on the mainland about the status of Zanzibar within the union.<sup>4</sup>

If the Swahili language can vary, and can also be spoken by people who would not define themselves as such, then does Islam provide an unassailable aspect of Swahili identity? Is it possible to be a Swahili and not a Muslim? Middleton (1992) has argued that Islam is the bonding factor for the Swahili and until recently this view would indeed have been largely uncontested. But in a recent article, Topan (2006) notes that there are increasing numbers of people who call themselves Swahili, for whom this is a first and home language, and yet who are Christian.

Further, the meaning of Islam is itself contested, with debates around the status of the various *tarika* (Sufi orders) and other Islamic rituals (see for example van de Bruinhorst 2009). Do such debates, often heated, represent a new aspect of Islam, what some have called 'Islam in Africa' as opposed to 'African Islam' (e.g. Rosander and Westerlund 1997). In a recent book chapter, Seeseman (2006) argues that they are not, that such debates have taken place over a long period, and cautions against "the temptation to measure Islamic societies in Africa against the yardstick of an Arab Islam that is assumed to be more pure" (274). Yet within my own research lifespan – from

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<sup>3</sup> Uganda has recently in 2005 added Swahili to its official languages, but during my stay there in February 2009 I found that few people spoke Swahili, and even those who understood it were unwilling to use it, as it was associated with the Tanzanian invasion and subsequent occupation of the country in 1978-9.

<sup>4</sup> For good summaries of this shifting situation, see the *Bulletin of Tanzanian Affairs*, which covers Zanzibar on a regular basis.

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the 1960s to the present – the kinds of Islam that have been imported first from post-revolutionary Iran, then from elsewhere in the Muslim world, are in fact very different from Islam as I first encountered it in Tanzania in the 1960s and the effects of the newer forms have been profound.<sup>5</sup>

As I have noted elsewhere (Caplan 2007a) much depends on who is speaking to whom, and when. In discussing issues such as identities, we need to be clear not only who is talking (male/female, young/old, higher or lower status) but also what kind of person is reporting the words of informants. To give an example, Marc Swartz (1991), who wrote a book about the Mombasa Swahili, notes that he was unable to stay in a Swahili household, and thus his access to women was limited. On the other hand, Minou Fuglesang (1994), a young woman, had easy access to women of her own age in the Lamu area. David Parkin has studied mosques and prayer on Zanzibar – an area that would be more difficult for a woman, but Kjersti Larsen (2008), working in the same area and at the same time, had access to women and their possessory cults in a way that would have been difficult for a man.

A final point I want to make at this stage in surveying the literature on the Swahili, whether historical, linguistic, or anthropological, is that it does not cover the coast and islands at all evenly. There is a great deal of focus on the Kenya coast and on the island of Unguja in Zanzibar, whereas relatively little work has been carried out south of Tanga. However, my own field area of Mafia Island, long neglected by scholars of all disciplines, has now received some attention from a handful of scholars, such as the archaeologist Chami (op. cit), the linguist Kipacha (op. cit), and a younger anthropologist Walley (2004). Furthermore, there has long been greater focus on Swahili towns than on the villages and certainly most anthropologists such as Middleton, Swartz, Larsen, Fuglesang, Le Guennec-Coppens and Prins have worked in towns.

### Space and Time

For the Waswahili, time is never a simple concept. When conducting fieldwork on the coast, one has to get used to ‘Swahili time’, ‘mosque time’ and standard (sometimes called ‘European’) time. Furthermore, coastal dwellers make use of both lunar and solar calendars. The former determines Islamic religious rituals, the latter the agricultural season and its associated rituals such as *Siku ya Mwaka*. But time is also a way of talking about the present (*siku hizi, sasa*) and the past (*zamani*). These may sometimes be contrasted to the disadvantage of the latter, as in discussions of development (*maendeleo*) (see Walley 2004), but equally in lamenting the practices of modern times, as in *kwenda na wakati* (see Saleh 2004).

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<sup>5</sup> Not least in terms of the change in the way women dress. The new form of *buibui* (*jilbab*) has become widespread, and virtually all Muslim girls now wear the *hijab*. But Muslim men too have taken on a different appearance, with many of them growing beards and wearing turbans instead of *kofia*.

