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Ngoma Memories: A History of Competitive Music and Dance Performance on the Kenya Coast

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NGOMA MEMORIES: A HISTORY OF COMPETITIVE MUSIC
AND DANCE PERFORMANCE ON THE KENYA COAST

By

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By

Rebecca K. Gearhart

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
TABLE OF FIGURES	ix
ABSTRACT.....	xi
CHAPTERS	
1 IN SEARCH OF NGOMA MEMORIES	1
Introduction	1
A Three Field Approach	4
An Historical Perspective	5
Performance Studies	10
Visual Anthropology	15
A Feedback Method.....	21
Community Education and Cultural Development	25
Coastal Women's Ngoma.....	30
The Lamu Community Cultural Center and Video Library.....	32
Imag - i – nation: A Conclusion	35
2 NGOMA GROUPS AND THEIR ROLE IN COASTAL SOCIETY.....	39
Introduction	39
Ngoma Group Organization.....	41
Performers in Coastal Society	45
Ngoma Competition	50
Performance as Socio-Political Control.....	53
Ngoma as Socio-Economic Security	56
The Politics of Artistic Production	63
Conclusion	67
3 THE IMPACT OF SUFISM ON COASTAL RITUAL NGOMA	70
Introduction	70
A History of Ritual Pluralism on the Coast	75
The Consequence of Islamic Reform	89
Habib Saleh and the Rise of Sufi Ngoma	95
Rama Origins.....	102
Rama as Nadhiri	106
Rama as Competitive Ngoma.....	108

Ngoma's Decline.....	111
Conclusion	114
4 “MTU KWAVO”: VAVE AND BAJUNI IDENTITY.....	118
Introduction	118
Vave in Motion.....	121
Vave and the Formation of Bajuni Identity	127
Vave's Role in the Making of Bajuni Men.....	134
Spatial, Cultural and Religious Heritage	139
Randa	150
The Burning	153
Homecoming: A Conclusion.....	155
5 "I TOOK IT AWAY WITH MY MOUTH AND PUT IT INTO THE DRUM:"	
HISTORICAL NARRATIVES OF NGOMA ORIGINS	158
Introduction	158
The Transfer of Upcountry Ngomas to the Coast	161
Cultural Imports: Chama and Beni Ngomas	180
Change and Continuity From Within	194
Conclusion	199
Final Remarks	201
6 EPILOGUE	204
WORK CITED.....	214
FIGURES.....	227
APPENDICES	
APPENDIX A	278
APPENDIX B	279
APPENDIX C	280
APPENDIX D	282
APPENDIX E	283
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	286

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Map of the Kenya coast.	227
Figure 2. Amina Hamisi & Rebecca Gearhart	228
Figure 3. University of Dar es Salaam Students & the Paul Taylor Dance Repertoire... 229	
Figure 4. Rukia’s female relatives make her into a Swahili bride.	230
Figure 5. Using henna to decorate a bride’s hands and feet.	230
Figure 6. Rukia at the “Showing of the Bride” ceremony.	231
Figure 7. “Kangoromo,” a coconut-tapper, and his sons watch a Uta performance.	232
Figure 8. Mzee Talo watches an excerpt of the ngoma competition at Riyadhha.	233
Figure 9. Members of a Mwavinyo group inspect photographs of their performance....	234
Figure 10. “Kadzo” Chivila, a Mwavinyo song leader, with a photo of herself.	235
Figure 11. Chivila reviews the interview he just completed.	236
Figure 12. Abubakar Kuchi with two Bajuni cultural experts in Magomeni	236
Figure 13. Coastal residents compete in the annual Maulidi board game competition... 237	
Figure 14. The annual donkey race along the Lamu seafont.....	238
Figure 15. Siyu dancers perform Goma dance during the Maulidi festival in Lamu.....	239
Figure 16. Ngoma la Ndia, a processional dance that features praises to the Prophet....	240
Figure 17. Two young men from Faza perform the stick dance, Kirumbizi	241
Figure 18. Bajuni drummers sound out the beats for the exciting Kirumbizi dance.	242
Figure 19. Students at Lamu Girls’ Secondary School recite Maulidi prayers	243
Figure 20. Local school children at the Exhibit, “Swahili Praises to the Prophet”	244
Figure 21. After looking at the photographs, children watch a video presentation	245
Figure 22. A drummer from Lamu completes the Exhibit questionnaire.....	246
Figure 23. The Lamu Community Cultural Center & Video Library Committee	247
Figure 24. Committee members and friends at the Opening of the Center.	248
Figure 25. Omari Haji’s women’s ngoma group in Matondoni perform Lelemama.	249
Figure 26. Mebaraka Juma’s ngoma group performs Lelemama in Takaungu.	250
Figure 27. Bake Die Shee, of Siyu, holds his zumari.....	251
Figure 28. Bajuni drummers play for the Goma competition at Riyadhha.	252
Figure 29. Esha Ngoma plays her drum for a wedding dance in Kipungani.	253
Figure 30. Omari Haji leads the Matondoni women’s ngoma group in Lelemama.....	254
Figure 31. Lali Ahmed Kale leads the Goma dancers from Siyu.	255
Figure 32. Mzee Bakamoro at his home in Lamu.	256
Figure 33. A Seventeenth-Century Ngoma Kuu displayed in the Fort Jesus Museum... 257	
Figure 34. Coconut tappers (wagama) perform Uta in front of Habib Saleh’s House....	258
Figure 35. Long-time Uta dancers tie on their leg rattles (misewe) before the dance . .	259
Figure 36. Uta leader Omari Said holds the rhino-skin shield (ngao).....	260

Figure 37. Goma dancers in white robes (kanzus), hand-embroidered caps (kofias)	261
Figure 38. A Rama Maulidi ceremony hosted by Abdul Rehman al-Basakut of Lamu..	262
Figure 39. Rama positions include acts of submission to Allah.	263
Figure 40. Members of the Barani Peoples’ Welfare Association.....	264
Figure 41. Rebecca and Bajuni farmers anxiously wait for Vave to begin.	
Figure 42. After a chapter of Vave, Bajuni farmers circle to perform Randa.	265
Figure 43. Bajuni farmers load dhows with the supplies they will need in Vumbe	266
Figure 44. Fire bearers run to set fire along the fire-break.	267
Figure 45. After a change in wind direction, the fire is set	268
Figure 46. Mzee Tarumbeta at his home on the outskirts of Takaungu town	269
Figure 47. Sword-donned Chama leader, Ali Madi, gives a military style salute	270
Figure 48. Ali Madi and the zumari player lead the dancers in Chama	271
Figure 49. The Chama dancers file out of the performance space.....	272
Figure 50. Male coastal residents form a Zefe procession along the Lamu seafront.....	273
Figure 51. A Zefe procession during Takaungu’s annual Maulidi celebration.	274
Figure 52. The Zefe procession in Kipini.....	275
Figure 53. Chonyi dancers performing the Mwavinyo dance.	276
Figure 54. Kadzo Chivila leads the dancers in Mwavinyo songs.	277

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Music and dance performance, called "ngoma" in Swahili, has been the site of social interaction and cultural creativity on the east African coast for centuries. This dissertation explores the recent history of groups oriented around ngoma activity by sharing the memories of the ngoma experts who once led them. All of the narratives that are included were transcribed from video taped interviews I conducted with Kenya coastal residents in 1995 and 1996. Their oral narratives are part of a larger documentation project concentrated on visually recording oral traditions and live ngoma events performed in coastal communities between Mombasa and Kiunga on the Kenya mainland, and on the islands of the Lamu archipelago. This growing archive of visual

data, which ngoma experts viewed at several video screenings, provided ethnographic material that stimulated discussions that illuminated ngoma's role in the construction of social identity among the coast's diverse populations.

This study takes a three-field approach, combining theoretical models and methodological strategies from history, performance studies and visual anthropology. This work is historical in content, yet it does not follow a chronological narrative, much like memory itself. The memories of past ngoma groups and how they operated within coastal society are intertwined with European accounts, secondary historical analyses, and my own interpretations. In combination, these sources demonstrate some of the ways in which coastal people have transformed what I call "ngoma packages," made up of specific dance movements, poems, songs, drum rhythms, costumes and props, over time and space.

Rather than focusing on the ephemeral dimensions of performance, this study locates music and dance in the daily lives of coastal people, and discusses the practical advantages of participating in ngoma. This perspective places weekly ngoma competitions at the center of social activity, and makes them the premiere fora for sustaining as well as challenging dominant systems of political and moral authority. For example, spiritual leaders strategically used ngoma as a vehicle for mediating ethnic and religious difference, while marginalized groups such as women and slaves used performance media to express their discontent with the status quo. The public nature of ngoma group competition made both possible--often at the same time.

CHAPTER 1 IN SEARCH OF NGOMA MEMORIES

We are subjectively implicated in and responsible for the histories we tell ourselves or others tell us and that, while these are just representations, their significance has both value and consequence to our lives.

(Vivian Sobchack, 1996:6)

Introduction

This dissertation takes a three-field approach to the study of east African coastal music and dance performance, a concept encapsulated in one Swahili word, "ngoma." Such a broad and multifaceted topic lends itself to multidisciplinary investigation, especially when considering the variation with which people have performed ngoma on the coast over the past century. Others become privy to the significance of ngoma when coastal elders share their memories of the past by showing and telling the way it used to be. This introductory chapter identifies the theoretical models and methodological strategies I have taken from history, performance studies and visual anthropology.

This dissertation is historical in content, yet it does not follow a chronological narrative, much like memory itself. The memories of coastal elders are intertwined with European accounts, secondary historical analyses, and my own interpretations. Chapter 2 deals specifically with the role ngoma groups have played in coastal society over time. It

takes a look at how ngoma organizations operated and why members joined them. The second chapter also explores the traditional social rank given to coastal performers, and how some ngoma leaders have managed to defy socio-political barriers and gain prominence, influence and prestige. Finally, the chapter returns to a fundamental question about the liminality of ngoma, mentioned briefly above. It suggests that although performance does indeed alter the performers' perceptions of space, time, and the order of things, their subversive behavior vis a vis the status quo is usually understood within a ritual context, and only rarely affects the nature of ordinary life.

The third chapter focuses on the impact that Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, has had on ritual performance among coastal peoples. One of the most significant manifestations of ritual pluralism on the coast is a celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad called "maulidi," held annually in Lamu town. This chapter traces the history of African and Islamic ritual syncretism primarily by reviewing the literature on the subject. Then it isolates the life of one Sufi sheikh named Habib Saleh, who first established the annual maulidi ceremony in Lamu and integrated non-Muslims and slaves into the coast's Islamic community by means of ritual ngoma.

Chapter 4 is an in-depth analysis of an oral tradition performed by the Bajuni people, who occupied Kenya's northern coast before they were driven off their land and forced to relocate in protected villages further south along the coast and in the Lamu archipelago. To the Bajuni, a farming people devoted to the land, the oral tradition called "Vave" (pronounced va-vay) represents their unique history, distinct identity, and

community consciousness. All Bajuni revere Vave as an ancient oral text, but it is especially sacred to those who have lived as refugees since the 1960s. Several excerpts of Vave, performed by Bajuni farmers before the burning of cut forest for cultivation, are included in this chapter. An analysis accompanies each of the verses to underscore Vave's insight into some of the mysteries surrounding Bajuni history and religious practice.

Chapter 5 traces the transmission of ngoma over space and time as "packages" of performative media that included the latest dance movements, dress fashions, musical styles, jokes, songs, jargon, instruments, and props that appeared at weekend ngoma competitions on the coast. Upcountry Africans who were dragged from their homelands in the interior of east Africa to work as plantation slaves on the coast brought many unique ngomas with them.¹ Other dances were imported by Arabians and Europeans concerned especially with maintaining their Imperial domination and glorifying their great military traditions through performance.

Finally, the Epilogue engages a current anthropological debate centered on "indigenous media." It re-evaluates my own efforts toward this goal, which I introduce in detail below, and offers a new direction, which western scholars and their ethnographic subjects can take in the production of more balanced ethnographic media, aimed at enhancing community development through cultural revitalization.

¹ Some of the east Africans whose narratives are included in this dissertation use the Swahili term "mtumwa," or "slave" when referring to their own ancestors. The English word "enslaved" appropriately describes the power dynamic involved in slavery, and represents the point of view of the person who has been enslaved, rather than the master. I believe that the term "slave" is a more appropriate translation, however, which is why I use it. This is not intended to legitimize east African slavery or privilege the perspective of those who forced others into subservient labor relations.

A Three Field Approach

I began my research in east Africa as a multi-disciplinary scholar in African Studies at Mount Holyoke College (MHC). One of my friends at MHC was an Asante princess from Ghana, who humbled me into taking a variety of Africa-related courses, primarily so that I would learn more about the continent's tremendous cultural diversity. I ultimately combined many of the lessons I learned from these courses with my own experiences in east Africa in a film titled *Women of Lamu: Reflections on a Swahili Wedding* (1989), which I submitted as my senior thesis project.

The film features still photographs of the month-long ritual transformation of a bride-to-be from a girl to a woman. It begins with a history of the people of the east African coast, many of whom call themselves "Swahili." It tells how the Swahili people originated from the interactions between African coastal women and men from the Arabian Peninsula, who settled on the coast. The program highlights the centrality of coastal marriage ceremonies, which make men and women out of girls and boys, and divide the community into unmarried "children" and married "adults." Scenes of coastal wedding dances such as **Kirumbizi**, a men's stick dance, and Chakacha, a women's dance, are presented with live sound that I recorded while participating in the performances. In retrospect, the three fields I have focused on in graduate school at the University of Florida: history, performance studies, and visual anthropology were already well defined in this first production.

An Historical Perspective

Many Africanist scholars have influenced my development of this tri-angular perspective, and their studies are cited throughout the following chapters. In particular, the scholarship of Terence Ranger (1975) and Margaret Strobel (1979) demonstrate ngoma's central role in the social history of the coast. Their analyses describe ngoma events as important public fora for men and women of diverse background to express their grievances against the oppressive forces of colonialism and patriarchy. This understanding of ngoma's ability to articulate popular sentiment and inspire collective agency has directed my own search for historical reference to performance activity on the coast. It is through their work that ngoma's potential for expressing and negotiating social conflict first became apparent to me.

The historical evidence that so enriches Ranger's study of Beni ngoma became all the more impressive when I began looking at primary historical documents myself. The research I conducted between 1992 and 1994 at the Kenya National Archives (KNA), the Tanzania National Archives, the archival collection at the University of Dar es Salaam, and at Yale Divinity School was exasperating. I discovered quite early that sifting through pages of European documents for cryptic descriptions of music and dance performances was a test of perseverance. I soon convinced myself that there was little value in accounts written by Europeans, who in my estimation neither appreciated nor understood the African performances they witnessed.

In the end, western accounts did provide me with the descriptive detail I needed to visualize some of the ngomas that people performed on the coast in the past. An excerpt from Hermann Norden's account (1924) of a Beni parade is a good example:

Like many a carnival in civilized countries, the *ngoma* is rooted deep in superstition and in religious observance. With some tribes ngoma is a debauch of incredible dancing preceding the ceremonies of circumcision, marriage, death and birth. Maybe there is ngoma after the tax collector has come and gone. Certainly every opportunity is seized. I was to see ngoma of one sort or another with every tribe I visited, but this first at Mombasa was the festival of a heterogeneous group, sophisticated from contact with town life, and *dressed*, which is not the way it is done on the reserves.

We sat in a car. . .and watched as strange a procession as ever was seen. . . Some wore European clothes. . .one squad wore Highland kilts. . .one group wore khaki trousers, with orange belts and felt hats trimmed with peacock feathers. . .others were in white tennis rigs. A man covered from head to foot in deer skins walked on stilts twenty feet tall...the bands were many. . .the only feminine suggestion in the parade was an evidence of perversion; a squad of young blacks dressed in kimonos as Japanese women. . .In the crowd of two thousand spectators, we three were the only Europeans.²

Descriptions like Norden's offered me a wealth of information about coastal ngoma when I was willing to put up with their tone of superiority. But after months of reading Church Missionary Society (CMS) documents in the Kenya National Archives, I was tired of their vibrato. I finally found relief in the diaries of Anna Binns, who lived with her husband Harold at the CMS coastal mission station in Rabai, Kenya, during the 1870s and '80s. Anna's daily reflections of her interactions with neighboring Mijikenda³ were a refreshing alternative to the formal reports passed between her husband and his

² Hermann Norden, 1924:46-48.

³The Mijikenda are a confederation of nine distinct ethnic groups, each with their own unique language and set of cultural traditions. The Mijikenda have a common place of origin known as "Shungwaya," from where they dispersed and settled in protected villages called "kayas" in the coastal hinterland of present day Kenya. For more information on the Mijikenda see Cynthia Brantley, 1981; Fred Berg, 1971; Justin Willis, 1993; and David Parkin, 1972; 1991.

fellow European missionaries. A few entries sufficiently demonstrate Anna's narrative style:

19 November, 1878: An old Wanyika⁴ from the kaya came in the evening complaining that there was much want for rain. That the gods would not give it for they were angry because some blood had been shed here some time ago by two men fighting each other. Their usual method for appeasing the gods is to sprinkle some medicine over the spot where the blood was shed. Now this had not been done, of course, so the elder from the kaya said that was the reason there was no rain and asked Harry if it could be done. Harry would not allow such heathen practice in the village, but said that prayer for rain could be made to God in church if they wished. The man appeared satisfied and went away.

11 December, 1878: Our people had their dance as usual and entered into it with great spirit. One man wore a whitewashed mask made to represent a European. A more hideous thing I never saw. He then had a round hole dug into which he put his head and had the hole filled up again. He stayed in it an amazingly long time.

8 January, 1879: There is some trouble about one of our people who has a child in his possession who belongs to someone else. Harry told him to give up this child to its rightful owner. This man is not at all inclined to do so and he is leaving the place. As he is a chief, all the people of the same tribe say they will follow him. We cannot help it if they do. We are only very sorry for they can be very happy and well cared for if they remain here.

9 January, 1879: Damunuju, the Giriama chief, has left with his wife and the child. We hear that he has gone to Kimboni, a very distant kaya.

10 January, 1879: We hear that the people from Giriama will stay here instead of following Damunuju. They will miss him here at the dance. Issac heard that they came here for the sake of the dance and not at all to learn Christianity.

Both Hermann Norden and Anna Binns offer a candid chronicle of daily life on the coast, and provide insight into activities rarely mentioned in official correspondence. Rather than converting the Mijikenda to Christianity, or "civilizing" them with European ways, Anna's account suggests that the missionaries were preoccupied with negotiating

⁴Non-Mijikenda coastal residents, including European missionaries, commonly used the derogatory term "Wanyika," or "people of the bush" to refer to the Mijikenda peoples.

their place among the neighboring Mijikenda. The mission itself was composed primarily of people seeking food and shelter during periods of famine and drought, alluded to in the entry of November 18th, 1879. CMS stations also served as safe havens for runaway plantation slaves,⁵ who arrived in increasing numbers until the abolition of slavery in 1907. Issac, one of the Indian catechists who acted as a liaison between the Africans and the missionaries, openly questions the motives of some of the mission residents on January 10th, 1879. His skepticism reveals the irony involved in the Mijikenda's use of the mission as a venue for their ngomas. Anna's frequent descriptions of ritual performances provide evidence that the African residents, as well as the Indian catechists,⁶ preferred their traditional religious practices to those promoted by the missionaries. This was obviously the case on November 18th, 1879, when after being denied the right to carry out a ritual for his ancestors, a Mijikenda elder refused Harold's invitation to pray in the church, and left the station.

Like Beni, the dances that mission residents performed in the stations dealt directly with the Europeans in their midst. Yet Europeans seemed to tolerate ngoma because they were so fascinated by the spectacle it offered them. This was true even when the performances outwardly ridiculed Europeans, as did the ritual Anna witnessed on December 11, 1878, and the Beni parades that coastal residents performed to fancifully mimic European military customs. This subtle tension, between entertainment

⁵For more information on runaway slaves (watoro) on the Kenya coast see Fred Morton, 1990.

⁶Some of the Indian catechists, called "Bombay Africans" by the missionaries, were caught participating in "heathen dances" on August 4, 1879. See Binns Journal, KNA vol. 1.

and resistance, makes ngoma a unique and complex form of African expression. Making sense of it historically is a challenge very few scholars have tackled successfully.

After analyzing European interpretations of coastal ngoma, it was pertinent that I turn my attention to the perspectives held by African performers themselves. This dissertation weighs heavily on oral evidence that I collected from nearly one hundred elders living in towns and villages along the Kenya coast between Mombasa and Kiunga. Some of these men and women identify themselves as Swahili, some as Bajuni, and others as Chonyi, Kauma or Giriama--three of the nine Mijikenda groups. A few are descendants of Ngindo or Yao slaves who originated from Tanzania. Many of them have combined ancestry, but culturally and/or spiritually associate themselves with one group more than another.

Because ethnic markers among coastal people are nebulous, I use such labels only when the performance tradition in question signifies specific group affiliation. For example, many people who live in the Lamu archipelago initially refer to themselves as "Swahili" because it is the generic, all-encompassing name that the Arabs first assigned to coastal residents when they began visiting the coast centuries ago. When asked more particular questions about their cultural practices, however, many self-ascribed "Swahili" explain that they have Bajuni heritage, which is a prerequisite for knowing and understanding the performance traditions that are unique to the Bajuni people. Among these is an oral tradition called "Vave" (pronounced va-vay), an important symbol of Bajuni identity and solidarity.

By focusing on the performance media coastal groups use to identify and unify themselves, I avoid being side-tracked by attempting to trace family lineages or categorize people according to their ethnic origins. Throughout this work, I simply identify the informants by their real names and their places of residence, since the majority of their narratives highlight ngoma activities they participated in and/or witnessed there.

Performance Studies

As a field of inquiry of itself, "Performance Studies" eluded me until quite late in my graduate career. Fortunately, I was finally introduced to Margaret Drewal's work on Yoruba performance media, which gave me new ideas for thinking about the ngoma traditions I was studying in east Africa.

What initially attracted me to Drewal's work was that it was poised to answer questions posed by post-structural theorists, who suggest that although ritual events take on the appearance of realized morality and naturalized order, they are always in a state of flux, and therefore always contestable.⁷ For example, Drewal (1992) argues that performance space is occupied by many agents, who, at simultaneous moments and in a variety of ways, vie for control over the meanings generated within it. Drewal uses a diagram to illustrate how Yoruba performers and spectators divide ritual space into

⁷See Michel Foucault, 1970:50-58; Pierre Bourdieu 1994: 159.

spheres of different kinds of activity.⁸ I have found this to be a very useful visual aid for understanding the various levels of competition that take place in a single ngoma event.

Another of Drewal's important contributions to the study of African performance is her attention to play and improvisation. Corrine Kratz' (1994) analysis of Okiek women's rituals is reminiscent of Drewal's focus on "the seriousness of play." Kratz looks at what she calls "unofficial" and "contradictory" modes of expression during Okiek initiation ceremonies. She explains that even though the fits of anger that occur during various phases of the ritual are considered unpredictable, they are strategically placed to heighten emotions at select times. As Kratz suggests, these episodes are "very much part of the culturally organized pattern of persuasive encouragement, emotional display, and interactive intensification found in formally scheduled ceremonial events."⁹ In this scenario, everything that occurs during the initiation procedure is calculated, almost rehearsed in advance. And by locating spatial and temporal patterns of variation within performance events, Drewal and Kratz prove that ritual performances are ordered and controlled even when they appear to be chaotic. Without refuting the notions of theorists who emphasize the maneuverability ritual time and space provide, their research explains why performances that challenge the status quo are rarely allowed to alter it in significant ways.

The ngomas I have observed in east Africa seem to operate within a range of activity that limits the degree to which participants can fundamentally change the way

⁸See Margaret Drewal, 1992:13.

⁹Corrine Kratz, 1994:216.

their society functions. This does not mean that performers are prevented from exhibiting outrageous behavior or articulating subversive messages, for coastal ngomas are famous for that. It simply suggests that people interpret such activity within its ritual context, and rarely let such activities interfere with life as usual.

All of this changes when secular time and space are disrupted by significant political and/or economic transformation. During such crises, the boundary that divides the sacred from the profane is made more permeable, and the organizing principles that regulate behavior in each sphere of existence are put to the test. Messages created and articulated in one realm seem to have a profound effect on the other. This occurred in Mombasa during the 1930s, when hundreds of female Lelemama members subverted the male dominated social structure, and dockworkers used Beni to openly defy their European bosses. Scholars of performance studies, such as Drewal and Kratz, offer conceptual frameworks within which to better understand the role that ngoma organizations played in these important episodes of coastal history.

As will be illustrated throughout the following chapters, most people joined ngoma groups in order to solidify their place and extend their social networks within the existing power structure, not destroy it. Supporting the neighborhood ngoma group was as obligatory as buying cookies from the local Girl Scout troop. Even members of very conservative Muslim families, who were not allowed to participate in public performances themselves, were expected to at least provide moral support for their

neighborhood's ngoma group as spectators. In many coastal towns and villages, the entire community was involved in the weekly ngoma competitions in one way or another.

Ngoma competitions were the hub of community life, where people spread news, made business deals, and arranged marriages. Most importantly, they represented collective spirit and imagination. For many of the elders I spoke with, the ngomas of yesterday symbolize a creative energy that was unique to their generation. And the decline of ngoma signals the end of an era that was characterized by prosperity and goodwill. [Amina Hamisi](#)'s sentiments are typical of those shared by her peers:

Things of the past and things of the present are very different. In the past there was a lot of happiness. During the British period things were different from the way they are now. Now there is no time, there is no place, there is no peace. We've come into a period of much uncertainty. And that's why the ngomas collapsed. If you wanted to, you'd have to resurrect them completely and start over. If you wanted a wedding ngoma, you could get a group together for that performance, but it wouldn't be like the olden days. It's not like it used to be. Of course they collapsed because all of the leaders who made the effort have died. We who remain aren't motivated to organize ourselves anymore. We might be able to perform, but it wouldn't be like it used to be. We need inspiration and we just don't have it. Everyone is just out for himself these days.¹⁰

To many elders like Amina, ngoma is a metaphor for "the good old days," and a mnemonic key that unlocks memories about the way things used to be. Old songs are especially potent reminders that evoke deep feelings and vivid recollections about precise events. When people share their memories of past performances, they feel compelled to share their favorite tunes and demonstrate the way they used to dance. As a result, the

¹⁰Interview with Amina Hamisi of Malindi, 8.3.96.

narratives I have collected are performances in and of themselves. They not only feature descriptions of music and dance, they include music and dance; they do not merely recollect, but re-collect unchained melodies, song lyrics and dance movements that would otherwise remain only in their minds.

I developed an interest in performing African dance myself during my sophomore year of college, when I took a dance class with Pearl Primus, the famous Trinidadian dancer who popularized African dance in the U.S. in the 1940s. Her course offered me another medium in which to explore the African experience I was learning about through novels and films. In her class, I learned how to communicate through African movement even though I did not yet speak an African language. And I became an African dancer even though I had not yet set foot on the African continent. I remember how liberating that was for me at a time when other aspects of Africanness seemed so alien.

I wondered if my modern dance training had prepared my body for the rigorous movements the African rhythms dictated, or if I willed myself to succeed at the one thing that connected me to the people I so intently wanted to learn more about. I was reading Victor Turner's work (1975) on Ndembu ritual at the time and was determined that the class was some kind of rite of passage. Primus' course was indeed a turning point in my career in African studies, which inspired me to embark on more serious investigation into various forms of African performance.

But my path was uneven and indirect, and it was not until after I received a master's degree in history at the University of Florida that I regained my focus on African

dance. I did this as a graduate student at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) in 1993 and 1994. Penina Mlama, a founder of the "theater for development" movement in Africa taught a yearlong course on African theater that set me back on track. I also took a dance class with E. Chambulikazi, a gifted dancer, who challenged his students to learn as many Tanzanian ngomas as we could. Eventually I had the opportunity to teach the class some modern American dance techniques, which we later combined with African movements in a performance at UDSM.¹¹

Being both a student and a teacher simultaneously was a rare privilege that prompted me to explore other opportunities for performing ngoma. I ultimately became an honorary member of a professional ngoma troupe called "The Lighters" that practiced near the University. The group was composed of talented young dancers and musicians who performed ngomas from all over the country. These practice sessions, in addition to the dance course at UDSM, gave me practical training in numerous east African dance forms and expanded my movement vocabulary.

Visual Anthropology

I was simultaneously captivated by Africa and documentary film while living in Paris, France, in 1985. I lived two blocks away from Musee de l'Homme and frequently attended evening lectures and films about West Africa there. One experience that I remember vividly was a lecture-film presentation that featured Jean Rouch's film *Les*

¹¹During this time the [Paul Taylor dance repertoire](#) held a series of modern dance workshops at UDSM and at the Bagamoyo School of Performing Arts. We performed a dance that I choreographed, which demonstrated our combined African and Modern dance techniques.

Maitres Fous (The Mad Masters, 1955). The auditorium was unusually packed that evening and the audience was composed primarily of Africans. Although I did not know anything at all about Rouch, or "cinema verite"--the documentary film style he helped to invent, the crowd gave me the impression that the film was significant.

I watched the film with my mouth wide open. Many of the scenes are still etched in my memory, as if I had seen the film recently. I remember the hand-held style of Rouch's cinematography, which was new to me then. He used close-ups, as well, which made the images of the Africans, possessed by spirits, all the more frightful. At the time, I did not know anything about the Songhay people or the Hauka spirit possession cult the film focused on. Nothing on screen made any sense to me intellectually, and I kept thinking how humiliating it must be for the well-educated, "modern" Africans in the audience to watch their fellows shoving their arms into boiling water, drinking blood, and skinning and eating a dog. I was surprised to see many of them laughing and enjoying the scenes that were most offensive to me. Their amusement comforted me, however, and made me question the film's authenticity. Were they laughing because it was so untrue to real life? To me, the film was an exciting display of anticolonialism, meant to shock and disturb people in Ghana at the time, not only the audiences in other places and in other eras. But, the mystery of whether or not anything in the film was "real" haunted me for years to come. This was indeed my induction into the ambiguous and powerful world of ethnographic film.

Now I know that Jean Rouch is one of the most controversial documentary filmmakers who ever lived. Cinema verite has many critics, and Jean Rouch seems to be both admired and abhorred by contemporary film scholars. For example, Frank Ukadike (1994) criticizes Rouch for being racist,¹² while Anna Grimshaw (1997) describes him as revolutionary.¹³ To get even with Rouch and his effort to exoticize Africans, Malian filmmaker Manthia Diawara makes Rouch the subject of his film *Rouch in Reverse* (1995). What most critics seem to ignore, however, is the depth of Rouch's understanding of the Songhay people and their culture, clearly discernible in his scholarship (1954, 1960).

No one does a better job of analyzing and validating Rouch's research than Paul Stoller. In the preface of The Cinematic Griot (1992) Stoller includes a poem written by the son of the spirit possession leader (zima) featured in *Pam Kuso Kar* (1974) after a screening of the film at a Rouch retrospective in Niamey, Niger, in 1987. The son, who had earned an advanced degree in physics, was confronted with rejecting his heritage for the power of western science and wrote the poem to thank Rouch for providing him with an opportunity to "taste my reality."¹⁴ Rouch's film had given him a chance to see his father again, as an adult, who could put his father's life and work into a clearer perspective. Rouch's film forced the man to take an honest look at his past, his present, and his future. More than a dissertation, a book, or an article written primarily for a

¹²See Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, 1994:50-51.

¹³See Anna Grimshaw, 1997:46-47.

¹⁴See Paul Stoller, 1992:xv-xvi.

western audience, Rouch gave Africans something they could watch and listen to, a piece of the past that might help them remember who their ancestors were, and who they are because of them. This seemed to me a noble, if misunderstood, endeavor that was worthy of my time and energy.

I shot 96 rolls of 35 mm film on my first visit to east Africa two years later, with nine other students on a program sponsored by the School for International Training (S.I.T.). That was in 1987, my junior year of college, when I was eager to capture every moment of my experience in Africa on film to prove I had really been there. I vividly recall the sensory overload I experienced when I stepped out of the airplane into the Kenya sun. I felt like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, pushing open a black and white door into Technicolored Munchkin Land. I wondered how my little point and shoot camera could hold images as vibrant and iridescent as the multicolored feathers of the malachite kingfishers that congregated on the telephone wires. I devoted my first roll entirely to them. The second, to the purple blossoms beneath the huge Jacaranda trees in the neighborhoods surrounding Nairobi. Another roll featured Kamba women selling produce in the Machakos market. And so on until I realized that most of what I saw would simply have to be stored in the visual archive of my memory and not in my camera. But I was destined to keep trying.

As I mentioned briefly above, the first story that I told about people in Kenya was a visual one that featured images of a Lamu wedding. This was a small miracle in and of itself, since most westerners are not invited to the private events of Lamu residents. Of

course, this does not apply to close relatives and friends, the latter being the category I fell under. Zainab and Saidi El-Mafazy, the couple who had been my host family in Lamu when I was on the S.I.T. program, asked me to document the wedding for them. Rukia, the bride, is Saidi's sister and they were excited by the prospects of having some nice photographs of the ceremony. No one was surprised by my curiosity with Rukia's pre-wedding seclusion, and she allowed me to photograph some of her activities during the month before the wedding.

One series of photographs that I took with Rukia illustrates her transformation from a plain looking girl in a simple cotton dress to a gorgeous woman donned in a **dazzling gown**. The photos depict a group of stylists combing and **setting her hair**, decorating her hands and feet with elaborate **henna designs**, and painting her face with make up. In a few hours, when their work was finished, Rukia was a new person--fashioned into the woman she was expected to be. The Swahili saying "good wives are made not born" was clearly evident in the long training process that Rukia had endured before the day of her wedding.

After I returned to college, I decided that I would submit the photographs without captions with my senior thesis paper on coastal history and performance. From my perspective, Rukia's ritual evolution was clearly illustrated visually and did not require additional commentary, or "translation" from me. Of course, Roland Barthes (1985) had advised against loading images with cultural verbiage,¹⁵ but my professors insisted that

¹⁵ See also John Berger, 1995.

photographs without captions are ambiguous. When I discussed transposing the photos onto VHS videotape, they advised me to use an explicit voice-over narration to explain the significance of the wedding and provide information not apparent in the images alone. I was adamantly opposed to the idea.

This was in 1988, just two years after James Clifford and George Marcus had published, Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (1986), a collection of essays that had suspended my desire to do anything vaguely related to anthropology. The only example of visual representation that had any redeeming value to me after reading that volume was Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Naked Spaces Living is Round*, filmed in West Africa in 1985. When I saw it in 1988, my faith in visual media was restored.

The most difficult part of becoming a visual ethnographer was learning to enjoy the process of cutting and pasting people's images and words together into something that would be considered mine and not theirs. Taking ownership of the end product seemed irreverent on several levels, and it took me years to come to terms with my role in this activity. Ultimately, it occurred to me that producing documentary films employs many of the same tactics as writing history does. Both activities engage people's observations, opinions and reflections, and arrange them in a way that appeals to contemporary audiences. A written description of an event is no more relevant, valid, or truthful than a verbal description or visual illustration of the same thing. In the African context, written accounts are primarily authored by European explorers, missionaries, and colonial officials. In order to get an African perspective, scholars must collect oral testimonies

from Africans themselves. I am convinced that doing so with a video camera only enhances this endeavor.

A Feedback Method

Soon after I began my dissertation research on the northern coast of Kenya in 1995, I developed a method that significantly improved the way that I collect oral history. Up until that point, my local assistants¹⁶ and I had established a formal procedure that included at least one pre-interview meeting with the informant(s), and a meeting among ourselves to review the interview questions. We used the questions we had agreed on to orient the interview and remind us of our objectives. We derived our questions from information we had gathered during the pre-interview meeting, which gave us an idea of the informant's personal experience with ngoma. Several core questions common in each of the interviews allowed us to direct discussion toward general themes relevant to the research agenda as a whole.

Using the questions to guide the interviews was a particularly useful tactic when elderly informants got off the subject. Yet, the assistants and I agreed that allowing informants to tell stories that initially seemed to be unrelated to the topic sometimes yielded important information we had not thought of asking about. There is a delicate

¹⁶In Lamu my assistants were Ali Fani, Mwanaesha Mzee, Omari Shee, Munib Said Abdulreman, Famau Mohammed, Rukia Nashee, and Alwi Badawy. Alwi Badawy also accompanied me on several excursions throughout the islands of the Lamu archipelago, to Kiunga, Takaungu, Malindi, Mambrui and Mombasa. Abubakar Kuchi accompanied me to Kilifi, Mambrui, Magomeni and Malindi. Athman Lali Omar and Machulla assisted me in Mombasa and Rashidi Hamza assisted me in Takaungu. Only with the cultural insight, historical knowledge, and professionalism of these people has this research been possible.

balance between permitting people to ramble on aimlessly and being patient enough to discover they are simply taking a verbose route in the right direction.

Even before I developed the feedback method I am about to describe, there were two primary reasons why I believed that my informants took the interviews seriously and provided honest testimonies. First of all, the people who assisted me in my research are prominent local figures who are respected and trusted in their respective communities. Most of them are close associates of mine, with whom I have come to know during various visits to Kenya. They have helped me refine my research goals and have directed me toward a topic that the community itself is interested in knowing more about. Their help gave the project credibility and reassured everyone we interviewed that their participation was worth their time and energy. Secondly, each of the informants were fully aware that their interview was being video taped and that it would become part of the public video library that would soon be established in Lamu town. They knew that their peers would have access to their testimonies and would thus be subject to public scrutiny. Both of these factors significantly decreased the likelihood that informants gave misleading information, but I wanted a more full-proof method to be sure.

So I developed a feedback component that consists of a simple procedure that gives people, who might not otherwise discuss ngoma, an opportunity to do so. Before each interview session, I selected excerpts of previously recorded interviews that I believed the informant would find most engaging. This allowed me to create an artificial dialogue between people who, because of their gender, their location, or their social

background, would not speak candidly to one another. Some of them were sworn enemies from competing ngoma groups, others lived too far away from each other to engage in such discourse. As the informants watched excerpts of other interviews about ngoma, I video taped their responses. The **screening sessions** helped to jog their memories of ngoma activities they had participated in in the past, but had since forgotten about. They also stimulated highly charged debate.

An example of this can be seen in an experimental documentary film I produced in 1997 called *Ngoma Memories*.¹⁷ The film includes a series of excerpts from interviews with **Kondo wa Juma Saidi**¹⁸ of Takaungu and Baheri "Maembe" Ndamungu of Tezo Mbuyuni.¹⁹ Each of them has a very different opinion about whether or not coastal slaves and masters performed ngoma together. By interweaving their reactions to each other's interviews on the topic, I use a technique commonly used in documentary film to present multiple views on an issue. But in this case, the informants are responding to each other's pre-recorded comments that they had just finished listening to themselves.

Using this method of information gathering enriches the value of the interviews in several ways. It immediately alerts informants to the fact that what they say will be subjected to public criticism, which like their interview will be video taped and added to the community's video library. Informants are naturally more cautious about being accurate in their descriptions and less apt to embellish their memories of past events. I

¹⁷ I thank Diego Colombo for assisting me on this film.

¹⁸ Interview with "Miraji" Juma and Kondo wa Juma Saidi of Takaungu, 4.8.96

¹⁹ Interview with Baheri "Maembe" Ndamungu of Tezo Mbuyuni, 4.17.96.

believe this explains the consistency of the information I collected from people after I began employing this feedback method. In addition, nervous informants seem to be comforted by watching their peers on screen go through the same interview process they are engaged in. Tangentially, they often feel honored by being in the company of other ngoma experts. This augments the prestige associated with involvement in the project, and increases the desire to make the interview worthy. Finally, viewing pre-recorded ngoma performances with the experts themselves, both individually and as a ngoma group, has provided me with rare opportunities to figure out what makes a performance "good" or "bad." Rather than asking people questions regarding aesthetics, which are often difficult to answer, I simply listened closely to their critiques of each other. After several group screenings, I developed a general understanding of the criteria by which performers judge their peers. I cite some of these in my analysis of Rama in Chapter 3.

To conclude this discussion of my research methodology, I am compelled to emphasize the length of time it took me to develop an information-gathering technique that I am comfortable with. I have briefly traced that journey above, by identifying the people who have helped me along the way. Yet, I feel that it is necessary to encourage scholars who have not yet resolved issues regarding ethical "data collection" to strive to develop methods that genuinely involve the communities they work with. This not only enhances the credibility of a researcher's scholarship, but also serves as a foundation for other kinds of community development, a topic addressed more fully in the next section.

Community Education and Cultural Development

An important component of all the field research I have conducted in east Africa has been sharing my work with the communities I have visited. I have done this routinely by making multiple prints of the photographs I take so that everyone receives at least one copy. When I deliver the photographs later, I take the opportunity to ask detailed questions about the people, places and things the photos contain. I used this strategy in April of 1996, when I returned to Mwamkura in Chonyiland to **distribute the photos** I had taken of a Mwavyo dance the week before. In all the excitement of the performance, I had forgotten to inquire about the Chonyi names for various features of the costumes the men and women wore. So, as I passed out the pictures to the ngoma group, I pointed to different items and recorded their names. This has proven to be a very useful information-gathering technique time and again. John and Malcolm Collier (1986) discuss the benefits of such practices at great length in their visual anthropology manual, which continues to be a source of creative field methods for me.