Time also involves considerations of kinship and descent, which operate through constant movement between past (including the ancestors), present and future (descendants and the as yet unborn). But like most aspects of Swahili culture, there is no single system agreed by all Swahili: in some areas, patrilineality is crucial, in others bilateral ties are more important. Some areas, like parts of Zanzibar (Middleton 1961) and northern Mafia (Caplan 1969, 1975) have discrete, named, property-owning descent groups; elsewhere one can only speak of kin networks.

Space is similarly complex. The Swahili classify the space in which they live using terms such as *nyumba* (house), *mtaa* (neighbourhood), *kijiji* (village), *mji* (town). In some areas such as Mafia, they distinguish between the *bara juu* (land above) and the *bahari* (sea) with a complex set of associated vocabulary for rocks, islands, tides, winds, boats and their gear.

Prins (1961) placed the Swahili on the East Coast of Kenya and Tanzania and the offshore islands of Unguja and Pemba, but many Swahili speakers moved inland, as far afield as central Africa and overseas to the Gulf and the Middle East beyond.<sup>6</sup> More recently, self-identified Swahili are located in many parts of the world, not least in the West (especially the United States), where a number have pursued academic careers. Today, furthermore, ‘Swahili-ness’ now exists in cyberspace, with a plethora of Swahili language and Swahili interest websites<sup>7</sup>.

### Swahili Self-Identities

If scholars have debated who the Swahili are, we may ask what people themselves have to say about their own identities since there may be considerable discrepancies between a person’s claims to identity, and that recognised by others. Inevitably these have shifted over time, often as people lay claim to or reject a Swahili identity for political reasons, as in the recent claims by some Kenyan Swahili to be considered a ‘tribe’ (*kabila*) (see Caplan 2007a). And an identity which may be criticised in some contexts (as with the Kenyan government’s apparently negative stance towards the coastal Swahili) may be valorised by the same interlocutors in other contexts (e.g. when seeking notions of the exotic to tempt western tourists).

It is important to note the articulation of ‘Swahili-ness’ with other forms of identity, such as citizenship, rural or urban residence, age, gender, social status and so on. Even ethnic identity may be multiple. Indeed, in his early work on the Swahili, Prins (1961) notes that a person is never ‘just’ a Swahili, but is also always something else in ethnic terms such as Mshirazi, Mwarabu, Mpokomo, etc. Yet in fact there have been periods when people who did not have other forms of ethnic

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Swahili merchants set up recognisable Swahili communities in the early 20th century in inland towns such as Tabora, Ujiji and Kigoma.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Zanzinet Forum: [www.zanzinet.org](http://www.zanzinet.org)

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identity, or did not wish to disclose them (perhaps because of ex-slave status), called themselves ‘Waswahili’.

Another important aspect of ethnic identity is the tension in Swahili culture between hierarchy and equality, and this too has continued to shift over time. On the East African coast, one can discern a hierarchy, largely but not entirely based on ethnicity, ancestral origin and freeborn or slave status, which has assumed greater or lesser importance depending on the political context. During the British colonial period and its immediate aftermath, there was a clear distinction between Arabs (or those who laid claim to such status), ‘freeborn’<sup>8</sup> (*waungwana*) of various kinds, and the descendants of slaves. This began to change around the time of independence, and such a hierarchy, was of course, violently ruptured during the Revolution in Zanzibar in 1964. Since that period many who previously would have described themselves as Arabs have begun rather to call themselves Waswahili. At the same time, on the East Coast there is and has long been importance attributed to notions of equality, as signified in terms such as *heshima* (respect), particularly in the moral economy of village communities, where reciprocity plays such an important role and where it is deemed inappropriate to flaunt one’s wealth.

On Mafia Island, as I first encountered it in the 1960s, there was a clear hierarchy composed of a few Europeans (who owned plantations), Indians (who owned shops), ‘Arabs’ of various kinds (Wamanga, Washatiri, Washihiri), ‘freeborn’ (*waungwana*) who might also describe themselves as *Washirazii*, and the descendants of slaves, who might hark back to their inland places of ancestral origin, or who might call themselves ‘Swahili’, although others might, out of their hearing, describe them as *watumwa*. In the north of the island, freeborn people usually described themselves as either Wambwera or Wapokomo, although there was a handful who claimed Comorian or Zanzibari ancestry. Some people laid claim to higher religious status than others on the grounds of their learning or piety, even if their status of origin was lowly, as I became aware when discovering that two of the men most respected in the village for their Islamic learning actually had slave ancestry. I also remember that during one season of drought, early in my fieldwork, I had to drive many miles to collect water. I was constantly besieged for lifts, and requested that those able-bodied people who wanted a ride should also help with the water supply. Several men refused saying ‘the children of Sheikhs do not do such work’, just as they had also refused to engage in the collective labour demanded by the government of the day.