In addition to using this **photo elicitation** technique, I routinely gave my informants opportunities to **watch themselves** on camera after our videotaped interviews had been completed. This often caused quite a commotion as relatives and friends gathered around to poke their eyes into the camera and borrow the headphones for a listen. Several of the coastal elders I interviewed were not interested in seeing themselves in the tiny black and white viewfinder, while **others** were glued to it and watched long

excerpts of themselves-talking and laughing and singing along with their pre-recorded voices.

These were some of my most favorite moments because I felt as though I was giving something back. And when I return to some of the more remote villages on the coast, which do not often receive visitors like me, I am caught off guard when people remember me for the photographs I have given them in the past. Sometimes they take me into their homes and spend awhile digging under beds, in hidden suitcases and tin boxes until finally, a perfectly preserved picture, taken years ago, emerges. And they always smile with pride that they have kept it for so long and so well.

My first public exhibition of some of the visual material I had collected on the coast was held at the Lamu Fort between June 1st and October 31st, 1996. The curator of the Lamu Museum, Abubakar Mohammed, agreed to give me a space for [the Exhibit](#) during that time so that it coincided with the four-day Maulidi festival held August 6th - 9th. He also made his staff available to assist me in framing the photographs and arranging a space where viewers could [watch video clips](#) of Maulidi ngoma performances and other events. The English version of the introduction to the Exhibit, which was titled, “Swahili Praises to the Prophet,” can be found in [Appendix A](#)

One of my primary goals for the Exhibit was to make it accessible to female members of the community, who do not regularly visit public facilities in the daytime. This stems from the gender roles and conservative customary practices of coastal Muslims, which encourage women to occupy the domestic realm while men occupy the

public sphere. In order to provide women with a chance to see the exhibit, I planned a maulidi ceremony at the Fort in the afternoon, the traditional time women go out to visit friends and relatives. I printed up hundreds of [invitations](#)²⁰ and distributed them throughout the neighborhoods of Lamu town, explaining the Exhibition and my research as I went. Most of the women I spoke with had been to the Fort for wedding dances but had never taken the time to visit the Museum's exhibits during the day. Several women said they thought the Museum was primarily for foreigners, not locals. Others said their children had visited the Museum on school trips, but they had never gone themselves.

My primary obstacle turned out to be a rumor that I planned to secretly video tape the women who attended the Exhibit's opening. Rather than attempt to publicly denounce this lie, I decided to carry on with the preparations for the event with the hope that people in Lamu trusted me enough to know it was not true. So I went ahead and put the finishing touches on the Exhibit. I arranged to have large woven mats delivered to the Fort, rented tea kettles, small coffee cups for Arabic coffee, glasses for punch, large metal serving plates, cloth decorations (zibendera) to hang above our heads, and the traditional [miniature mosque \(kinara\)](#) with fresh jasmine flowers--the essential centerpiece for maulidi recitations. Juweriya, a friend who frequently caters large events, prepared sambusas and pastries, and my dear friend Zainab brewed coffee and made fruit punch. All was delivered to the Fort by 3:30 pm and we were ready for the guests, however few or many they might be.

²⁰ A sample translated from Swahili is located in [Appendix B](#).

The catchall term "maulidi" is used in reference to any praise poem or prayer that is recited in honor of the Prophet Muhammad. Zainab agreed to lead us in the maulidi recitation and then introduce me so that I could say a few words about the photographs and my research in Lamu before welcoming the women to view the exhibit and watch the video. After they had perused the Exhibition, we planned to serve the refreshments, and then they would leave. All of this had to take place within two hours, in order for the women to get home and prepare dinner for their families on time. This schedule of activities followed the schedule adhered to at most women's events--including wedding dances, where women sing songs, dance, receive refreshments, and quickly depart.

I am made uncomfortably nervous again just thinking about how I felt when it finally reached 4:25 pm and only fifteen women had shown up at the Fort. Zainab was anxious to start the maulidi since time was ticking away and she knew some of the women would leave soon. I asked her to wait five more minutes, then I would surrender to the mounting humiliation. But a few minutes later, at exactly 4:30 pm a miraculous thing happened. Two hundred women, who had been gathering outside the Fort discussing whether or not they should come in, decided to attend. From the balcony I watched them slowly ascending the long staircase in their flowing buibuis (black veils). Two by two and three by three they glided toward us. Zainab had started reciting and the women joined her as they tried to find places to sit. I was ecstatic and could hardly keep still as I tried to sing the words of the prayers I had memorized just for the occasion. I saw friends and strangers among the crowd of women, poised solemnly in worship. We

all faced away from the exhibit, so as not to detract from the maulidi. Incense rose in long streams of white smoke and floated in between the silk figures that now occupied nearly every inch of the huge floor mats.

After we completed the maulidi prayers, I welcomed everyone and explained a bit about my ongoing research on coastal ngoma. They appeared anxious to see the Exhibit and rushed to look at the photographs of their friends, relatives, and neighbors. There was a large crowd around the television that showed clips of various maulidi activities from the celebrations held in 1993 and 1995. Some women were obviously shocked to see relatives whom they had not seen in years or had since passed away. Some asked for prints of the photographs that featured their sons or husbands, so I wrote down their names to make sure they received copies. I believe that by following through with my promises to give photographs to people I have solidified my reputation for being honest and dependable. Perhaps that is the reason why the women finally decided to come to the Fort that day. But I will never know for sure.

After the opening reception, I was so busy conducting interviews, video taping live performances, and traveling to various villages throughout the Lamu archipelago and the mainland, I do not know how many people visited the Exhibit over the next few months. When I returned to Lamu for the four-day Maulidi celebration in August, I decided to take advantage of the hundreds of visitors by asking them to fill out short questionnaires after they had walked through the exhibit. I was eager to learn which photographs and video clips appealed to the spectators most, and what images they

thought were missing. A small sample of the responses, translated from Swahili, appears in [Appendix C](#).

The responses to this short [questionnaire](#) have helped me identify some of the exhibit's most obvious educational applications as well as its shortcomings. I fully acknowledge the criticism put forth by [Mau](#), a well-respected leader of the Lamu community, who suggested that the Exhibit was male-oriented. Without making excuses, I need to explain that Muslim women on the coast do not regularly perform in public venues, as many of them did in the past. This point is further developed in subsequent chapters. Here I would like to take the opportunity to discuss the very sensitive nature of studying women's ngoma activities.

Coastal Women's Ngoma

Several waves of Islamic reform have swept the east African coast since the Independence era and stimulated an overwhelming reaction against women's public ngoma activities. This has not only caused a decline in public ngoma competitions in Muslim communities in general, but has made women's ngoma an extremely private matter that is rarely photographed or video taped. There has been a slight change in the past five years, however. Today, many coastal women who live abroad in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia visually document weddings when they return to Africa, so their relatives and friends at home can watch them later. As expressed by [Ayasha](#), from Dubai, many young women who immigrate to Arabia with their families still

hope to have a traditional east African coastal wedding that includes the customary wedding dances and all of the other festivities that surround a Swahili marriage.

On a few occasions I have been asked to videotape and/or photograph a wedding celebration called "the showing of the bride," which takes place on the night that the bride and groom consummate their marriage. In the company of other female videographers, I am not as uncomfortable documenting such events as I might have been a few years ago. Since most of the ngomas that I study are for men only, I usually send my male assistants to video tape them. Thus, I avoid situations where I am forced to be an anthropologist when I would rather be a friend attending a party. When I am asked to be the documentarian, I struggle with wanting to turn off the camera and go dance with my friends. To overcome this problem, I made a promise to myself to dance at least one time, even when I am "on duty." Putting myself in front of other people's cameras also seems to put my skeptics more at ease.

I have been alluding to an implicit hostility that some coastal women feel toward western anthropologists. This is the result of several studies conducted in Lamu in particular that cast dark shadows on coastal society and women's position in it. I will not refer specifically to those scholars, or their work here, but wish to elaborate on the obstacles their research methods and conclusions have posed to me and other scholars dedicated to illuminating the remarkable aspects of coastal civilization. Besides the obvious dilemma I faced when a false rumor almost doomed the opening reception of my photo exhibition in Lamu, the general sense of disbelief that preceded my research and

me was a challenging obstacle that my research assistants and I had to overcome. We did this by explaining our objectives over and over until the communities we were working with clearly understood what we were trying to accomplish. We always involved local people in our work, as well, either as escorts, videographers, or interviewers. They were the ones who introduced us to resident cultural experts and helped us write-up the questions we asked them. Since they were familiar with the idiosyncrasies of their communities, locals often prevented me from committing cultural fauxpas that might have jeopardized the project's credibility.

For these reasons, I question the motives of scholars who hope to uncover and expose a community's secrets, or explain away the mysteries that make people who they are. In my mind, studies that have this agenda are more akin to investigative journalism than intellectual inquiry, and should not be credited as the product of academic rigor. Focusing on the cultural attributes that people use to define and understand themselves in relation to others seems like a more admirable way to use a community's valuable time and resources.

The Lamu Community Cultural Center and Video Library

This mission inspired me to establish a public facility in which the visual history I had collected could be stored for public viewing. My friend and research assistant Alwy Badawy donated a portion of one of his family's houses near the Riyadhha mosque in Lamu for the Center. I used the last of my Fulbright research grant to restore the space

and make it suitable for classroom size groups to view their video selections. We hung photographs from the "Swahili Praises to the Prophet" exhibition in the Center and had shelves and cabinets built for the video tapes, the television, an additional VCR and a video camera, tripod, microphones and other equipment. I hired my assistant, Omari Shee, to run the Center, be responsible for the equipment and to teach anyone who wanted to learn how to use the video equipment. I also wanted the Center to be a training facility, where local people could come to check out the camera so that the cultural preservation project would continue in my absence.

I planned an [opening reception](#) for the Center to invite people to come for a look. According to local custom, women and men were invited at different times and were assured that the Center would maintain gender-specific hours of operation. Like the invitations to the women's maulidi ceremony at the Fort, I passed out [invitations](#) all over town.²¹

After the Opening, which was a moderate success, it became apparent that Omari could not handle the Center all by himself. As soon as the Center began its regular hours of operation, it was over-run with unsupervised school children that Omari did not want to baby-sit. Concomitantly, I could only continue to financially sustain the Center for six more months, and needed the community's support if it were to stay open. Several friends advised me to form a committee to oversee the Center and seek additional funding for its survival. I did not have much time, since I was getting ready to leave to return to the

²¹ A sample of the English version is located in [Appendix B](#).

States, but I quickly organized a [committee](#) of seven community leaders who I hoped would operate the Lamu Community Cultural Center and Video Library, (Center ya Utamaduni na Maktaba ya Video). A biographical sketch of the Committee members appears in [Appendix D](#).

At the Committee's first meeting, all of the members except Omari and Khatwab were present. We discussed how the Center should be operated and might be financially sustained by the Lamu community. I was in favor of having Omari teach anyone who was interested to use the video camera to document important cultural events. I had in mind a truly "open" facility with resources that were accessible to everyone equally. The Committee was quite opposed to this idea and feared that people would damage the equipment and use it for personal and/or recreational use. They explained to me that most coastal people are unfamiliar with how delicate video equipment is, and recommended that Omari be the only one allowed to use it. Rather than fully rescind my initial goals, I proposed that a system be established whereby people who wanted to use the camera would submit a written proposal for the Committee's approval. Omari could then accompany the party to make sure they were using the equipment properly and provide on-the-spot training. The members discussed the idea and suggested that Omari make the final decision about who should use the equipment, rather than the entire Committee, since he would be responsible for the equipment's safety. Of course Omari was not there to disagree, so that idea passed unanimously.

The Committee also raised the issue of theft, and I agreed to hire someone to build cabinets in which the equipment would be locked up at night. Obviously the Committee was much more experienced and less naive about local matters than I was, yet I could not help but be a bit depressed with how things were turning out. The Committee had basically decided to turn the Center over to Omari, who was a full-time primary school teacher and had other duties to fulfill. If Omari was too busy, or decided the money was not adequate for the job, the entire Center would have to be shut down. But there was nothing I could do. I wanted the Center to be an example of legitimate *local* development. Trying to run the Center from the States would defeat the purpose.

The field notes I took immediately after our first meeting clearly illustrate the tension that existed between my lofty visions of what the Center would become, and the Committee's realistic concerns about equipment safety and community sustainability. A letter I wrote to the Committee shortly after the first meeting includes many of these notes. It is located in [Appendix E](#). I refer to this letter again, more specifically, in the Epilogue.

Imag - i – nation: A Conclusion

At the end of November, 1996 I returned to the States to attend the African Studies Association (ASA) annual meeting in San Francisco. I had been asked to speak on "ethics in the field" at a round table, an honor I did not take lightly. I spent the entire

flight home thinking back on each phase of my research and scrutinizing it on ethical grounds. Had I paid my assistants fairly, had I asked for and then implemented their advice? Had I burned any bridges, or excluded individuals I should not have? I was self-assured at every phase except the last--the creation of the Center. By the time I had said my good-byes to everyone in Lamu, I had relinquished emotional ties to the videotapes, the equipment, and the exhibition photographs. After all, I told myself, all of that rightfully belonged to the coastal people, not me. Having been lied to, deceived and swindled out of their secrets and their treasures by people who looked like me, asked similar questions as I did, and made spectacular promises to them, as I had, they certainly deserved to get something back. Their images and stories about ngoma and about the past were theirs, not mine. I had simply arranged them in a neatly organized way, and set them aside in one place--in a very western fashion.

Upon my return home, I resolved not to pester members of the Committee about how the Center was going. I believed that if the members had the time and energy to report to me, they would. But they have not. My good friend Saidi has kept me apprised of the Center's status in a casual way, by telling me when things change. Three months after I left Lamu, the Center was closed because Omari was unable to tend to everything himself. I assume this either had to do with the lack of people who visited the Center, or the supervision required when neighborhood children visited unaccompanied by their parents. Later, Saidi informed me that Dotty volunteered to store the equipment at her house, and the Center was re-converted into an apartment for Riyadha Mosque College

students. More recently, I heard that there was talk of transferring the Center to the Lamu Museum, where it would be made available for residents. I have not heard any other news about it to date.

Working with people is what ethnographic research is all about. We postmodern social scientists do not pretend to be able to manipulate the people we study to accomplish our research goals or fulfill our idealistic dreams. This does not mean that we should not have goals or dreams, but that we need to be flexible enough to allow for them to be transformed by the people we work with, and humble enough to accept major disappointments and sometimes even failures. These lessons cannot be taught in a graduate methods course, or at a panel discussion at an academic conference. They are learned and re-learned again and again as we try to improve our strategy for learning more about the societies we are studying.

As is typically the case, I have learned more about myself while working in east Africa than I have about coastal society. Much of what I have learned about the history of coastal music and dance is presented here, in the chapters that follow. This information has been generously passed on to me by nearly one hundred different people, all of whom wish to share it with those who are interested in learning more about the peoples of the east African coast and their performance traditions. My interpretation of their memories and experiences is evident throughout this work, just as the imprints of a potter's hands are impressed in the clay.²² Indeed, there is as much craft involved in the following

²²Here I borrow a metaphor used by Walter Benjamin, 1969.

interviews, translations, photographs, video clips and text as there is in the creation of a clay pot; all are the products of culturally-embedded imagination.

CHAPTER 2

NGOMA GROUPS AND THEIR ROLE IN COASTAL SOCIETY

In Africa performance is a primary site for the production of knowledge, where philosophy is enacted, and where multiple and often simultaneous discourses are employed. Performance. . is a means by which people reflect on their current conditions, define and/or re-invent themselves and their social world, either re-enforce, resist, or subvert prevailing social orders. Indeed both subversion and legitimation can emerge in the same utterance or act.

(Margaret Drewal, 1991:2)

Introduction

This chapter discusses some of the reasons why east African performers have organized themselves into ngoma groups over the past century. As Margaret Drewal elucidates in the passage above, Africans perform music and dance to communicate messages that uphold the status quo, as well as challenge it--often at the same time. Like all live performance, ngoma is art in motion, an expressive medium that, at it's best, takes on a life of it's own. The dangerous potential of such activity has, over time, threatened those who constitute the parapets of religiously conservative, patriarchal coastal communities.

Consider that nearly every household in each coastal town and village had at least one member involved with a ngoma group. Moreover, weekend competitions brought together ngoma groups from various places, and attracted hundreds of spectators--men and women of all ages and backgrounds. The significance of these events in coastal

history is staggering. Ngoma competitions, unlike any other kind of social activity that people participated in on the coast, stimulated social interaction between groups normally separated by ethnic, religious, cultural, gender, and age difference. I do not pretend that ngoma magically erased these differences, but I do argue that performance events created a unique atmosphere that transformed people of diverse background into dancers, drummers, singers, and supporters of one group or another. Without fully considering ngoma competitions into the scheme of socio-political and economic interaction, it is impossible to understand how coastal society operated at all.

Ngoma stories serve as a narrative framework within which coastal elders talk about their past experiences. For performers, music and dance is the creative outlet through which they have celebrated times of wellness and plenty, as well as dealt with the hardships in their lives. The topic of ngoma rekindles a passion they simply cannot suppress. When elders conjure up old melodies and movements of past performances, they do more than illuminate a bygone era, they re-live it. This makes the interview process therapeutic for people who rarely have an opportunity to re-enact their experiences for such an attentive audience. It can also be quite painful for those who have suffered a loss of self-esteem and social recognition with ngoma's decline. After listening to coastal elders' stories for over ten years, I have learned that nostalgia is a spectrum of emotion ranging from pure happiness to utter remorse. And reminiscing about the past evokes any number of feelings simultaneously. I believe the candid manner in which

most of my informants shared their nostalgia for ngoma with me reflects ngoma's value as a mnemonic key to the past.

Because it comprises so many facets of coastal life, discussion about ngoma yields fascinating information about political and socio-economic transformations that coastal communities have experienced over time. By closely analyzing interviews with ngoma experts, I have pieced together a thematic history that provides further evidence of the crucial role ngoma organizations have played in the continuous re-creation of coastal society. This chapter provides an overview of themes that are discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow.

Ngoma Group Organization

Ngoma members describe their groups as three-tiered hierarchies.¹ At the top is the leader, usually a talented song composer, who either grew up in a family of ngoma leaders, or has the charisma needed to lead a group of performers. The members select their own leader based on his or her experience, talent, and personality. He or she must be openly willing to risk everything they value for the group, including their family life, financial security, and personal reputation. In return, a leader usually acquires more fame, social status, and political influence than they thought possible. Most importantly, they

¹Both Ranger (1975) and Strobel (1979) detail the various titles assigned to ngoma members during the Colonial era. Colonialism seemed to foster the kind of rank and file so central to ngomas such as Beni and Lelemama. Although a few military-style ngomas such as Chama still exist on the coast, the complexity of their organization seems to have declined with Colonialism.

get a shot at immortality, for the greatest ngoma leaders are remembered by name long after their peers in other professions have been forgotten.

Well trained **drummers**, experienced song leaders, and **choreographers** make up the second tier, along with professional instrumentalists such as zumari² or trumpet players, who are hired to perform with the group on a gig to gig basis. The final tier is comprised of dancers, who backup the soloists and sing the chorus. They make up the majority of the **group's membership**, and need not be musically talented or rhythmically inclined. All that is required of them is the will to try their best, and the patience to learn how to perform even the most complicated dance steps. I have been told time and again that any true ngoma enthusiast can become a good dancer. And it is this accepting attitude that makes ngoma inviting to so many people.

Seniority takes precedence over skill level when questions of authority arise between members of the same rank. Traditional rules of gerontocracy have thus provided ngoma groups with a system of government that parallels east African coastal society in general. Elders are respected for their past experience, wisdom and ability to resolve conflict. Young people are valued for their energy and enthusiasm, but are often considered unpredictable and careless. Elders control the dissemination of knowledge to younger members thereby sustaining the respect and authority that they deserve. This system of social reproduction is more formalized in dance societies that deal specifically with transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next--usually as part of rite of

²The zumari is a double-reed clarinet-like instrument made of strong wood such as mahogany. For an historical analysis of the zumari see Alan Boyd, 1977. Also see illustrations in H.N. Wanjala, 1990:Ch.11.

passage rituals. Vave, a Bajuni oral tradition passed on from male elders to young men, is an example of this. Chapter 4 is devoted to exploring the role Vave has played in the creation and sustenance of Bajuni identity.

Women also take advantage of ngoma's capacity to shape young people into viable adults. Since grace and discipline are the most important aspects of a good ngoma group, elderly women spend a great deal of time curbing the behavior of young members.³ Unmarried girls are not allowed to join ngoma groups,⁴ which prevents elders from having to deal with women who have not yet been instructed in adult matters. But the elders usually have a lot of work to do, nonetheless. Even though young dancers attract attention, their impetuosity often threatens to erode a group's reputation. This is of particular concern among women's groups because those who believe women have no business participating in ngoma constantly scrutinize the behavior of female ngoma enthusiasts. Opposition to women's ngoma has been exacerbated during politically volatile times, when female dancers composed song lyrics that publicly expressed their discontent with the patriarchal nature of coastal society. One such episode of coastal history is summarized below, in the final section of the chapter.

In addition to external conflicts, internal strife arises when a group member believes that his or her skill level has surpassed that of the leaders and feels compelled to

³Interviews with Athmani Juhudi of Takaungu, 4.12.96; Kadi binti Mohammed of Matondoni, 11.3.95; Miraji Juma and Kondo wa Juma Saidi of Takaungu, 4.8.96; Nana Shee and Yumbe Bakari of Kiunga, 11.3.96; Maulidi Sibina of Lamu, 8.27.96.

⁴Changani, a circle dance performed by women throughout the coast, seems to be one exception. Interview with Salima Jazaka of Lamu, 10.11.95. See also Marjorie Ann Franken's (1987) discussion of Changani and other female ngomas in Lamu and Mombasa.

challenge their authority. This is a common scenario in all ngoma groups, and reflects an underlying tension between people who are organized on the basis of seniority, not skill.

Bake Die Shee, an elderly zumari player from Siyu town on Pate Island, describes his own experience with this problem as a youth:

Do you see this? (holds out his zumari) It is very jealous. It has a lot of jealousy in it! Jealously! If one person gives a better performance than another does, the weaker player does not seek advice from the better one. Instead, he claims that he is the best, and that jealousy becomes part of his work. And if his rival is invited to perform somewhere, he might try and take the opportunity away from him--just because he is so jealous of his success. He tries to undermine him until he is the only one left. And the other player becomes useless. Is that proper? Tell me that it's not!

It was the teacher who trained me, and has since passed away, who disgraced and dismissed me from our group. He and Shee Mwana both dismissed me from the group when people recognized that they were not as good a player as I was...

But I respected my teacher and paid him for my lessons. Even my parents advised me to respect my teacher. They told me that doing so would benefit me later on. And now, here I am. Even though they undermined me and dismissed me from the group, I am the only one left. The other guy (Shee Mwana) is now ill and cannot perform. If I had refused to come back to the group, who would be left to play?⁵

In addition to highlighting the teacher-student competition inherent in apprenticeship training, Bake Die illustrates several important points about ngoma organization in this excerpt. First of all, he describes a system of tutelage that involves a master musician and a group of students, who were under no social or moral obligation to pay fees for their lessons. Earlier in the interview, Bake Die Shee explains, "Of all the students my teacher had, I was the only one who paid for the training, and thus I received

⁵Interview with Bake Die Shee of Siyu, 8.25.95.

the teacher's blessings, and was the only one who really learned how to play well."⁶ According to Bake Die, his parents were the only members of the community who valued the teacher's talents. The others did not consider making music to be a valid or respectable profession, and they did not want their children to become musicians and heavily involve themselves in the ngoma groups. They, like most members of coastal society, believed that ngoma was a pastime, not a legitimate way to make a living.

Performers in Coastal Society

The devaluation of east African coastal performance experts is symptomatic of a pervasive trend across the entire African continent. Because drummers, dancers, and song composers were usually drawn from among the servants and slaves of kings, chiefs, and other political leaders, they were rarely compensated for their skills. Beating sacred drums, playing royal horns, and reciting oral history by memory was just a job like any other. When slavery was abolished, the lower echelons of free African societies inherited the important, but indigent role of being their communities' cultural custodians. Most performance experts today cannot get by with the meager earnings they make from singing, dancing, or drumming even if they are very famous. The incentive to carry on with their profession decreases as they realize their knowledge of the past is no longer an asset in today's world, nor something that their children will be proud to inherit in the future.

⁶Ibid.

History does provide us with some examples of situations in which coastal performers were given the respect and monetary benefits they deserved. The Pate Chronicle,⁷ recorded by several authors in various installments over the past two centuries, sheds some light on this subject. One version (MS177), narrated by a Pate elder named "Bwana Simba" in 1900, suggests the introduction of a lineage-based system that provided a family of Pate musicians with the handling rights over a large, side-blown horn known as a "siwa."⁸ In the 17th Century, the king of Pate, like many coastal royals, used the siwa exclusively for ceremonial occasions such as circumcisions and weddings.⁹ Use of the siwa was restricted to members of the royal family. Exceptions were made for Pate's political allies, who were allowed to rent the siwa for special events. Of course, the king's rights over the siwa took precedence over anyone else's.

When it came time for one of the king's rivals, Mwana Darini, to circumcise her son, she requested the use of the royal siwa. In order to prevent her from using the horn, the king scheduled his own sons' circumcision ceremony for the same day. In her anger, Mwana Darini commissioned another siwa to be carved out of an elephant's tusk so that it would be more beautiful than the Pate original. At the same time that Mwana Darini's ivory siwa was being made, the king's siwa was rented by some Lamu officials, whose ship sank with the royal horn on board. Before the king could take charge of Mwana Darini's siwa, she designated a particular family of slaves "the heralds of the horn" to

⁷See The Pate Chronicle. Edited and translated from manuscripts housed in the library at the University of Dar es Salaam by Marina Tolmacheva, 1993.

⁸For more information see James de Vere Allen, 1976; H.Sassoon, 1975.

⁹See Jonathon Glassman's historical analysis of the role that musical instruments such as the ngoma kuu and the siwa played in sustaining coastal authority, 1995:154-158. Also see Glassman, 1989.

insure it's protection. With their new status came emancipation from slavery, as well as a regular salary of money, cloth and cooking fat. In addition, each time the siwa was blown, the patron who rented it was obligated to offer the herald a gift as a sign of appreciation.¹⁰

This story explains two correlating features ngoma leaders typically share; a relatively low status, and the lineage-based system within which they inherit their musical expertise. Most of the ngoma experts I interviewed on the coast were from a long line of performers, who passed on both musical abilities and administrative skills to the next generation of would-be ngoma leaders. Many of these people have never known the fame or enhanced social status that their ancestors periodically enjoyed. This is not to say that professional ngoma experts were held in great esteem in the past. The excerpt from the Pate Chronicle above aptly demonstrates that was not true. Yet, African royals did make a distinct place in their courts for families of griots, praise-singers, drummers and horn blowers, and their authority rested upon the adequate care of these symbols of power. Thus, however meager was their recognition, performance experts of past centuries at least knew that their role was crucial to the maintenance of their society, and that they could not be replaced by a radio or a cassette player, as they often are today.

The general lack of appreciation toward African performers, past and present, is ironic when considering that many of the important events that take place in African societies depend upon professional performers to make the occasions happen with their

¹⁰See Tolmacheva 1993:304-306.

music. East African coastal weddings are good examples. Female relatives of a bride-to-be meet their favorite song leader several days before the wedding dance to give her song lyrics they have composed in the bride's honor.¹¹ The leader is expected to memorize the lyrics and set them to a tune that the guests are familiar with and will enjoy singing. The songs usually contain personal information about the bride and groom, and their families, so it is crucial that the song leader avoid distorting the details of the message. This is a more difficult task than it may seem. For the song leader is expected to embellish the lyrics to make them more poignant, more humorous, or more newsworthy than the originals. And she must do so under the scrutiny of her patrons, whom she hopes to amuse rather than insult. Basically, the song leader has the entire wedding party's reputation in her hands.

The success of the wedding, therefore, is largely up to her. All for the price of a soda, a few cigarettes, a handful of miraa,¹² and some chewing gum. If an ngoma leader makes 500 shillings¹³ on tips from the wedding guests she considers it a successful night. Sometimes, the tips are all she can hope for--especially if she is asked to perform for a member of her own ngoma group, a relative, or a long-time friend. Salima Jazaka, a retired female ngoma leader from Lamu further explains:

¹¹I learned much of what I know about female ngoma leaders from Esha Ngoma, a famous ngoma leader from Lamu, who allowed me to accompany her to coastal wedding dances throughout 1993.

¹²Miraa is an organic stimulant that is grown primarily in Meru District on the slopes of Mount Kenya. Its caffeine-like effects produce feelings of alertness and euphoria.

¹³This is equivalent to about \$10.00.

A: We used to perform for weddings. The mother of the bride would come to invite us to perform ngoma. She was responsible for finding the leaders. We just danced.

Q: When she came to invite you, did she pay you anything up front?

A: No.

Q: She didn't give you anything -no money at all?

A: No, it was just "thank you." It was like this: Let's say your daughter was having a wedding and you were a member of my ngoma group. In that case, we would just come and perform for you for free. That is how we used to do it. If you were hosting a wedding, we would make candy trees (uti wa paramandi). All of the members of the group participated. We used to whittle coconut branches and then we would wrap them in colored paper. Then we collected money from the group and sent it to her.

Q: Did you put the money in the candy tree?

A: Yes, we used to wrap up the money in the tissue papers and put them in the slits we made in the branches. If it was five hundred, six hundred, or seven hundred shillings that we collected, we would take it to her.¹⁴

In this passage, Salima highlights some of the fringe benefits that female ngoma members could expect to receive from their group when one of their own daughters got married. In such a case, the ngoma group leader forfeited her regular performance fees and joined her group in offering a donation to a co-member as a gesture of solidarity and support. The group itself, and not the community therefore rewarded long-term commitment to a particular ngoma group at large. When considering the weighty responsibility placed on ngoma group leaders and the trifles they earned for it, it seems strange that anyone would devote their life to making music. And yet, Bake Die Shee, Salima Jazaka, and hundreds like them did. Much of this had to do with the "sifa" or honor and respect that accompanied their leadership roles. This important motivating factor is explored in detail below.

¹⁴Interview with Salima Jazaka of Lamu, 10.11.95.

Ngoma Competition

Usually ngoma competitions were arranged on a weekly basis--the most popular competition days being Friday and Sunday. Members from one group wrote letters to the members of another group, inviting them to compete on a particular date at a certain time and place. If the group was in a different village, these invitations were written weeks in advance so that arrangements to feed and accommodate the visitors could be made. Neighborhood groups simply notified each other a few days prior to the competition, and then only if plans deviated from the regular performance schedule.

Some ngoma organizations, such as those in Siyu and Takaungu, had proper "club houses," where they held their meetings and practice sessions.¹⁵ Others simply met at the group leader's house, or at a private plot of land a member, or a group supporter owned. Former ngoma experts from Lamu remember practicing on private farms and soccer fields outside of town, where competitors could not see them.¹⁶ These practice sessions were top secret, and it was not uncommon for spies to be caught in the act of trying to find out what their rivals were up to!¹⁷ It was at the practice sessions that members discussed their weekly strategies. The song leaders had lyrics to teach, the drummers had rhythms to practice, and the choreographer had movements to go over with the dancers.

¹⁵Interviews with Baraka Mzee of Siyu, 10.23.96; Hauna Mwalim and Lali Ahmed Kale of Siyu, 10.23.96; "Miraji" Juma and Kondo wa Juma Saidi of Takaungu, 4.8.96.

¹⁶Interviews with Ali Jabu of Lamu, 10.26.95; Omar Jabu Mwakatwa "Kangoroma" of Lamu, 10.21.95; Maulidi Sibina of Lamu, 7.27.96.

¹⁷Interviews with Omari Haji and Athman "Habu" Bwana of Matondoni, 8.5.96; Amina Hamisi of Malindi, 8.3.96.

Members had to agree on the order of the numbers, and organize the timing of some sort of spectacle that would sway the audience in their favor.

Keep in mind that ngoma competitions were events that featured two or more ngoma groups performing simultaneously. Spectators moved back and forth between the groups, scrutinizing their performances before deciding the one they liked best. The group that had attracted the largest crowd by the end of the competition was deemed the winner. A losing group, on the other hand, might be left without any spectators at all. During the Colonial era, a District Commissioner or other high-ranking officer was honored with the privilege of presiding over the competition as the judge.¹⁸ The British were especially fond of "native" dances and regularly sponsored ngoma competitions by furnishing a trophy for the winning group.¹⁹ Of course, ngoma competitions predated the Colonial era and thus must not be considered products of it. At the same time, the generally supportive attitude many Colonial officials had toward ngoma competitions certainly upped the ante as far as the competitors were concerned.

The trophies, or "cups" as people called them, were coveted symbols of supremacy that provoked members to come up with new strategies for out-performing their opponents. This took the form of extravagant displays that were meant to thrill spectators. This might be a stilt-walker, or a famous guest star, or new costumes. Whatever it was, its real value was its surprise factor, which is why groups began using

¹⁸Interview with Salima Jazaka of Lamu, 10.11.95.

¹⁹Interviews with Ba Omari of Lamu, 9.2.93; "Bakamoro" of Lamu, 7.23.96; "Matangasi" of Lamu, 9.29.95; "Tarumbeta" and Saidi Mwamanzi of Takaungu, 4.9.96; Maulidi Sibina of Lamu, 7.27.96. See also Ranger, 1975.

espionage tactics to find out what their competitors had in store for them, before the competition. Amina Hamisi, an ngoma expert from Malindi, describes her group's surveillance system :

We had special people who informed us about what the other group members were doing. They were young boys. They were our primary spies. When the other group performed on days that we did not, the boys would go with a tape recorder and record them. They were the children of members of our group. They were our policemen. Whenever our rivals performed, they went to spy on them. There were three of them. One of them was the son of an Arab. He was the one who gave us the tape recorder that we used to tape them. They'd bring the tape to us so we could listen.²⁰

Although such tactics may seem extreme, they were definitely not uncommon. As will be further discussed in following chapters, ngoma competition was fun, but fierce. And it regularly got out of hand.

Ngoma also allowed members of coastal society with opportunities otherwise unavailable to them. To be more specific, ngoma gave marginalized people confidence to become cultural experts in their own right. An example of ngomas effect on people is evident in each of the interviews I conducted among coastal ngoma leaders. Each of them vividly recalls the most significant contribution they made to their group. Whether it was a satirical song they wrote to cleverly mock someone famous, a beautiful praise poem they composed for a political leader, an elaborate costume they designed, or a fancy new

²⁰Interview with Amina Hamisi of Malindi, 8.3.96.

movement they invented.²¹ They remember every last detail! I believe this is because the competitive spirit of ngoma pushed them to fully realize their creative talent, and they were recognized for it. In this way, therefore, ngoma provided women, as well as newcomers, homosexuals, and anyone else who was considered an outsider (*wageni*) by long-time coastal residents (*wenyeji*), with the kind of recognition usually reserved for male members of the coastal elite.

Performance as Socio-Political Control

This is not to suggest that ngoma has worked exclusively for the benefit of the socially misfit. On the contrary, music and dance media serve people from all echelons of society. New songs, whether they are of conservative or liberal content, manipulate public opinion. There is no question about it. And ngoma leaders often have a great deal of influence over their communities. Public performances make excellent fora for critiquing the behavior--either good or bad--of community members. As discussed above, this is done primarily through songs.

The most famous coastal lyricists compose songs that are both witty and poetic--on the spot. This means that they cleverly put words together in such a way that innuendo and linguistic dexterity are demonstrated without compromising Swahili literary convention. This is not an easy task by any stretch of the imagination. Lyrics need to

²¹The handkerchief-pass performed in traditional Lelemama comes to mind, although I do not know by whom or where it was first established. The movement itself consists of the transfer of a handkerchief from one dancer to the next using only the mouth. I had the privilege of seeing it performed by Omari Haji's women's ngoma group in Matondoni on 9.29.96. Unfortunately it is rarely performed anymore.

appeal to the local sense of humor, as well as be informed by the latest gossip. If the composer meets all these demands and attaches the words to a popular tune, it is likely to be remembered across generations. The historical content of many old songs make them especially good records of past events.

Less than a century ago, wordsmiths regularly engaged each other in battles of rhymes, riddles, puns, and innuendo. Verbal combat usually involved someone who started a poetic phrase and another who was expected to complete it. An example of this is Vave, mentioned briefly above. As one of the few epic poems still remembered, Vave provides us with a hint of how coastal people tested each other's intelligence, wit, and charm.

Male elders often demonstrated their poetic skills by acting as unofficial gatekeepers, who challenged visitors to solve a riddle before being allowed into town. Elderly women perform a similar role in traditional coastal weddings today. On a bride's wedding night, her female relatives keep the groom's male relatives from entering the house in which the new couple will consummate their marriage. Typically, one elderly woman with exceptional verbal skill is the one men must bribe and sweet talk in order to get inside. Omar Saidi Amin of Takaungu witnessed such an event the night of his brother's wedding:

When my brother married into the family of Sharif Alwy bin Hamed of Malindi, Mzee Abdalla Kadara, the famous poet from Lamu, helped me get through the gate to the house, which was guarded by an old Swahili woman of that family. He used poems to convince her to allow me to pass through without paying the customary entrance fee. We ended up paying the fee anyway, because it is a

custom, but he just wanted to prove that he could charm the old woman with his poetic talent. He used the Bajuni language and they argued back and forth with poems for an hour, but no one tired of listening. Mzee Abdalla Kadara and the woman argued for an hour and no one got bored! Finally, the woman agreed and she opened the gate and everyone entered. To be a poet is something very special.²²

A similar test was put to me when Ali Jabu, a Lamu elder, refused to allow me an interview until I solved a riddle. He held up his index finger and asked me what it was used for. After contemplating it for a moment, I used my right hand finger to point to something, then I counted to three with it, and then inserted it into my ear, as if to clean it out. Even though I did not answer the riddle correctly, as I was told later²³, I made the old man laugh so hard that he eventually agreed to speak with me. I am sure my gestures would not have been acceptable when Ali Jabu was a young man and Swahili oral literature was reserved for experts.

After experiencing the pressure involved in oral arts myself, I am glad not to have been born a Swahili poet. Especially considering the malicious messages embedded in lyrics regularly passed between performers. Indeed, many of the ngoma songs that have been passed down over time are notoriously sarcastic and reveal the vicious turn ngoma competitions sometimes take. Some songs are direct attacks, meant to defame individuals and ruin family reputations. This poetic genre might best be called "oral warfare," and has little in common with the verbal tricks Ali Jabu plays.

A former leader of a women's ngoma group in Lamu named Salima Jazaka offers a vivid example of just how biting the song lyrics passed between competing ngoma

²²Interview with Omar Said Amin of Takaungu, 4.15.96.

²³The correct answer is, "the index figure is used to read the Qur'an."

groups can be. The first song is one which Salima (S) composed herself. The second song is one of the responses she remembers her opponent (R) singing back.

S: Sinitote kanena asoneneka. (Have you heard this song? Well, it's mine! Don't provoke me to say something terrible.) Tuyawate mambo yameharibika. (Let's just forget it--everything is ruined.) Si yoyote atambikae kashika. (Not everyone who sets a trap catches a victim.)
 R: Taunda jahazi langu lauteo. (I'll build a ship out of coconut tree fibers.) Nimpakie salama ende kwao. (I'll send her safely on her way back home.) Mwana Haramo alipo hana cheo. (A bastard has no status, wherever she goes).²⁴

Salima remembers this song because the words publicly humiliated her by suggesting she came from an illegitimate family. Even if a person's background was well known, it was shameful to discuss such things in public. R broke this code of conduct to satisfy her own pride. Salima's memory of this incident, years after it occurred, represents the damaging consequences of competition gone amiss.

Ngoma as Socio-Economic Security

In spite of the problems that resulted from over-competitive ngoma groups, they are excellent models of the way in which coastal people have arranged themselves in order to protect against socio-economic calamity. The notion of safety in numbers, or wealth in people, might also be referred to as "social capital."²⁵ In the east African context, social capital has been a primary source of economic security for people who rely on kin and fictive kin networks to assemble the resources they need to pay dowry, buy land, purchase medical treatments, compensate crime victims, or host a wedding or a

²⁴Interview with Salima Jazaka of Lamu, 10.11.95.

²⁵For a concise intellectual history of "social capital" see Michael Woolcock, 1998.

funeral. Obtaining those resources at the time they are needed greatly depends upon a person's ability to liquidate their social capital, or collect on the favors owed to them by people whom they have assisted in the past. Becoming a member of a ngoma group extends the network of people who can help in times of need.