Over time, it is clear that on Mafia, as elsewhere, things have changed. The period of Nyerere and *ujamaa* stressed the virtues of being a Tanzanian and an African and partly as a result, fewer people now lay claim to Arab status, even though their ancestors might have done so. And yet

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<sup>8</sup> Middleton (2000) also distinguishes between what he terms ‘nobles’ (*waungwana*) and ‘commoners’ (*wenyeji*) but this distinction was not made on Mafia.

paradoxically, in recent years, there has been a renewed emulation of things Arab, as I noted at a wedding I attended in 2002, when the men present drew my attention to their beards and turbans, and said that they wanted to look as ‘Arab’ as possible. Even so, they would be unlikely to describe themselves as such.

There is a further distinction between *wageni* (guests, visitors, in-comers) and *wenyeji* (original inhabitants, people who own the land), and I remember with pleasure an occasion when a friend and I were walking together in the district capital, and we met a man who did not know me. He exclaimed to my friend “what are you doing with that European? And how on earth do you talk to her?” My friend replied “Huyu mama ni mwenyeji wetu”, indicating that I had been known to the community for a very long time and moved from the category of *mgeni* to *mwenyeji*. More importantly, it is the well-known capacity of Swahili society to assimilate by a variety of means – inter-marriage, conferral of land rights - strangers who arrive among them which has enabled it, until recently, to be so resilient – the strangers become what Beckerleg (2004) has termed ‘Swahilised’.

### Issues of Gender

During my research association with Mafia Island, I have been interested in many topics, but gender has been a theme running through most of them. There are a number of other anthropologists who have paid attention to gender among the Swahili, almost all of them women (e.g. Bujra, Caplan, Fuglesang, Le Guennec-Coppens, Porter, Strobel, Walley).

When I first went to Mafia as a young postgraduate in my early twenties, I was single, and definitely not interested in what women did, seeing it as of lesser importance. Nonetheless, women on Mafia were determined that I should not ignore them, and forcefully obtruded themselves on my notice. By the time I made my first return visit in 1976, my life had changed, since I was married, mother of two small children, and struggling to juggle a career and a family. Inevitably this meant that I saw things differently, and that I asked different questions (Caplan 1993). But anthropology itself had also changed, not least because of the rise of the second wave of feminism, and women’s issues were receiving much more attention. As I have continued to move through the life cycle, the things I ‘see’ have inevitably shifted, just as the discipline of anthropology itself has changed. And of course, Mafia Island, for all its apparent remoteness, has changed too.

My first impression of women on Mafia when I arrived in 1965 was negative – too many babies, difficult to interview. Later, during the 18 months I spent in the field, I shifted my views somewhat, as some women became good friends. With hindsight I realised that for them I was a total anomaly – an unmarried, childless woman in her twenties who could not possibly be taken seriously, whereas most women on Mafia at that time would have been secluded at puberty, married soon

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afterwards, and then started their child-bearing careers, in addition to carrying out their numerous household and agricultural tasks. Few of them went to school.

Later, in the 1970s, I went with a BBC film crew specifically to make a film about gender relations. I wanted to show a western audience that gender relations were culturally constructed and could be different from what was deemed 'normal' in the West. We showed footage of men doing embroidery (making *kofia*) and washing clothes, and of women who supported aged parents. There were interviews about men's and women's land rights. I published a number of articles after this trip about domestic relations, and also about women's importance in the *mila* (custom) sphere, drawing not only on my own fieldwork but also on the wider literature about the East African coast (Caplan 1982). I was interested in the differences between town and country in terms of how gender was constructed and how it had changed historically.