In most cases, joining an ngoma group was not about becoming a member of an exclusive clique that shared a narrowly defined set of beliefs, similar amounts of wealth and social status, or identical family backgrounds. On the contrary, ngoma groups facilitated collaboration between people who, at first glance, seemed to have little in common. This is why several people with whom I spoke compared ngoma groups to soccer teams; they both foster group pride, which encourages members to suspend ethnic and class prejudice.²⁶ Muslim leaders have long recognized ngoma's ability to mediate differences that otherwise separate people. Chapter 3 analyses “maulidi ya Rama” in this context.

Besides ngoma groups, there are other coastal institutions that ease the social tensions produced under high degrees of socio-economic stratification. Yet, unlike marriage, which legally and spiritually joins two families, blood brotherhood,²⁷ which enacts trade alliances between non-kin, and diye-paying groups specifically organized by kin for indemnity protection against non-kin,²⁸ ngoma is community-based. Unbound by

²⁶See Hyder Kindy's discussion on the relationship between soccer and politics, 1972:Ch. 9.

²⁷For a vivid description of a blood-brotherhood ceremony performed along the Bagamoyo Road in Tanganyika in 1881, see Last to Hon. Sec., March 18, 1881, KNA. See also Thomas Herlehy, 1984; Cynthia, 1981:62; A.M. Champion, 1967; Thomas Spear, 1979.

²⁸I.M. Lewis and L.V. Cassanelli describe similar alliances formed as “blood-money” groups between pastoralists, farmers and hunters in southern Somalia. See I.M. Lewis, 1969; L.V. Cassanelli, 1973. Also see Steven Feierman's discussion of the “kifu group” among the Shambaa of Tanzania, 1990:56-64.

kin or fictive-kin obligations, ngoma members become a social network that is less formal, but ultimately more extensive than the others.

In the past, ngoma competitions provided affluent coastal families with a public venue for demonstrating their religious piety by fulfilling their Muslim obligation of *sadaka*, giving alms to the poor. Newcomers, orphans, and descendants of slaves relied on the weekly feasts that wealthy patrons hosted at weekend ngoma competitions, not only for food, but also for the social interaction the events entailed. Since everyone in the community was welcome to attend, those with ambitions for moving up the socio-economic ladder used the occasions to meet people who could help them. Ngoma feasts, therefore, were more than sites where wealth was redistributed among the coast's population, but where people of diverse background met and made alliances.

Today, low membership dues make joining ngoma groups affordable for even the poorest people. But this also prevents the organizations from becoming primary sources of financial assistance for those who are not integrated into kinship structures that provide them with the socio-economic security they need. This puts people on the margins of coastal people at a disadvantage, especially if they do not have ties to elite families. This is often the case for people of slave ancestry.

Although anti-slavery legislation began putting an end to coastal slavery one hundred years ago, many communities on the coast are still cognizant of which families are descendants of slaves and which are not. This reality is explained by the fact that even after Colonial decrees made slavery illegal, subservient relationships between ex-slaves

and former masters persisted.²⁹ These relationships are evident today as patron-client obligations between former slave families and their former owners. For example, senior male patrons are expected to attend the funerals of senior male clients, and provide financial assistance for their families. Likewise, clients are expected to visit sick patrons, help them with labor requirements, and generally be available for special services upon request. In exchange, clients regularly accept charity (zakat) from their patrons, squat on their land, tend their farms, and help with their livestock. Although many of these clients are blood-relatives of their patrons, they remain under the stigma of their ancestor's slave status in perpetuity.

Ngoma has facilitated positive interaction between the classes, however. A well known dance expert from the outskirts of Takaungu named "Tarumbeta" recalls that the two rural ngoma groups "Magongo" and "Chokaa" each had an alliance with one of the two groups in town--"Crownie" and "Ibinaa al Wataan."³⁰ When the rural groups competed against each other, the members of the groups in town went out to the farms to cheer on their respective allies. And when the town groups competed, members of the rural ngoma groups came into town to rally around their urban colleagues. These alliances not only bridged the cultural and economic gaps between dancers, whose historical backgrounds prevented them from performing together, they provided another

²⁹The first anti-slavery legislation passed in 1897 by the British Colonial government applied only to the islands off the east African coast. Slavery was not fully abolished until 1907. Long after that, so-called "freed slaves" were still controlled by their "ex-masters" and had little alternative but to continue working for meager wages, for portions of the crops they tended, and/or for access to small plots of land to grow their own subsistence. For more information on the evolution of coastal slave systems see Frederick Cooper, 1980; Fred Morton, 1990; Abdul Sheriff, 1987.

³⁰Interviews with Mhunzi Kibwana "Tarumbeta" and AbuBakar Mbwana, Saidi Manzi of Takaungu, 4.2.96; "Miraji" Juma and Kondo wa Juma Saidi of Takaungu, 4.8.96.

way for the groups to compete. If Crownie brought a goat to the countryside for Magongo's feast, then Ibinaa was compelled to buy a cow for Chokaa's feast. Thus, the redistribution of wealth from the urban elite to the rural poor was a result of the competitive nature of the town-country ngoma alliances.

Ali Jabu, a retired coconut farmer himself, tells of a similar affiliation that provided an "in" for outsiders in Lamu.³¹ During the Colonial era, the outskirts of Lamu town, like the coastal hinterland in general, were inhabited by people whose ancestors were brought to the coast as slaves to tend coconut plantations. With the exception of Muslim converts who came into town to pray, the elite (waungwana) did not welcome the coconut farmers (wagema).

This situation changed when the wagema's traditional dances captured their masters' attention, and they were invited to perform after Friday prayers. This provided the elite with an opportunity to fulfill their weekly obligation of charity, while simultaneously entertaining their friends and neighbors.³² When the wagema divided themselves into competing groups, these wealthy patrons quickly took sides. Soon they were hosting huge feasts for the dancers and the spectators before and after the competitions, in order to outdo their rivals. This paved the way for other kinds of social interaction between wagema and waungwana, a topic, which is discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

³¹Interview with Ali wa Jabu of Lamu, 10.26.95.

³²These weekly performances are discussed again in Chapter 3.

In the days when group pride and social prestige meant as much as economic wealth, patrons enhanced their social standing in their communities by financially supporting their favorite ngoma group. They hosted barbecues, bought lavish costumes, imported foreign instruments, and ultimately turned ngoma performances into public displays of their own personal wealth and esteem.³³ It is not surprising that people referred to them as the "owners" ("wenye") of the groups they supported. Yet, how much influence did patrons practically have over the group members?

Mohammed "Bakamoro" Mzee seems to offer a partial answer to this question. In a discussion we had about the role Lamu's ngoma groups played in the construction of the famous Riyadhha mosque, Bakamoro explained that there was indeed a strong sense of mutual obligation between Lamu's ngoma group members and one particularly famous religious figure and ngoma enthusiast named "Habib Saleh."

Habib Saleh didn't participate in any group. He just organized them to work. During the month of maulidi (mfungo sita), when the Kambaa group and the Kingi group were still in existence, Habib Saleh called Sabirina over and said, "Oh, Sabi, I don't know what to say. We the people of Langoni are so lazy. Fadhili has already alerted the people of Mkomani with his trumpet, and he and his group are already on their way to the mosque. While my son, Meri, can't even blow "halelihalelihalile" to please me."

You see, Habib Saleh was trying to motivate people to work for him! After the people of Mkomani had assembled, he told them that it was time for them to get to work. He reminded them that they had enjoyed the Beni performances and everything else the whole year, but now the month of maulidi had come and it was time to celebrate the Prophet's birthday. He explained that the limestone, the sand, and the rock were ready to be picked up at the sea front.

³³One Lamu elder named "Matangasi" recalls a Beni competition he witnessed as a child, which included a group of patrons digging a large hole and burying a huge basket full of money. Although this sort of ostentatiousness was not unheard of among ngoma supporters, it is unclear what this gesture actually symbolized. See interview with Nassar "Matangasi" of Lamu, 9.29.95.

They told him, “Mwenye, don’t worry.” And they went down and carried as much as they could to Riyadh--free of charge.

When that group had gone, he told someone to call Mzee Baguo, a member of the Kingi group. When he came, Habib Saleh said, “Oh Mr. Baguo, what illness do the people of Langoni have? I haven’t heard Jabu Tai blow his trumpet today, I’ve only heard Mr. Fadhili’s trumpet. Now it’s time to get to work! We have enjoyed ourselves with Beni, Mwasha, Chakacha, but now the stones must be brought from the sea front. It’s the month to celebrate maulidi, the Prophet’s birthday.”

In the evening, while Mwenye was resting in his house, troops of women--nearly two thousand--used their cooking pots or pieces of cloth to carry sand on their heads from the sea front to the mosque--voluntarily! In an instant, all of the sand was transported. The men carried stones. Habib Saleh acted as an owner of the groups in that kind of situation, but after the work was finished his authority dissolved. People used to use wisdom and respect when they organized people to work for them.³⁴

Here, Bakamoro suggests that Habib Saleh's clever tactics allowed him to call on Lamu's most active organizations, the town's ngoma groups, as a ready-made work force. Yet, unlike his peers, Saleh commanded the moral authority needed to compel people to exert themselves in this way. It is unlikely that even the most generous ngoma benefactors had the clout to do the same. Even though Bakamoro credits the competitive spirit between Kambaa and Kingi as the source of the members' motivation, the general population of Lamu was so enamored by their "Beloved Saleh" that any of them would have come to his assistance regardless. Bakamoro claims that Saleh himself was so confident of this that he stayed at home, knowing that the task was being accomplished without his supervision.

Contemporary politicians have kept a similar system alive by regularly commissioning ngoma groups to perform for them at campaign rallies and solicit voters

³⁴Interview with Mohammad "Bakamoro" Mzee of Lamu, 7.23.96.

during the elections.³⁵ As some of my informants have suggested, ngoma group members enjoy the publicity they get from these events, but usually end up putting a lot of time and energy into composing praise songs for candidates who forget them as soon as the campaign is over.³⁶

More recently, women have taken advantage of their own organizing potential by transforming their groups into self-help associations geared toward income-generation. An example of this is the "Shani Women's Group" led by Mebaraka Juma of Takaungu.³⁷ Her twenty-member group has pooled enough money to buy a fresh water tap, and plan to start up their own cooperative business when their bank account is full. This venture already makes the women more economically independent than their mothers, who worked together primarily to provide charity for poor children, but did not economically enhance their own lives.

The Politics of Artistic Production

The extent to which politics has influenced ngoma and vice versa is well documented in historical sources. Group solidarity is both demonstrated and created in public performances, which often makes ngoma, in and of itself, an essentially political activity. Ranger (1975) provides a thorough study of this by tracing the historical

³⁵Interviews with Saidi Mwamanzi and Tarumbeta of Takaungu, 4.9.96; Shauri Kaingu Chondo, Katana Mapori Kivatsi, Kirao Kombe Hare of Ganda (Malindi), 9.1.96.

³⁶This occurred after a big campaign rally I attended in Kiunga on 10.29.96.

³⁷Interview with Mebaraka Juma and Kibwana Said of Takaungu, 4.15.96.

development of Beni³⁸ ngoma in various locations and through various episodes of political change. Beni was a phenomenon that emerged in various parts of eastern Africa after WWI and lasted into the 1950s. It consisted of elaborate military processions, which Africans put on to mock as well as to celebrate the pomp and circumstance of their Colonial oppressors. As Ranger suggests, Beni was a continuation of previous ngoma traditions that helped people deal with contemporary issues. In the early 1900s, the harsh realities of forced labor,³⁹ land alienation,⁴⁰ migration, famine,⁴¹ and other symptoms of British political, economic and cultural domination made ngoma a singular form of relief. In such uncomfortable times, it is not surprising that the perseverance of Beni and the lavish activities it supported spurred accounts such as this one from C.W. Hobley, an officer appointed to the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC), who wrote at the turn of the twentieth century:

If the decadence of the so-called Swahili or semi-Arab people on the coast continues, it is almost certain that in a few years they will almost entirely be replaced by the flow of Nyika people coast wards. Both the descendants of the slave owners and the descendants of the slaves have lost heart. The former have lost all their landed property, mortgaging it to Indian merchants in satisfaction of unpaid debts, both ex-masters and ex-slaves living in exiguous existence. . .⁴²

³⁸Beni was also known as "Gwaride" in many coastal communities including Mombasa, Takaungu, Kilifi, and Malindi.

³⁹For more information on forced labor policies see C.W. Hobley, 1929.

⁴⁰Chapter 5 presents a detailed history of how land in Takaungu was taken from its original occupants. For more information on land, labor and migration on the coast of Kenya between 1907-1925 see Frederick Cooper, 1980:Ch. 5. For a thorough labor history of the Kenya coast between 1935 - 1950 see Frederick Cooper, 1987.

⁴¹For information on rinderpest, small pox and famine in Mijikendaland between the 1880s and the early 1900s, see Brantley, 1981.

⁴²See Hobley 1929:168-169.

It is indeed astonishing that in the wake of considerable upheaval, Beni members turned their attention to the seemingly insignificant tasks involved in making perfect replicas of Scottish highlander uniforms and British royal regalia, and building large-scale models of man-o-war ships to display on parade.⁴³ As increasing numbers of hinterland Mijikenda (the "Nyika" Hobley refers to) and people from further upcountry settled in coastal communities to escape poverty and unemployment,⁴⁴ they too were caught up in Beni mania. Some of these immigrants actually managed to work their way up the ranks to become Beni leaders, and hold the prestigious position of "Queenie" or "Kingi" of their group.⁴⁵ Ngoma was surely unique in its ability to catapult members of the lowest echelons of coastal society to the top.

Leaders from other parts of east Africa transformed coastal ngoma in more ways than one. The story of the Wanyamwezi visit to Takaungu, outlined in Chapter 5, illustrates just how disrupting the presence of foreign cultural influences was to existing power structures. New dance sensations such as Beni intoxicated young people and bewildered elders. This created a generation gap analogous to the one produced during the "hippie era" in the United States and Europe. A similar cultural revolution was imminent between the world wars, when male elders found themselves challenged by their own daughters for the first time. Strobel's research (1975) on [Lelemama](#) dance

⁴³Interview with Athmani Kitoka of Lamu, 10.4.95.

⁴⁴Colonial reports of "gangs of upcountry boys" migrating to the coast without passes (vipande) are numerous in the first decades of the 20th century. For an example See W.G. Parker to F.G. Hamilton, May 24, 1910, KNA.

⁴⁵ See Ranger, 1975:89-90.

associations, and Linda Giles' (1989) study of spirit possession cults explores ngoma as a form of female rebellion during this tumultuous period of coastal history.

This was a time when female members of elite households were bound by customary laws of feminine modesty (*purdah*), which severely limited their freedom of movement. Princess Salme of Zanzibar gives us this description of what *purdah* meant to upper-class women on the coast:

Only her father, her sons, brothers, uncles and nephews, and her slaves are allowed to see her. When she appears before a stranger, or has to speak to him, the law requires her to be shrouded and veiled; part of the face, the neck and chin, and above all, the ankles, must be completely covered...Poor people, who have but few or no slaves at all, are obliged, on this account alone, to go abroad more in the daylight, and consequently enjoy more liberty.⁴⁶

However free to move about, lower class women had no socio-economic or political mobility, save the rise in their status as mothers of freeborn children if they bore their master a child. To be sure, women of all classes shared exclusion from power-yielding institutions, including the mosque, which compelled women to join "unorthodox" ritual communities such as Sufi *tariqa*⁴⁷ and spirit possession cults.⁴⁸ These organizations gave women an outlet for their discontent, as this verse that Salima Jazaka composed for her male opponents, clearly illustrates:

⁴⁶Emily Ruete (Princess Salme), 1989:146.

⁴⁷Strobel suggests that coastal women were welcomed to join the Qadiriyya Sufi order, and did so in large numbers in the 1930s. See Strobel 1975:74.

⁴⁸See also Edward Alpers, 1984.

"Sabiri tumbo, wewe hunenani? Na Hamisi tongo, mvaa miwani.

Kipai cha jaha cha mtu usoni."

(Sabiri, with the fat belly, what are you saying? And blind Hamisi, with four eyes. The symbol of honor should be right in the middle of your forehead.)⁴⁹

Conclusion

Because I have focused my research on the ngomas of the past, this dissertation highlights the stories of elderly people, such as Salima Jazaka, who primarily describe the ngoma activities they participated in as adults. By reflecting briefly on a children's ngoma, performed in Lamu during Ramadan, I can acknowledge the contribution children have made to coastal performance, while providing another example that illustrates ngoma's propensity for sustaining continuity by providing people with a medium to *act out*, but not necessarily *bring about* change.

Of primary importance are the children's groups that performed throughout the coast during the month of Ramadan. Athmani Kitoka of Lamu established one such group after a visit to Dar es Salaam, where he saw young musicians singing on doorsteps to wake people up to eat before sunrise. Athmani's group became so popular that other youth bands formed to compete against them for the town's affection. These groups not only provided participants with a taste of what life as a performer was like, it provided them with a taste for an elite lifestyle usually off-limits. Athmani Kitoka explains:

⁴⁹Interview with Salima Jazaka of Lamu, 10.11.95.

When I went back to Lamu and Ramadan approached, I rounded up six children to help me. I was the singer and the drum player, and the children played the “vumi” (whistle), the “kiamba” (shaker), the “dafi” (tambourine), the “msondo” (drum), and the “vigongo” (sticks)--for keeping time. . .After the fourth day, the news spread, and I began receiving letters from different households throughout Lamu. We performed for everybody who sent a letter--until we had visited nearly half of Lamu town...We became so famous that we were even invited to perform at the most important people of Lamu’s homes. Sometimes they invited us to join them for “bembe”⁵⁰ and some even slaughtered a goat for us--just for fun!

The most important day of all was Idd, the end of Ramadan. The morning after the new moon was seen, we went around and performed the ngoma as usual. But on that day, people showered us with perfume and burned incense for us. Even if we had never been invited into a certain house before, we went in that day! And they had mats laid down for us, where we were served tea and everything. And we received fifty shillings here and twenty shillings there. We used to make a lot of money because those people wanted to out-do their peers.⁵¹

Athmani's experience reminds us that ngoma suspends the regular order of things and opens up spaces where the impossible can happen. By virtue of the disorder it creates, the month of Ramadan is a particularly good time in which to test ngoma's possibilities. Eating is done at night during Ramadan and many people rest during the day. This creates an "out of time" state of being that permeates every sphere of activity, and suspends ordinary social behavior. Muslims are expected to right their wrongs, make up with their enemies, and live as purely as humanly possible. Any good act committed during the Holy Month yields double the usual reward. Inviting strangers in for a meal is a good way to stock up on blessings (baraka). Thus, the success of Athmani's group may not be extraordinary at all, considering they were performing at an extraordinary time of year.

⁵⁰ A snack eaten between 8 - 10 pm. during Ramadan.

⁵¹ Interview with Athmani Kitoka of Lamu, 10.4.95

If Athmani had permanently enhanced his group's status in Lamu society, their ngoma activities would be recognized as having legitimate political leverage. Since this was not the case, Athmani's story serves as a good example of the way ngoma warps reality only as long as the performers sustain the anomaly with their music and dance. After the performance is over, everyone returns to their expected roles in their ordinary lives. The comfort, sense of permanence, and predictability that normalcy gives people usually overshadows their desire for dramatic change. When ngoma permanently alters relationships between members of society, as did Lelemama, Beni, and others discussed in the chapters that follow, then it must be considered an important vehicle for political transformation. Either way, ngoma gives people a chance to be who they wish they were, and act out lives they wish were theirs--if only while the music lasts.

CHAPTER 3

THE IMPACT OF SUFISM ON COASTAL RITUAL NGOMA

"Sainthood" represents the domestication of barakahh; "sainthood," the social organization of saints. The two complement each other when disciples, fortified with the barakahh of the saint, embrace their master's teaching in the charismatic collective setting of community practice and action. It is in relationship that the true mettle of barakahh is proved.

(Lamin Sanneh, 1997:115-116)

Introduction

This chapter explores the spiritual aspects of coastal performance by focusing on the sites and symbols that the diverse members of ngoma groups have enacted together. Some of the most important examples of ritual pluralism are Muslim performances called "maulidi"¹ in Swahili, from the Arabic term *maulid*, or birth. The birth date of the Prophet Muhammad is the 12th day of the sixth month of the Arabic lunar calendar, known in Arabic as *Rabbi-al-Awwal* and in Swahili as Mfungo Sita. While this day is especially significant, many Muslims on the east African coast commemorate the Prophet's birth throughout the entire month. Since the Wahhabi clan took over the leadership of Saudi Arabia, *maulid* is not officially celebrated there. It remains a favorite

¹For more information on the annual Maulidi ceremony in Lamu see Allen W. Boyd, 1981; A.H.M. El-Zein, 1974; Esmond B. Martin, 1968; Rebecca Gearhart, 1998.

religious holiday in many other parts of the Muslim world, however, including the coast of Kenya and Tanzania.

"Maulidi" also refers to praise poems that participants recite, sing, and chant in celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. East African coastal peoples have continuously integrated new cultural motifs into the maulidi ceremony since it was first performed there, probably in Mogadishu over six hundred years ago.² There are still several features of maulidi that are characteristic of the kind of religious devotion practiced by Sufis, or Islamic mystics, who were the people who established maulidi in east Africa.³

The founders of Maulidi in east Africa were members of the Alawiyya Sufi brotherhood (tariqa),⁴ who had migrated to the coast of Somalia from Yemen, formerly known as Hadhramaut, or Aden.⁵ The Alawiyya order was probably the first established Sufi brotherhood in east Africa. It was founded by Mohammed bin Ali bin Mohammed (d.1255) in the southern part of present-day Yemen. The founder's ancestor, Ziyad bin Labid al-Khazrali, was sent by the Prophet himself to the Hadhramaut city of Tarim, shortly before the Prophet's death in 630 A.D. Following Ziyad, Ahmed bin Isa al-

²Al-Mas'ud Id wrote an account entitled, Muruju'l Dhahab (The Golden Meadows) about Muslim activities on the east African coast in the tenth century. Later, in the early thirteenth century, an Arab geographer named Yakut described the Muslim polity of Pemba under a pair of sultans, who claimed Arab descent.

³Sufism refers to the mystical tradition of spirituality in Islam, which has its roots in the life and example of the Prophet Muhammad and the revelation of the Qur'an. For more information on Sufism and its origins see Michael Sells, 1996.

⁴*Tariq*, (pl. *turuq*) is the Arabic word for an organization, brotherhood, or order comprised of members who are devoted to exploring the mystical dimensions of Islamic worship.

⁵The earliest record of Hadhrami settlement in Mogadishu is the gravestone of Abu Barar bin Al-Hajj Yaqut al Hadhrami, which is dated 1358. See Freeman-Grenville and B.G. Martin, 1972. Over the next five hundred years, Hadhrami sharifs continued to immigrate to east Africa in increasing numbers. See Aydarus b. al-Sharif Ali al-Aydarus al Nadiri al-Alawi, 1954.

Muhajir, one of the Prophet's descendants, also migrated to Hadhramaut, where the sharif tradition, honoring direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, was inaugurated. The Alawiyya Sufi order was founded after Ahmed bin Isa al-Muhajir's death, and named after his grandson, Alawi bin Ubaidallah.⁶

One of the earliest glimpses of Hadhrami influence on the east African coast is provided in Rihla, written in the 1330s by the famous north African traveler, Ibn Battuta. The "Sultan" of Mogadishu welcomed Ibn Battuta with elaborate public ngoma performances, which demonstrated both his religious convictions and his enormous wealth. Upon arrival, the traveler was greeted by a grand procession of beautifully dressed musicians, as this excerpt from Rihla describes:

All of the people walked barefoot, and there were raised over head four canopies of colored silk and on the top of each canopy was the figure of a bird in gold. . . (The Sheikh) was dressed with a wrapper of silk and turbined with a large turbin. Before him drums and trumpets and pipes were played, the *amirs* of the soldiers were before and behind him, and the *qadi*, the *faqihs*, the *sharifs* were with him.⁷

Much of Muslim devotional life on the coast focused on the Prophet Muhammad because coastal sharifs like the Sultan of Mogadishu gleaned their religious prestige and authority from their claims to shared lineage with the Prophet. A biographer of Ibn Battuta, Ross Dunn, suggests that in the 14th century, the Hadhrami sharifs were among the wealthiest and spiritually influential members of the east African educated class (ulama). During Ibn Battuta's time, the sharifs made up the most literate Muslims on the

⁶See A.A. Ahmed, 1995:165.

⁷Ross Dunn, 1989:125-126.

coast, which is why they held the majority of Islamic posts as qadis (judges), faqihs (canon lawyers), mediators, miracle-workers, and Muslim teachers (walimu).

Ibn Battuta's account illustrates the flamboyance with which the Muslim elite attempted to rule the coast in the fourteenth century. It also provides a snap shot of the degree of social stratification they tolerated. The barefoot attendants in the Sultan's parade were probably servants and court slaves of African descent. This brief description does not offer many clues in this regard. It does testify to the Sultan's economic status, but tells us very little about the political influence he had over his subjects.⁸ Such displays might actually hint at the insecurity of the young Arab regime, surrounded as it was by strong African confederations unwilling to give up control of the coast or its hinterland. The eclectic mixture of instruments Ibn Battuta noticed in the Sultan's band suggests a mediated exchange between indigenous people and the newcomers. It would take a few more centuries for Arab leaders to fully understand that syncretism was the key to Islamic expansion and the rise of "civilization", known as "ustarabu" in Swahili.⁹

Sufism gradually fostered more of the kind of cultural collaboration Ibn Battuta's documents suggest. But this was certainly not true of coastal Christianity. In general, Portuguese priests were unsuccessful in their attempts to convert Africans to Catholicism. They believed this was due to the "Moorish" (Muslim) tendencies of the peoples of the

⁸For a slightly different interpretation of the *Rihla* see Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Noor Shariff, 1994.

⁹There is a paucity of literature on the origin of musical instruments played on the east African coast. While the local origin of various kinds of drums is certain, the history of the *zumari* is a bit more difficult to pin down. Alan Boyd's cursory study (1977) on the history of the *zumari* on the coast suggests that the instrument is African in origin. This concurs with my own research, as well as the general consensus among Kenya ethnomusicologists, who maintain that the *zumari* originates among the Digo and Giriama, two groups belonging to the confederation of African hinterland peoples known as the Mijikenda. See Boyd, 1977. H.N. Wanjala (1990) also includes reed pan pipes among the instruments native to the coast of east Africa.

coast. In fact, priests were barely tolerated by most communities, and in the worst scenarios, they were run out of town, or murdered, as was the case of a priest who was poisoned to death by the Muslim ruler of Pate in 1624.¹⁰

Portuguese sources suggest that the Mombasa uprising against the Portuguese in 1631 was led by an African named "Chingulia," who was inspired by the general hatred of Christian missionization among both Muslims and "heathens."¹¹ One account of that event made by Father Luis Coutinho, the Provincial Vicar of the Augustine Patriarch of Eastern Parts of India, provides clues to how religious life on the coast had evolved since Ibn Battuta's visit. The persuasiveness of the "Moors" suggests that coastal people had adopted many features of Islam. Yet, martyrdom and sainthood, prominent concepts in both Islam and Christianity, became part of coastal cosmology during this period, and it is difficult to trace the transmission of such notions to a single source. It is likely that coastal people's affiliation with Muslims and/or Christians had implications that extended beyond religious faith or practice, and reflected local political struggles. For example, Father Coutinho reported that Chingulia also murdered his own cousin, Dom Antonio of Malindi, who had converted to Christianity.¹² Family rivalries were played out between contenders who aligned themselves with local power brokers--be they Sufi sheikhs, traditional healers, or Catholic priests.

¹⁰See Freeman-Grenville, 1980:xxxv.

¹¹This excerpt from a sworn testimony made in 1632 by Father Coutinho, describes the murder of three Catholic priests and subsequent takeover of Fort Jesus in Mombasa by coastal Africans. See Freeman-Grenville, 1980:11.

¹²See Freeman-Grenville, 1980:13.

A History of Ritual Pluralism on the Coast

Here I insert my research on ritual pluralism on the east African coast into western academic discourse on the subject. I do so in order to provide evidence that religious syncretism is indeed a historical phenomenon that was recorded by numerous observers on the coast over time. I trace the development of shared ritual between Muslims and non-Muslims by referring to primary historical accounts, as well as secondary scholarship. Although this journey is a bit tedious, I believe readers will find it to be a good review of what we know about the complexity of coastal religious practice, and how we gained that knowledge.

The diversity of views on religious pluralism on the coast is exemplified by J. Spencer Trimingham (1980), who argues that Islam was "inflexible" and did not allow east Africans to integrate their religious traditions sufficiently enough to allow syncretization, and A.B.K. Kasozi (1995), who claims Islam's social principles were very similar to those already adhered to by many east African communities. Kasozi suggests Islam was "easy to grasp" by illiterate Africans because they were merely required to memorize the *shahada*, which proclaims, "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger." While Trimingham maintains that Islam and African religions were "parallel" and "dualistic", rarely if ever intersecting,¹³ Kasozi offers evidence that Africans inserted Islam into their lives very easily, by adopting practices that naturally

¹³See Trimingham, 1980:68.

meld with ritual activities they already engaged in.¹⁴ My own research concurs with Kasozi's findings, as I will further demonstrate below.

Both Donald O'Brien (1995) and Marcia Wright (1995) point to the economic factors that influenced the popularity of Islam on the coast of Tanganyika during the colonial era. O'Brien suggests that Sufi brotherhoods flourished in Tanganyika because of the pre-colonial trade networks that incorporated African traders into the Arabic social milieu, which included certain elements of Islamic practice.¹⁵ Wright contends that traders in coastal towns such as Bagamoyo increasingly used Sufi networks to strengthen their ties with important Muslim businessmen in the interior.¹⁶ In contrast to both O'Brien and Wright, I argue that the primary impetus for coastal peoples to share their religious practices was not economic advantage, but an increase in ritual efficacy. Evidence to support this claim is provided in the sections that follow.

Several other historical studies provide examples of the variety of socio-political contexts within which shared religious practice emerged on the east African coast. William McKay's (1975) analysis of the sixteenth century town of Vumba Kuu (Wasin) reveals a society that combined the ritual traditions of Shirazi immigrants from Persia, members of the Digo tribe of the Mijikenda, and peoples of the Segeju tribe, to form a unique political and religious system. At the top of the Vumba political structure was the "diwan," a figure whom McKay describes as, "the living embodiment of the various

¹⁴See A.B.K. Kasozi, 1995:224.

¹⁵See Donald O'Brien, 1995:203.

¹⁶See Marcia Wright, 1995:138. For a more comprehensive history of Bagamoyo and the Mrima coast of Tanganyika during the colonial period see Jonathon Glassman, 1995.

beliefs and institutions which differentiated the Vumba from other Swahili groups."¹⁷

McKay explains that the Vumba appropriated specific symbols from both Islam and indigenous African religions and created elaborate rituals of social reproduction unlike any of the societies that surrounded them.

For example, the diwanship was always filled by a person of sharif origin, who was enthroned in a fashion similar to the installation of a chief. Like other east African leaders, the diwan had custody over certain artifacts that symbolized his leadership, such as the "ngoma kuu," a large drum that was used only on ceremonial occasions attended by the diwan himself. In addition to the African elements of the diwan's regalia were objects associated with Islamic culture, such as the elaborately carved horns called "siwas", which constituted authority in many Arab and Shirazi (Persian) controlled towns along the coast.¹⁸

An additional function the diwan fulfilled among the Vumba was his role as medicine man, or "mganga" in Swahili. Common among coastal societies such as the Vumba was a local healer, who combined Islamic wizardry, based on the use of Qur'anic holy words, with African treatments to create effective remedies for both physiological and psychological disorders. McKay states that diwans were the most sought after consultants for caravan traders, fishermen and travelers who were about to set out on

¹⁷See William McKay, 1975:66.

¹⁸Trimingham (1980) suggests the siwa is of Persian origin, although many coastal clans that claim Arab ancestry have used it as a symbol of their authority. It must not be overlooked that while instruments such as the siwa and the ngoma kuu symbolized royal privilege, they were undoubtedly cared for and performed by members of the lower classes, as discussed in Chapter 2.

journeys, and for families who were about to marry off their sons or daughters.¹⁹ In this regard, the Vumba diwan held a position very much like other ritual experts such as Sufi sheikhs and traditional healers, all of whom attempted to channel supernatural power in order to care for increasingly diverse coastal communities.²⁰

Divination is perhaps the most prominent manifestation of ritual pluralism on the coast. In 1838, English merchant John Studdy Leigh wrote an entry in his Zanzibar diary that describes his meetings with several "fortune tellers," who used sand configurations, known as "ramli,"²¹ to predict the arrival of a ship that he was expecting.²² Although Islam prohibited divination, several techniques, including sand geomancy, stemmed from a scientifically grounded field of study from which astronomy and mathematics emerged. It was within this context that divination became part of a repertoire of esoteric knowledge that was passed on primarily by Sufi scholars. Among such techniques was a branch of necromancy that provided mystical interpretations by deciphering combinations of Arabic letters in different combinations. Another traced the patterns made by casting stones, sticks, shells, or beads to foretell the future.²³

¹⁹See McKay 1975:710-711.

²⁰Hyder Kindy's (1972) pre-colonial history of Mombasa outlines the complex political alliances that existed between the twelve "Swahili" tribes that lived on the island of Mombasa and the nine Mijikenda tribes that resided in the nearby hinterland from the seventeenth century. The twelve Mombasa tribes, known as the "Kimvita", were led by a sheikh referred to by the Arabic term *tamim*, who presided over a council of elders, or "wazee," a Swahili term.

²¹Ramli, in Swahili, or *raml* in Arabic, is one form of divination that was one of a number of different practices known in Arabic as *Ilm al-falak*, which combined knowledge from astronomy, writing and medicine. *Raml* more specifically comes from the Arabic word *al-khatt bi-raml*, which is the original name for the Arab practice of making geomantic figures in the sand. See E. Donzel, 1978.

²²See James Kirkman, 1980.

²³See Donzel 1978:71.

Randall Pouwels (1987) attributes the appearance of ramli on the coast to the Omani Arabs, who reportedly used a well-developed "magico-religious" science known in Arabic as *Ilm al-falak*.²⁴ Pouwels links the use of "falaki," as it is called in Swahili, to the introduction of Arabic medical treatments in east Africa by citing several of his informants' claims that many of their most popular healing strategies were of Arabic origin. Pouwels argues that because these treatments were based on the combination of herbal medicines imported from Arabia and written messages taken from the Qur'an, they were essentially Arabic in nature.

It is my understanding that waganga were selective about the Arabic treatments they incorporated. Like the Arabic regalia that coastal chiefs used for symbolic power, Arab medical prescriptions and conjuration techniques enhanced the assortment of healing strategies, and thus increased the status of many ritual experts on the coast. A medley of cures allowed healers to accommodate a diverse clientele that included Africans, Arabs, Afro-Arabs, Indians, and Europeans--all of whom sought the expertise of doctors who could successfully combine Muslim and non-Muslim healing rites.

The story of "The Battle of Shela" (1810 or 1812)²⁵ demonstrates the significant role that trained ritual experts, who successfully used their mystic abilities at crucial times, have played in coastal history.²⁶ Al-Amin Mazrui's (1995) account of the battle,

²⁴See Randall Pouwels, 1987:121.

²⁵Captain C.H. Stigand's version (1913), based on the narrative of The Pate Chronicle given by Mohammed bin Fumo Umar al-Nabahani, nicknamed "Bwana Kitini," a descendant of the Pate royal family, claims the Battle took place in 1812. The so-called Lamu Chronicle claims that the Battle took place in 1810. See Marina Tolmacheva's notes, 1993. See also Al-Amin Mazrui, 1995:67n.

²⁶See Mazrui, 1995:66-67.

based on Freeman-Grenville's recording of The Pate Chronicle, tells of a famous Muslim ritual expert named Mwenyi Shehi Ali, who is remembered for saving the island of Lamu from invasion by the Sultan of Pate's army. Mwenyi Ali is said to have written the "Attributes of God" on an egg (a Sufi symbol of life) and then broke it--sending the Mazrui-Nabhani soldiers to their deaths. Mwenyi Ali certainly may have been a Sufi mystic, summoned to provide spiritual intervention in a crisis situation. What is more significant is that many people in Lamu know this version of "The Battle of Shela" and believe it. As will be further illustrated below, Lamu town became a center of Sufi devotional practice in the mid nineteenth-century, and cultivated a milieu that fostered a greater communion with the Divine through spiritual innovations like the one Mwenyi Ali is said to have used to save Lamu from a Pate invasion.

By the 1860s and 70s, Sufi practice was popular enough to have been noticed by British Lieutenant Richard Burton. In Zanzibar, published in 1872, Burton describes Muslims who incorporated what he refers to as "superstitions" and "idolatries" into their ritual performances. Speaking of coastal Muslims, many of whom may have been members of the increasingly popular Sufi brotherhoods, Burton states, "They defend themselves against evil spirits (jinn) and bad men by Koranic versets, greegrees and various talismans, mostly bought from the pagan mganga, or medicine man."²⁷

Considering the ritual experimentation going on in coastal communities at the time, it is safe to assume that the medicine men Burton refers to were a diverse group of healers of

²⁷See Richard Burton, 1872:422. The word "talisman", or charm, is derived from the Arabic word "*watalasim*." The term amulet has the equivalent "hirizi" in Swahili. See Mazrui, 1995:66.

diverse religious background, who shared sacred paraphernalia and the expertise on how to use it.²⁸

Several studies that focus on the history of ritual performance on the Kenya coast shed light on where some of the non-Muslim rituals originated, and how they came to be incorporated into Muslim ceremonies. Strobel's (1978) study includes several examples of how coastal women combined African and Arabic symbols in their life cycle rituals. The interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims was most intimate in the homes of elite women, who spent most of their time in the company of their female house slaves. In a girl's initiation ceremony called unyago, introduced to coastal people by upcountry African slaves, the wakungwi (ritual experts) led their wari (initiates) in a sand divination procedure that included red, white and black granules.²⁹ The configurations were interpreted by the wakungwi, who passed on the meaning of the shapes to the wari by way of moral-embedded stories. As Strobel further explains, "a lizard reminds the initiate that . . . the secrets of unyago are to remain secrets. The spider is a lesson in good motherhood, for the spiders take excellent care of their children. (And) the moon reminds the mwari of her monthly menstruation."³⁰ In combination, the Bantu color triad and the spider--both popular African symbols, and the moon--an important Arabic icon,

²⁸Johann Krapf's mission diaries from the mid nineteenth century also contain compelling evidence that Muslims and non-Muslims continued to have a major impact on each others' ritual practices, and regularly collaborated in developing new forms of worship based on shared cosmological belief systems. See David Sperling, 1995.

²⁹Strobel writes of unyago as a coastal-wide phenomenon by citing references of the ritual by Carl Velten in Bagamoyo (Tanganyika) in the 1890s and Captain Stigand in Lamu (Kenya) in 1913. See Strobel, 1975:287.

³⁰See Strobel, 1975:292. For additional information on female initiation on the coast see Sarah Mirza and Margaret Strobel, 1984.

represented effective means by which upcountry female elders transformed coastal girls into women.

It is interesting to note that slave women, and not men, were more influential as experts of non-Muslim ritual practices on the coast. Princess Salme (Emily Ruete), who wrote down her memories of Zanzibar in the 1880s, describes several female "diviners" who were paid handsomely for their skills at foretelling the future and curing various illnesses among members of the Sultan's court.³¹ Much of this has to do with the intimate relationships, which formed between elite Muslim women and their female slaves, but that is not the whole answer. Carol Eastman's (1988) theory is that slave women were more likely to hold on to their Bantu cultural practices than were slave men, who were more readily trained by their masters in Islamic custom. If Eastman is correct, more African men than women would have officially converted to Islam.

Some evidence that supports this theory is T.O. Beidelman's study of nineteenth century caravans, which suggests that Muslim traders in Zanzibar often had their male slaves circumcised and made "nominal Muslims" so they could legally slaughter animals for Muslim consumption on the caravans. Elmer Danielson, a Lutheran missionary who worked among the Iramba in Ushola, Tanganyika from the 1920s, also makes the connection between male circumcision and Islamization. Danielson (1991) explains how Iramba boys of various religious background were considered Muslim if they were circumcised in Muslim circumcision camps, established throughout Ushola primarily for

³¹See Emily Ruete (Princess Salme), 1989:98-99.

that purpose. Danielson calls this “a sly way of Islamizing Iramba society,” but acknowledges that it was extremely effective.³² Both of these accounts underscore Eastman's hypothesis that coastal men converted to Islam in greater numbers than did women, who typically held on to the African religious practices their ancestors had passed down to them.

Like Strobel, David Parkin (1970) illustrates the important role that upcountry slaves played in the development of ritual pluralism on the coast. Parkin confirms that after 1873, when slavery was officially abolished on the Kenya coast, many freed and runaway slaves, who had worked on Arab plantations between Mombasa and Malindi were absorbed by Mijikenda villages in the hinterland. Parkin claims that the ex-slaves who settled among the Rabai peoples of that area were Muslims, whose religion became associated with their effective healing practices as well as their successful business relations with traders in the major towns along the coast.