In the 1980s, I returned to Mafia to begin work on issues of food, health and fertility, a theme which I continued to pursue for some time. At this time, Tanzania had gone through a difficult economic period, but on Mafia, the economy was doing well with great demand for coconuts. Men turned their attention away from subsistence agriculture towards planting more trees, a cash crop, leaving most of the food production to women, whose workloads increased still further. It was during this time that I began to be aware that the indices of well being for men and women on Mafia (morbidity and mortality) were very different, leading even to an imbalance in the sex ratio on Mafia Island which is more typical of South Asia than of Africa (Caplan 1995, 1999). Although more girls were in primary school, few of them went on to secondary school. Families continued to be large, although contraception was sometimes available in the district capital.

A decade later, though I continued the work on food, health and fertility, I also focused on personal narratives, particularly that of a man I called Mohamed, his wife Mwhadia and one of their daughters Subira (Caplan 1997). All of this work served to convince me that gender could not be characterised in any simple fashion. I noted that a new kind of Islam was being preached, often by missionary preachers coming from outside, and that one of the issues frequently discussed was women's clothing. Women started to cover their heads more, even in the village, and when travelling abandoned the old form of *buibui* for a new one (*jilbab*). Yet at the same time, girls were receiving more education, including at secondary school, and there were women leaders on the village council, which had not been the case before.

Furthermore, NGOs, with a discourse of equal rights, including for women and men, were beginning to be active, and UNICEF had taken up the work I had previously carried out on the reasons for the imbalance in sex ratios and had campaigned for girl babies to be fed in the same way as boys and taken to the clinic when they were ill. Many people, including men, were clearly more aware of the issue than they had been.

### The Tension Between *mila* and *sheria*: Cults of Affliction

There are, on the east coast and islands, many practices which fall outside the realms of orthodox Islam and which are known as *mila*, *ada* or *desturi* (customs). They are sometimes condemned by the pious but most *soi-disant* Swahili engage in at least some of them. *Mila* may range from rituals carried out at weddings, girls' puberty or boys' circumcision ceremonies, to the cult of the ancestors and veneration of their graves, to the practice of spirit possession rituals (*ngoma*), which are discussed in more detail below. *Mila* are contrasted with practices which are termed *sheria* (lawful) or *sunna* (habitual practice). Yet it is precisely that mix of *mila* and *sheria* which produces Swahili cultures (Caplan 1982).

There is a large literature on Swahili spirit cults<sup>9</sup>, which are pervasive in all parts of the east coast and islands. The land-sea distinction already mentioned is carried over into the spirit world. Land spirits (*mashaitaini*, *pepo*, *mizimu*) are associated with the ancestors, with the earth and agriculture, and with the terrestrial sphere more generally; they have much in common with similar *ngoma* cults found throughout sub-Saharan Africa and described by many anthropologists.<sup>10</sup> Janzen (1992) sums them up in the term *ngoma*, which means not only drum, but also the ritual in which the drums are used to invoke the spirits and which deal with affliction of various kinds. In northern Mafia, the rituals are known as *kitanga* (during which drums are used) and *mwingo* (which has only hand-clapping).

But Mafia also has a cult of sea spirits, which practices completely different kinds of rituals, including the use of incense (*udi*) and rosewater (*maharashi*), the Arabic language (or what passes for such), and the utilisation of some parts of the Sufi order rituals, especially *dhikr*<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, sea spirit cults, although usually led by men, concern women's afflictions: infertility, miscarriages and unhappy marriages. Sea spirits (*majini*) are associated with Arabs and the Gulf, and with Islam, and their cults have much in common with similar cults in other Muslim African societies such as Somalia, the Sudan, and Morocco, to name a few<sup>12</sup> and which generally fall under the rubric of *zar*.

There is much that can be said about Swahili spirit possession cults. One is their importance as cults of affliction and healing. A second is their theatricality and dramatic qualities as sheer

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<sup>9</sup> Topan (1972), Giles (1987), Larsen (2008), Caplan (1997), Nisula (1999).

<sup>10</sup> In February 2009, I was in Uganda, a country which I had visited only once before, and that 40 years before. I was taken to see a waterfall some miles outside Kampala, which was indeed a beautiful sight. A 'guide' who rapidly attached himself to me and my companion, proceeded to tell us that this place was not only a tourist spot, but was also a sacred site for the Baganda, the locally dominant ethnic group. As we walked around, I recognised immediately many features of the spirit cults with which I was familiar on Mafia: a shrine in a cave, offerings of food, including slaughtered animals. I was very struck with the similarities between this and what I knew on Mafia Island, hundreds of miles away.