Because the good fortune of the immigrant Rabai was associated with the Islamic charms, medicines and spirits they possessed, non-Muslim Mijikenda integrated many of these elements into their own religious ceremonies. While the Giriama did not convert to Islam in large number, they incorporated Islamic spirits into their possession cults and

integrated Islamic remedies into their healing practices.³³ In the case of the Giriama,

³²See Elmer Danielson, 1991:39.

³³Brantley (1981) discusses the group of Giriama Muslim converts known as "Mahaji," who settled near Takaungu town in the late nineteenth century and developed relations with the Mazrui there. Brantley's study corroborates my own research in the hinterland of Takaungu, where I interviewed Giriama Muslims with kin ties as well as socio-economic relationships with Mazrui families who lived in town.

Parkin reports, "(I)n some cases of spirit possession, divination, and cure, there is acceptance of the superior ritual efficacy of Islam among a people who have persistently rejected formal and widespread conversion to Islam."³⁴

By the early 1900s, most of the Mijikenda had incorporated certain Muslim customs into their ritual performances. Richard Skene's 1917 account of Malindi spirit possession rituals describes the use of Islamic symbols to exorcise Muslim spirits (pepo) of various kinds including "pepo ya kiarabu," "pepo ya kihabashi" and "pepo ya kisomali."³⁵ To appease Arabic spirits, a Muslim healer was called on to write the Attributes of God on a piece of paper, which was then dipped into a potion for the patient to drink. Both drums and tambourines called "*matwari*"³⁶ were used to provide rhythm for the patient, who danced with white flags on which the Qur'anic verse *Alyal il kursi* was written.³⁷ Patients possessed by Arab spirits wore Arabic-style white gowns (kanzus) and were perfumed with imported oils (udi). In addition, rose water (mirashi), incense (pefu), and sweet meat (halua) were shared by all of the participants at the end of the ceremony--typical Arabic cultural traditions.³⁸

From the mid nineteenth century Zanzibari women's spirit possession cults were characterized by their use of *matwari* because the instruments signified both a sacred

³⁴See Parkin, 1970:224-225.

³⁵For more information on spirit possession cults, dances, and rituals see Giles, 1989; Franken, 1987.

³⁶*Matwari* originate from the Arabian Peninsula, although the exact time and place they were brought to the coast is unknown. Abdalla Kirume, a Lamu elder, suggests that the tambourines that were brought from Arabia were larger than the *matwari* now used on the coast. Interviews with Abdalla Kirume of Lamu, 9.13.95; Omar Said Amin of Takaungu, 4.15.96; Mohammed Abdalla Mohammed Mazrui of Takaungu, 2.29.96; Mwalim Dini of Pate, 8.7.96.

³⁷See Skene, 1917:422.

³⁸See Skene, 1917:430-431.

medium of religious expression, as well as a break with the kinds of patriarchal Islamic practices that excluded them. Because the conservative Muslim ulama generally scorned Sufis for playing tambourines in the mosque during their weekly maulidi ceremonies, the instruments became symbols of spiritual rebellion. As Edward Alpers (1984) explains, "Hadhrami religious practices were both attractive and accessible to relatively disadvantaged or deprived Swahili who did not share willingly or were denied participation in the dominant cultural norms."³⁹ As will be illustrated below, it is the use of matwari and the popularization of Swahili praise poems to the Prophet, which made Sufi performances sites for the mediation of such diverse cultural metaphors.

Perhaps the most enlightening description of the way coastal peoples shared their symbols of ritual expression is the one provided by Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari, a Zaramo Muslim from Bagamoyo, who wrote Customs of the Swahili People in the 1890s.⁴⁰ In this text, Bakari tells of the popularity of both "wild-tree" amulets and Qur'an amulets among the late nineteenth century Swahili of the coast.⁴¹ Bakari describes the "wild-tree" amulets as being made with roots, honey, dried herbs, snake skin and lion whisker, depending upon the client's need. In addition, a variety of Qur'an amulets were available for purchase, which included various verses from the Qur'an, including *Yasin*, the most

³⁹See Edward Alpers, 1984:685.

⁴⁰In the 1890s, a German linguist named Dr. Carl Velten asked Mwinyi Bakari and his colleagues in the coastal town of Bagamoyo, Tanganyika to write an account of the traditions of the Swahili. The authors used Arabic script to write the Swahili version of the text and in 1903 Dr. Velten translated and published a version in German. James de Vere Allen used Bakari's original Swahili text to work on a revised edition of in both Swahili and English. After Allen's death, Noel King and other scholars continued the project and published The Customs of the Swahili People in 1981 in Allen's memory.

⁴¹See Allen, 1981:60-62.

popular. These verses were written on paper that was held over incense and then sewn into a leather pouch that was similar to those that encapsulated the roots in the "wild-tree" amulets.⁴² Noting the popularity of both kinds of charms among diverse populations, Bakari states, "Some country folk want Qur'an amulets and some town folk wild-tree amulets."⁴³ Bakari's account suggests that neither amulets that contained Qur'anic verse, nor amulets filled with organic and animal matter had more ritual efficacy than the other. Rather each offered different kinds of protection for different situations.

Combining Muslim and non-Muslim symbols is prevalent among the Bajuni people, who occupy Lamu and Kiunga districts further north along the coast. For several generations, Bajuni farmers have performed a series of agricultural rituals that feature both Islamic and African purification procedures. In her study of Lamu in the nineteenth century, Marguerite Ylvisaker (1979) mentions that cultivators who farmed the mainland opposite the Lamu archipelago regularly consulted specialists who had training in meteorology, astronomy, Islam and witchcraft.⁴⁴ Such specialists combined practices from each of these traditions in order to predict the proper time and diagnose techniques for cutting, clearing and burning the forest, as well as for planting and harvesting the crops. According to Ylvisaker, local Muslim scholars known as "walimu"⁴⁵ referred to

⁴²Lamin Sanneh devotes a section of his study on Islam in West Africa to the use of Islamic amulets. Sanneh demonstrates how Qur'anic phrases were used in both "sacramental invocations" and "magical incantations," as well as written down and inserted into amulets worn by pagan Bambara. See Sanneh, 1997:42-43.

⁴³See Allen, 1981:61.

⁴⁴See Marguerite Ylvisaker, 1979:46-50.

⁴⁵Today, "mwalim" is the most popular Swahili term used for "teacher." In the past, mwalim was associated specifically with an Islamic instructor, and was considered an expert in performing divination and healing rituals. See David Parkin, 1994. See also Sanneh, 1997: Ch. 2.

Islamic texts called "kitabu cha falaki " to prescribe the purification rites required of the farmers before they cultivated new areas of the forest inhabited by evil spirits.⁴⁶ My own research confirms this practice, which is still performed today among Bajuni farmers.

One of the primary rituals that the Bajuni perform on the eve of the annual burning is a sacrifice of goats and the distribution of the meat to volunteers who have come to participate. This offering, or "sadaka," as it is called in Islam, is discussed rather negatively by Ylvisaker, who suggests that the Bajuni's interpretation of giving alms demonstrates a degradation of so called "orthodox" Islamic practice.⁴⁷ In refutation of such criticism, which is typically made by Muslim fundamentalists, the Bajuni argue that Qur'anic recitation and prayer play a central role in the farming ceremonies they perform.⁴⁸ Bajuni forefathers developed the other procedures over time, and their prescriptions for combating evil spirits and attracting good ones continue to be effective means of protection.⁴⁹ The notion that certain rituals are inherently more sacred than others is simply illogical to Bajuni cultural experts, who have inherited a formula for success that, as far as they are concerned, has endured the test of time.⁵⁰

I video taped a group of farmers from Pate island in March of 1996, as they performed Vave the night before they set fire to a large tract of pre-cut brush. To insure

⁴⁶See Ylvisaker, 1979:48.

⁴⁷See Ylvisaker, 1979:48-49.

⁴⁸Interviews with Twahiru Ali Famau, Mohammed Kale, Mohammed Ali, and Hassan Mohammed of Lamu, 6.7.96; Tora Abushiri of Kiwayuu, 11.11.95; Vave performers in Vumbe, 3.25/26.96; Chief Tora of Kiunga, 10.22.95.

⁴⁹While the ritual practices of Bajuni farmers differ from other mainland peoples, such as the Mijikenda, Ylvisaker suggests that the use of religious practitioners (walimu) among coastal farmers extended from Lamu to Zanzibar. In his writings, Richard Burton made reference to a weather forecaster in Zanzibar in the 1870s, as did Sir John Gray in the 1950s. See Ylvisaker 1979:46-47.

⁵⁰For another example see Peter Lienhardt, 1980.

the fire's success, which was critical because the rains had already begun, the farmers slaughtered two goats for the evening feast and kept half a dozen chickens ready to be sacrificed the following day if deemed necessary. After the evening meal, Bajuni wordsmiths recited Vave in a clearing near the camp. They began each chapter with a litany of prayers to God before reenacting the legend itself, which foretells the perilous obstacles, which farmers are likely to encounter.

Vigorous dancing called Randa, characterized by humorous lyrics farmers compose on the spot as they move slowly around in a circle repeatedly interrupted the solemnity of the event. Below is an excerpt of the Vave tradition that a group of Bajuni elders recited by memory. More of this tradition is discussed in the following chapter.

Ni kweli tavuka na mzee. Tavuka na mzee mkalia mbee mshika sukani dira zimuele. Maana tavuka na mwalimu mwenye taalumu. Mshika uyamu jahazi ikee. Maana tavuka na yasini isi na sura za tini mzuka na jini asituvambaze. Maana tavuka na hitima io alotoka nyima na venye kusoma ni vanazuvoni. Hapo tavuka na chuvo imi cha randa ikevu. Mola apendalo litaiwelea. Maana tavuka na zikaratasi eh imi na buni nyeusi na zikaratasi kesho tutavuka nazo. Maana tavuka na kichunga imi kesho kundi na mpunga na venye kutunga ni hulilia moyo. Haye tavuka na kichunga eh, mvulana eh. Kundi na mpunga na venye kutunga hulilia moyo.

Its true, we need an elder to succeed at our task. We'll succeed with the help of an elder, who will be our compass and guide us on our way. We'll succeed with a trained mystic. We will follow the leadership of the one who guides our course. We will succeed by reciting chapter Yasin and chapter Tini. Then the ghosts and spirits will not come close to us. We will succeed when the scholars read prayers for us. We will succeed with the scriptures and the land will be well cleared. What God has planned will be. Tomorrow we will succeed with small chits of paper and black coffee beans. We will succeed with a basket full of rice while the poets hearts are aching. We will succeed with a basket full of rice, young man, while the poets' hearts are aching.⁵¹

⁵¹The Vave tradition was translated by Omari Shee and Munib Said El-Mafazy of Lamu.

The Consequence of Islamic Reform

Vave clearly illustrates the syncretic religious ideology that the Bajuni developed as they gradually fit Islam into their spiritual philosophy. As evidence of this less-than-orthodox religious model, Vave tends to cause discomfort among contemporary Bajunis, which is why it is rapidly fading from memory. For coastal residents in general, traditions like Vave represent the pagan beliefs of their unwanted ancestors, who have long been exchanged for more prestigious forefathers from Persia and/or Arabia.

Two historical factors are responsible for this. The first has to do with the objectives of Indirect Rule, which made it necessary for European Colonial officials and missionaries to accentuate the divisive influence of ethno-religious categories and stifle the organizing capacity of groups such as the Sufis. Between 1910 and 1912, British colonial officials in Kenya exempted all those who could prove their Arab ancestry from the Hut Tax, which reinforced a general notion among coastal peoples of Arab superiority and African inferiority, and forced people to define themselves as members of a distinct tribal group.⁵² As Francois Constantin further explains,

While presenting themselves as models of liberal democracy, European colonialists legalized racial discrimination. In various fields, (politics, administration, education, jobs, economic activities) colonial law operated codes of rights and obligations according to the color of Her Majesty's subjects, such indecent discrimination being later hardly corrected by the introduction of the more simple distinction of "natives" and "non-natives."⁵³

⁵²See Strobel, 1975:30.

⁵³See Francois Constantin, 1989:148

It is for this reason that evidence of Sufi ritual practice wanes during the colonial period and references to symbols that signify the shared belief systems that coastal peoples practiced become more cryptic. This excerpt, by British official C.W. Hobley (1929), represents a pervasive attitude among Europeans, who were hard pressed to fit the religious activities they observed among coastal Africans into the neatly defined categories they used to differentiate them racially:

They have been the despair of both Arabs and Portuguese, neither of whom appeared to be able to control them effectively. . . The persistent manner in which they have generally clung to their ancient beliefs, although they have for several hundred years been in contact with Islam, and during the last fifty years, with Christianity, is a remarkable fact and evidence of their tenacity of character, or the unreceptive nature of their minds.⁵⁴

The second factor has to do with the contentious terrain Sufism has occupied among orthodox Muslims. Although this struggle has been going on in other parts of the Islamic world for centuries, it initially manifested on the east African coast during the latter half of the nineteenth century, when some prominent Hadhrami sharifs decided that many Sufi practices were forms of forbidden "innovation," or *bida*. The seeds of this movement were planted during Seyyid Said's reign (1806 - 1856), when a highly literate style of Islam (*tasawwuf*) was mainstreamed by a famous Muslim theologian named Sheikh Uways bin Muhammad.⁵⁵ Uways' teachings influenced prominent scholars such

⁵⁴See C.W. Hobley, 1929:164-165.

⁵⁵For more information about Sheikh Uways see C. Ahmed, 1989; Said Samatar, 1992; B.G. Martin, 1969.

as Sheikh Muhyiddin al-Qahtany, who was appointed qadi for the Sultan of Zanzibar and further advanced the call for a purification of Sufi practice along the coast.⁵⁶

As promoters of a more sophisticated form of Islamic worship, Sheikh Muhyiddin and his peers devoted much of their time to reading and writing Arabic style poetry, which became the primary medium in which they expressed their new religious ideas.⁵⁷ Sheikh Muhyiddin's poems clearly articulated his objections to the various forms of meditative prayer, or *dhikr*,⁵⁸ which Sufis regularly engaged in. Ironically, he also composed rainmaking prayers not unlike those composed by non-Muslim Africans, who appealed to their ancestors for rain. The following poems by Sheikh Muhyiddin were originally composed in Swahili:

Study only the holy books: open them and read them
Show me in them those who have been cured by these,
the spirits who dance.
All these beliefs which people talk about are lies.
Those lies have no basis in truth, they are lies
fashioned by those who would deceive us.

It is for naught that you pay them, they have no craft.
They only perform their tricks, their patients do the curing.
And he whoever denies this is the one who walks in ignorance.

The first is the punga ngoma of Kitanga
and the second is the punga of Kitimiri.

⁵⁶See August Nimtz, 1980:57; See also Alpers, 1984:682.

⁵⁷On the east African coast, Arabic poems, as well as the Qur'an itself, were translated into Swahili by at least the mid eighteenth-century and probably much earlier. See Justo Lacunza-Balda, 1997; Mohammed Abdulaziz, 1979; Jan Knappert, 1970; B.G. Martin, 1976.

⁵⁸*Dhikr*, or remembrance, signifies one of the four forms of devotional prayer outlined in the Qur'an. This method is characterized by the repetition of Qur'anic phrases and the "most beautiful names of God," either aloud or in silence, while in a meditative state. See Sells, 1996:12-13.

Our God the Holy Spirit, Our God who has no partner,
 Thou art merciful, the Compassionate One, there is no doubt.
 Have mercy on the young and old who have difficulties enough.
 Thou knowest our plight in the sun without rain,
 The sun which is merciless through day and night.

Bring rain; drive away thirst and the blazing sun.
 Thou art omnipotent, Thou who wills life and death.
 Thou knowest our plight; Thou needest not be told.
 Of thine omnipotence there is no doubt;
 Thou needest only to say, "Let it be."
 Thou Incomparable One, O Mighty God. ⁵⁹

The first poem clearly denounces witchcraft, consulting waganga, and participating in spirit possession dances--all of which coastal Muslims engaged in regularly. The two most popular possession ngomas, Kitanga and Kitimiri,⁶⁰ were especially popular among coastal people, who overlapped Arabic and African ritual motifs as demonstrated above. In contrast to the sarcastic tone of the first poem, which was obviously written as a warning to fellow Muslims, Sheikh Muhyiddin's rain prayer appealed to people of various spiritual beliefs; indeed everyone interested in rituals that increased the chance of rainfall. During the late nineteenth century, mixed messages such as these, which seemed to signal a new intolerance for "unorthodox" Islam while continuing to extend the boundaries of religious practice, led to rifts among Sufi leaders themselves.

⁵⁹See Pouwels 1989:8.

⁶⁰See Pouwels 1989:10. The Kitimiri spirit possession cult is mentioned in several nineteenth century sources. It is interesting to compare Skene's 1917 account of the "kiarabu ngoma" in Malindi with French Missionary Anton Horner's detailed description of the Kitimiri exorcism in Zanzibar of the 1860s. Many of the same ritualized objects are used in the Kitimiri and Kiarabu exorcisms: tambourines, incense, rose water, sandalwood, Arabic clothing and turbans. Also see Bakari's 1890 description of the "Qitimiri Spirit" in Allen, 1981:109-110.

At first glance, it seems unlikely that new adherents would have been enticed to join the Sufi tariqas during a reform movement that scorned the kinds of practices they were already engaged in. Yet, there was a surge in popularity among the Sufi brotherhoods during this period. Why? The answer lies in the dual-strategy that leaders such as Sheikh Muhyiddin employed to purify, as well as expand Sufi brotherhoods.

To accomplish these seemingly contradictory objectives, Sufi leaders recruited African initiates from the interior of east Africa, where Islam had not yet taken hold. Many of the sheikhs who ventured into these proselytizing roles were African students of Sheikh Uways, who were the first of the high-level African Muslims to be indoctrinated as sheikhs. One of these, Sheikh Abdalla Mjana Khayri, succeeded in establishing so called “Uwaysiyya” branches of the Qadiriyya sufi order as far away as Zaire.⁶¹ The African sheikhs were committed to expanding Islam to include people who had not been considered convertible by Muslim ulama in the past.⁶² It was because of the rapid expansion of Islam in the east African interior that even under a period of Islamic reform, the Africanization of the Sufi brotherhoods occurred.⁶³

In addition to the work done in the interior to make Islam more popular, Sufis continued to fight against the elitism that was so pervasive among the conservative Muslim ulama in many coastal towns. In 1886, a revolutionary named Sayyid Muhammed Ma’ruf bin Sheikh (d.1905) fled his home in the Comoro islands and

⁶¹See Nimitz, 1980:58.

⁶²Johnson's (1884) account describes the inroads Muslim scholars were making along well-traveled caravan routes in Tanganyika.

⁶³Sufi spirituality did not only attract non-Muslims, but also brought many orthodox Muslims into its fold. Collette le Cour Grandmaison's (1989) analysis of the al-Harthy Arabs, who migrated to east Africa from Oman, suggests that several orthodox members converted to Sunni Islam and joined Sufi brotherhoods. Pouwels (1987) also links the widespread popularity of Sufism to the Shafii-led tariqas. See Pouwels 1987:119-120. See also Kasozi, 1986.

inspired a revival of the Shadihiliyya tariqa in Zanzibar. "Muhammad Ma'ruf," as he was commonly known, broke away from the sharifian Alawiyya brotherhood of his birth after becoming disillusioned with its repressive ideology. Like some of the other visionaries of the time, Ma'ruf was searching for an outwardly spiritual and activist religious experience that would extend beyond the scope of most Muslim scholars and their elite patrons. Ma'ruf attracted Muslims and non-Muslims to the Shadihiliyya order in east Africa by breaking down some of the rigid barriers that had divided coastal people into categories of civilized (waarabu) and pagan (kafiri).⁶⁴

B.G. Martin (1976) mentions a letter written by the daughter of one of Ma'ruf's close friends, which describes Ma'ruf's dynamic personality as the primary impetus for the swell of the Shadihiliyya order in such a relatively short time.⁶⁵ This illustrates that the popularity of one Sufi brotherhood or another was often dependent upon the charisma of the leader and his ability to gain respect among the masses. Many Sufi sheikhs were Africans whose mastery of Arabic texts elevated them above their illiterate followers. In a society rife with class consciousness, racial discrimination and intellectual and religious elitism,⁶⁶ it was only the most dedicated of scholars who resisted taking advantage of the immediate social mobility their "ijaza" certificate⁶⁷ provided them. As Mtoro Mwinyi

⁶⁴Several scholars have written about the distinction coastal peoples have made between Arabs and Arabized groups, and slaves. See Constantin, 1989; Pouwels, 1987; Strobel, 1979; Cooper, 1981; Eastman, 1988; Swartz, 1979.

⁶⁵See Martin, 1976:156.