<sup>11</sup> *Dhikr* is rhythmic chanting and breathing which brings on an ecstatic state.

<sup>12</sup> See Crapanzano (1973), Boddy (1990), Constantinides (1977) and Lewis (1971).

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entertainment. A third is their relationship to ideas about witchcraft and evil in the world, notions which, far from dying out, have received a fresh lease of life from the new ills that currently beset people in areas like the East Coast. Indeed, some anthropologists such as the Comaroffs (1993, 1999) have suggested that the growth in such 'occult economies' is something which has happened because of the negative effects of globalisation on the lives of the vast majority of people in Africa.

A final issue, which brings me back to some of the points I raised earlier, is the relationship between spirit possession, perhaps the most quintessentially *mila* aspect of Swahili culture and Islam. Many Swahili people, not only on Mafia, who claim to be pious Muslims, roundly condemn the spirit possession cults as being *shiriki* (threatening the oneness of God). One very close friend of mine in the village on Mafia told me that he had never attended such an *ngoma* and first saw such a ritual only when I screened the film the BBC had made about the area back in the 1970s to the assembled villagers. Yet he later admitted to me that his mother sometimes became possessed by an ancestral spirit, and that his father, a respected Koran school teacher, had to find remedies for her through the shamans. This is not an isolated instance, indeed, it was often whispered of revered Sheikhs that they 'kept' (*kufuga*) spirits, and that this increased their power.

Here again, then, we see that Swahili culture cannot be broken down into separate bits and labelled *mila* or *sheria*, 'African' or 'Arab', rather it has to be viewed as a complex whole from which people select according to context.

### **Conclusion: So what is Swahili Culture “I know it when I see it, hear it, smell it, taste it.”**

The task I was given by the organisers of the conference at which this paper was first presented was to answer the question: what is Swahili culture? I have used both my own ethnographic data from Mafia Island, gathered over a period of almost half a century, as well as the work of other scholars of the East African coast to explore this question. Inevitably, it is not possible to give a comprehensive answer, but I have highlighted a number of concepts which I see as key. The first set includes time and space, involving considerations of histories and how they are written, and ideas of kinship and descent. Another set consists of ideas around personhood and identity, including self-identity, and also brings in the tension between equality and hierarchy. It also includes notions of gender, which itself varies over space and time in the Swahili world. Finally, I discuss the tension between concepts of *mila* (custom) and *sheria* (law) or *sunna* (habitual practice) both more closely associated with Islam and in particular, the cultures of affliction (*ngoma*: literally drum, also dance and dance rituals) which have their very particular manifestations on the coast and islands, reflecting the importance of both dry land and sea.

What then may we conclude from all of the above? Perhaps it is best to leave open the question of what exactly constitutes Swahili cultures or Swahili identity. And yet there is for an anthropologist such as myself a feeling that there is also a sensual knowledge of such a culture. Each of us who has experienced some aspect of Swahili culture would have different memories, but these are mine. For taste, it would be *chai* made with spices, which incidentally has now become a packaged supermarket commodity in the West, or *wali kwa nazi* (coconut rice), or *maandazi* (deep fried buns).<sup>13</sup> For smell it would be spices such as cloves, cinnamon or cardamom, or the scent of flowers like jasmine, or the very particular odours of the inside of a boat or fish drying. It would be when I see a raffia prayer mat (*msala*), coconut trees, or boats like *ngalawa* (outrigger canoe), *dau* (small dhow) or *majahazi* (large dhows) or someone wearing *khanga* (cloth wraps worn by women) or a *kofia* (embroidered cap worn by men). It would be hearing the *muhedhin's* call to prayer, *taarabu* music, the recitation of a Swahili *utenzi*, a woman grinding a coconut on an *mbuzi* (literally goat but here meaning a kitchen implement) or pounding rice in a *kinu* (mortar). None of these is unique to the Swahili, rather it is a constellation of traces such as these which leads one to say "yes, that's it!".

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it is scarcely surprising that when cultures appear to disappear, traces may be found in food practices.

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