⁶⁶See Constantin, 1989; Caplan, 1975; Cooper, 1987; and Salim, 1976.

⁶⁷There were actually 2 types of ijaza for all Sufi brotherhoods: ijaza irada - the license for the murid (young scholar), and the ijaza t-tabarruk, which was the permission to access the baraka (blessings) of the sheikh. See Trimmingham 1980:99.

Bakari explains, during the late nineteenth century, Islam was associated with high culture and civilization:

The Swahili are by custom much attached to any person who knows the Qur'an and elimu (education) . . . Every father is glad that a learned person should marry his daughter, even if he is poor. If a man comes from a long distance to live in a place as a teacher and says, "I am a teacher, I know the Qur'an and elimu", but the people do not know him, they set him questions; and if he answers them, he is accepted as a genuine teacher.⁶⁸

To summarize, the spread of Sufism in east Africa was largely due to a handful of sheikhs who strove to Africanize Islam. Several of these scholars, who seem to have promulgated the true Sufi spirit of devotional collaboration, have already been mentioned above. The following section will focus on the life of another Sufi scholar named Sayyid Saleh bin Alawi Jamal al-Layl, or "Habib Saleh" ("Beloved Saleh") as he is commonly known. While several authors have discussed Saleh's life,⁶⁹ this chapter would not be complete without highlighting the important contributions he made to the formation of a more unified coastal society through the use of ritual ngoma.

Habib Saleh and the Rise of Sufi Ngoma

Every year performers from the northern coast of Kenya gather in Lamu town to sustain a tradition that offers a hint of the spectacular ngoma competitions that were once central to everyday life. They come to Lamu today, as their ancestors have for over a

⁶⁸See Allen, 1981:32.

⁶⁹For more information on Habib Saleh and his family see El-Zein, 1974; Abdulaziz, 1995; Pouwels, 1989; Constantin, 1988.

century, to commemorate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. Part of this maulidi event includes a four-day dance competition that takes place on the grounds of the Riyadhha mosque, next to the former home of Lamu's patron saint Habib Saleh. Male dancers from villages in the Lamu archipelago and the mainland perform meditative ngomas featuring Swahili praise poems that honor the life of the Prophet. One of the dances, "**Rama maulidi**," emphasizes the important connection between Islamic religious expression and competitive African ngoma among coastal people.

The union of maulidi praise poetry and African dance is the result of an ideological merger between African ngoma experts and Muslim religious leaders who practiced Sufism. From at least the fourteenth century,⁷⁰ Sufi scholars migrated from a region in Southern Yemen called Hadhramaut and settled in trade centers along the east African coast.⁷¹ Unlike orthodox Muslim leaders, who prohibited devotional activities that induced religious ecstasy, Sufi sheikhs regularly led their followers in meditative chanting called "**dhikri**"⁷² to the rhythms of drum-like tambourines, or *matwari*. The transcendental states that the Sufis achieved during maulidi recitations were similar to those experienced during spirit-possession ngomas performed by coastal Africans; both facilitated communication with supernatural forces.⁷³ The pertinent parallels between

⁷⁰ Mark Horton's excavations at Shanga, in the Lamu archipelago, have revealed a timber mosque dating to the ninth century. Permanent Arab settlement on the coast probably did not take place for another three hundred years or so. See Horton, 1983.

⁷¹ See Freeman-Grenville and Martin, 1972. See also Aydarus al-Alawi, 1954.

⁷² Opponents of *dhikr* included Ibn Waddah, whose text, *Kitab al-Bida*, charges that chanting verses from the Qur'an is prohibited in the oral tradition, *hawadit*, which describes the acts and sayings of the Prophet. See Francesca Declich, 1995.

⁷³ Sufis have generally considered mystical experience a primary component of Islamic worship and argue that *dhikr* complies with rules governing the recitation of Qur'anic verse, or *tajwid*.

these activities led to a gradual expansion of Sufi organizations in east Africa, peaking during the early twentieth century, when charismatic leaders such as Habib Saleh (1844 - 1935) and Sheikh Uways (1847-1909) promoted ritual ngoma competitions that attracted thousands of new Muslim followers.⁷⁴

Charismatic individuals are often attributed with the rise of Sufi practice in Africa.⁷⁵ Nowhere is this more apparent than in Lamu, where maulidi ngoma is rarely mentioned without reference to Habib Saleh. Seyyid Saleh b. Alawi b. Abdallah Jamal al-Layl immigrated to Lamu from the Comoro Islands in the 1870s,⁷⁶ when he was about thirty years old. After his arrival, Saleh's paternal uncle⁷⁷ helped initiate him to the elite social circle in which well established Arab immigrants belonged. In addition to the prestige Habib Saleh enjoyed as an Arab, the Jamal al-Layl clan traced their ancestry back to the Prophet Muhammad himself. This provided the family with an elevated religious status that coastal people acknowledge through the use of honorary titles such as "sharif", "seyyid" and "mwenye."

⁷⁴ Trimingham (1980) briefly describes how the Yao divided themselves into two sects of Qadiriyya members, those who performed dhikri and those who meditated more quietly. Trimingham cites J.N.D. Anderson, Islamic Law in Africa, 1954.

⁷⁵ See selections in O'Brien and C. Coulon, 1988.

⁷⁶ El-Zein (1974) puts Habib Saleh's arrival in Lamu sometime in 1866, which is premature according to my informants' calculations. Peter Lienhardt (1959) suggests it was 1885, which is a bit too late. According to the ages of Saleh's students, I propose that Habib Saleh established himself in Lamu in the mid 1870s. Farsy's account (see Pouwels, 1989) claims that he was born in 1844 and died in 1935, this date is more reasonable.

⁷⁷ Sayyid Ali b. Abdallah b. Hasan Jamal al-Layl (1825 - 1915) is one of a long line of the Jamal al-Layl clan of sharifs to immigrate to Lamu from the Comoro Islands. He is remembered in Lamu for his knowledge of Islamic medicine and for integrating the works of sufi philosophers such as Abu Hamid Mohammed al-Ghazzali (1058-1082) into the Islamic curricula in Lamu. See Pouwels, 1989:68.

To the chagrin of his uncle and his Islamic teachers,⁷⁸ Saleh was not impressed with the hierarchical structure that situated him in the upper echelons of Lamu society. Nor was he willing to ignore the social injustices upon which it was based. That is why, after years of religious training in Lamu, Saleh decided to live with the coconut farmers (wagema) on the edge of town, where he hoped to establish an Islamic community founded on equality rather than elitism.

One of the many things that distinguished Saleh from the Lamu ulama was his refusal to prohibit Africans from performing their traditional dances.⁷⁹ In fact, Saleh regularly attended the ngoma competitions that the wagema held on Thursday evenings.⁸⁰ Each of the ngoma groups was named after a residentially defined moiety in Lamu. One was called "Makafuni" and the other was called "Maziwani." Among the wagema's many dances, Saleh favored Uta, a rainmaking ngoma characterized by full-length leg rattles (misewe) made of coconut raffia and dried seeds.

This dance plays a central role in the annual Maulidi celebration in Lamu, when descendants of Habib Saleh's original followers perform Uta in front of the mud house that served as his residence until he died in 1935. One of Saleh's teachers, "Mwenye Mansabu", gave him the plot of land on which he and the wagema built the house. Saleh eventually named the structure Ribat ar-Riyadha; *ribat* being a place for the practice of

⁷⁸ Among Saleh's teachers were: Sayyid Mansab, Sheikh Abdalla Bakathir and Sayyid Ahmad b. Sumayt. See Pouwels, 1989:70.

⁷⁹ Another distinguishing characteristic was Saleh's medical skills, which he learned from his uncle in Lamu.

⁸⁰ Interviews with "Matangasi" of Lamu, 9.29.95; Ali Jabu of Lamu, 10.26.95; Omar Jabu Mwakatwa ("Kangoroma") of Lamu, 10.21.95.

riyadha, or Sufi worship. Today it stands in the shadow of the palatial mosque of the same name, now operated by Saleh's descendants.

The contrasts between Uta and the other ngomas that are performed during the Lamu maulidi celebration are quite stark. First of all, Uta dancers prefer leg rattles and a one-stringed gourd instrument called a "zeze" to drums. Like the dance **Goma**, Uta features the use of walking canes, but rather than resting them on their shoulders as Goma performers do, Uta dancers lean on the canes as they pound out rhythms with their feet. Uta is further distinguished by the leader's **rhino-skin shield** (ngao), which constitutes a symbol of traditional authority among the wagama. Perhaps the most obvious contrast is that between the **Goma dancers' shimmering white robes (kanzus)** and **hand-embroidered caps (kofias)**, and the work rags Uta dancers wear to reflect their slave heritage.⁸¹

An element the two dances have in common is the use of religious praise poetry, which the wagama incorporated as they converted to Islam. Their knowledge of this poetry seems to have bridged the gap between the wagama and the wealthy plantation owners from Lamu town, who eventually joined Saleh in watching their slaves dance. This excerpt from an interview with Ali, the son of Jabu, a well-known Uta leader from Lamu, explains how the wagama ultimately benefited from their masters' admiration of their ngomas:

⁸¹Clothing has been an important status marker on the coast for centuries. For more information see Shun'ya Hino, 1968.

A: (I)f today is Thursday, then tomorrow the coconut tappers (wagema) would not work at all. So they would perform Uta the whole nightlong. And when they went to the mosque the next day, the freemen / elite (waungwana) were there.

Q: The wagema performed Uta for the waungwana at the mosque?

A: They waited until the Friday prayers were over (around 1:00 pm). You see, the wagema met there on Friday--maybe fifty or sixty of them, and everyone sat with his leg rattles and his stick. And after the prayers, people would leave and the wagema would begin performing the ngoma. "Allahuwe, AllahuAllah, Allahuwe, AllahuAllah, AllahuAllah, Manswali Allah" and then, " eeh Alamsala, eeh Alamsala, Salam Aleikum, eeh Alamsala." They would go to the houses of their bosses to perform the ngoma and they were given gifts. One would go to his boss's place and he would be given something, and another would go to his boss's and be given something, and so on...The deadline was the time of the Isha prayers (around 7:30 pm) They went from house to house until the Isha prayer was called. Because in the past, the town belonged to the waungwana. And after the Isha prayers everyone went back to the farms singing, "Horiaeh," "Horiaeh." They went to the farms to compete, Makafuni against Maziwani.⁸²

Ali clearly outlines the stratified nature of Lamu society, which was basically divided into two classes of people: slaves, or "watwana" and freeborn "owners" of the town, or "waungwana."⁸³ It is not surprising that slaves incorporated Islamic verses that appealed to their masters' religious sentiments. Many of the Uta songs that Lamu elders such as Ali Jabu, Kangaroma, Ba Omari, Bakamoro, Mohammed Bwana and others remember include Muslim prayers. The socio-economic benefits that the wagema gained by demonstrating their ability to recite Islamic verse went beyond the weekly alms they received from their masters. Religious training provided them with a chance to become members of Lamu society, a fact that Habib Saleh was keenly aware of. By introducing the wagema to Islamic worship, Saleh negotiated that process. The entertainment value of

⁸²Interview with Ali Jabu of Lamu, 10.26.95.

⁸³By "stratified" I also mean by gender, as well as by class, religion and ethnicity. Although women played significant roles in the ngoma groups, few like to admit that they participated. Since the 1970s, ngoma groups have been condemned as sacrilegious, and Muslim women are generally discouraged from participating in ngoma except for special occasions such as weddings.

the wagama's ngomas seems to have contributed to Saleh's success at bridging the cultural gaps between Lamu's diverse population.

When Habib Saleh was establishing his ribat among the wagama, there were several well-known Islamic texts, including the Qur'an itself, that had been translated from Arabic to Swahili. In addition to these, original verses composed by Lamu scholars such as Mansabu were widely used in devotional activities throughout the east African coast.⁸⁴ Predominantly illiterate coconut farmers learned to memorize the most popular verses (*qasidas*) in order to participate in local Muslim rituals. One of the most widely used of those was a thirteenth century religious poem, *Qasida Ummul qura*, that had been translated from Arabic into Swahili by Seyyid Aidarus in 1792. A portion of the Swahili version, known as "**Hamziyya**," is still recited regularly today, and illustrates the emphasis coastal Muslims put on praising the Prophet Muhammad:

Hali wakwlaye kukwelakwe michumi wote uwingo usioyo kulechewa ni mja sama.
Walimithili swifa zako kuliko wachu, jamai yaliyo-mathili ndani nuhuma.
Uwe ndio tala ya fadhila na mayonjea nuru kazilawi ila mwako nuruni njema.

How could all the other prophets ascend like he did,
All the Heavens without obstacles placed on the way.
You are the light of everything magnificent!
No light shines forth save from your brilliant source.⁸⁵

⁸⁴A female poet named Namwenye wa Saidi Amini also composed maulidi verses that were very popular on the coast in the nineteenth century. Interviews with Abdalla Kirume of Lamu, 9.13.95; Mohammed Bwana of Lamu, 8.22.95. For a more comprehensive analysis of the contemporary impact of Swahili religious poetry see Balda, 1993.

⁸⁵See Abdulaziz, 1995:150.

Since many "big men" (mabwana makubwa) from the coast were known as descendants of the Prophet, these poems were particularly meaningful to them and their followers. Moreover, the verses were not unlike praise poems local Africans sang for their own deceased relatives. The integration of Swahili praise poems into African dance signifies an historical process that begins to explain both African Islamization and the maintenance of competitive ngomas on the coast.

Rama Origins

Of the many ritual ngomas Muslims in the Lamu archipelago have performed over time, Rama maulidi is one of the few that remains popular today. Its function as a form of religious expression and as a competitive ngoma is an indication of the multi-layered meaning it has had for the people who have performed it. Lamu elders⁸⁶ attribute the establishment of Rama to a member of one of the town's most esteemed clans, the al-Mahdali.⁸⁷ Others claim it originated from the slave plantations on the mainland opposite Lamu Island.⁸⁸ This discrepancy is not as puzzling as it seems when considering that Uta was a rain-making dance performed by slaves before Habib Saleh promoted it as a form of religious entertainment for the Lamu elite. A similar process explains the role of

⁸⁶Interviews with Mzee Talo of Lamu, 8.16.95; Abdalla Mohammed Kirume of Lamu, 9.13.95; Bakamoro of Lamu, 7.23.96; Mohammed Bwana of Lamu, 8.22.95.

⁸⁷The Mahdali clan was well known for its connection to other important families of sharifs, including the late thirteenth century Abu'l Mawahib dynasty of Kilwa. See Pouwels, 1987:138.

⁸⁸See El-Zein, 1974. In addition, Trimingham (1980) describes a *dhikr* that members of the Salihyya-Rashidiyya order, founded by Mohammed Salih (1845-1916), performed in Somalia that sounds almost identical to Rama maulidi. Apparently this *dhikr* included two lines of performers who moved their heads back and forth over their left and right shoulders--basic Rama maulidi movements. See Trimingham, 1980:103.

Mwenye Abdalla Zubayiri, who elevated Rama to the rank of a Sufi ngoma, and attracted Muslims and non-Muslims alike to partake in it.

Zubayiri's original Rama group is said to have comprised hundreds of members--both freeborn and slave.⁸⁹ Eventually the group split along the same residential lines that divided the town's other ngoma organizations. This was a symptom of the ideological significance that residential location had in the identity-formation of Lamu people. Ngoma competition has been an important expression of neighborhood rivalries, which were originally based on clan disputes and gradually took on broader connotations. Besides competitive ngoma, deep-seeded animosity among Lamu residents was settled through Swahili poetry and wordsmith competitions, **board game matches**, **donkey races**, sailing regattas, as well as an occasional sword duel.⁹⁰ Prominent clan leaders, religious figures, and wealthy businessmen often sponsored these contests, and made them official by inviting honored guests to judge the winners. The annual Maulidi celebration in Lamu offers a modern sample of the kinds of activities Lamu residents have conjured up in order to test themselves against their neighbors.

Mwalim Bajuri and Mwalim Jumaani emerged as the leaders of the two factions that formed after disputes broke out among the members of Zubayiri's Rama group. In

⁸⁹Interviews with Mohammad Ali Salim of Takaungu, 3.1.96; Mohammad Abdallah Mohammad Mazrui of Takaungu, 3.30.96; Omar Said Amin of Takaungu, 4.15.96; Abdallah Mohammed Kirume of Lamu, 9.13.95; Bakamoro of Lamu, 7.23.96.

⁹⁰Mzee Bakamoro explains that the width of Lamu's narrow passages were measured according to the arm span of a single swordsman and his weapon. Many of the first Arab clan leaders who settled in Lamu established neighborhoods that separated the town into clan-based moieties. The stone houses of elite clan members were connected through interior passage ways, which allowed women to visit each other without having to go outdoors. Interview with Bakamoro of Lamu, 7.23.96.

spite of their slave heritage, both received strong support from members of the Lamu elite, and went on to successfully challenge the status quo. According to El-Zein (1974), Bajuri and Jumaani were the first to incorporate tambourines (*matwari*) into the maulidi rituals in Lamu. This was considered a highly controversial innovation (*bida*) to say the least. The use of tambourines in Islamic ceremonies was considered unlawful (*haram*) among orthodox members of the Lamu ulama, who pointed out that the use of musical instruments was never officially condoned by the Prophet or his followers.

On the other hand, newly converted worshippers believed the tambourines helped them attain spiritual ecstasy, and therefore Sufi masters such as Habib Saleh encouraged their use. With the support of Mansabu and Ali bin Muhammed al-Habashi, the head (*Qutb*) of the Alawiyya Sufi order, Saleh argued that the tambourines sparked interest among non-Muslims, and facilitated a much-desired spiritual link between man and God. Other advocates suggested that the Prophet himself was overjoyed when women welcomed him with tambourines as he entered the city of Medina. They claimed that nowhere in the *Sunna*⁹¹ does it suggest that the Prophet condemned people for their use of music in religious expression.

Nevertheless, those who rejected Saleh's adamant support of Rama and his desire to integrate slaves and newcomers into Lamu society, used the debate over the use of tambourines to fuel opposition against him. The following is a portion of the oral

⁹¹The *Sunna* is considered Apostolic practice, edict or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. It is one of the sources of Islamic law, or *sharia*.

tradition that tells of Habib Saleh's struggles. Here it is told by a Lamu elder named "Bakamoro," who remembers Saleh from his childhood:

There was a great dispute and the local elite rounded up people to go and fight Habib Saleh. They asked him, "If shouting in the mosque is not allowed, how can playing tambourines be allowed?" Mwenye Mansabu told them to go and talk to Habib Saleh instead of fighting him. He explained that Habib Saleh was a visitor who had come to study, and asked them why they wanted to fight him. He told them that they were making a big mistake. But they convinced Mwenye Mansabu to go and tell Habib Saleh not to allow the tambourines.

So he told Habib Saleh, "People in the town are screaming about your playing tambourines in the mosque." Habib Saleh replied, "Mwenye Mansabu, my teacher, I know nothing about the problem with tambourines. All I know is that Ali Habashi had a problem performing *maulid* in Hadhramaut, but he told me to perform it here. He told me that it should carry on forever and ever. If there is a problem, then the people should write a letter of complaint to Ali Habashi--not to me. How can I solve the problem? I just came here to study with you. Its not good manners for me to ask Ali Habashi for favors."

Mwenye Mansabu thought about it and finally replied, "I don't know what to do. The scholars should send a letter to Ali Habashi themselves asking him why he allowed the tambourines in the mosque. Even I am surprised to see tambourines being played. How should this problem be solved?"

Mwenye Mansabu kept quiet for awhile and finally allowed Habib Saleh to carry on playing the tambourines . . . And so it is because Habib Saleh was strong willed and continued to perform Maulidi the way he knew was best that Mwenye Mansabu gave him the land on which he built the Riyadha mosque.⁹²

This commonly told legend is held dearest to those who had the most to gain from Habib Saleh's endeavors. It seems to encompass all of the obstacles that people of slave heritage, humble birth, pagan upbringing, and immigrant status have had to overcome in order to carve out legitimate spaces for themselves in east African coastal communities such as Lamu. Membership in Saleh's Sufi brotherhood extended the criteria for who belonged in Lamu, and transcended ordinary social barriers that kept outsiders out. Rama

⁹²Interview with Bakamoro of Lamu, 7.23.96.

maulidi is one of the rituals that mediated that process, which is why it serves as an important source of redemption for individuals, as well as the Lamu community as a whole.

Rama as Nadhiri

The Swahili word "rama" denotes the rocking motion that signifies it as a form of Sufi meditation, or dhikri. During a **Rama performance**, participants form two lines that face each other, one comprised of song leaders and tambourine players, and the other of regular members of the group. Male guests and observers form a third row facing the leaders, and veiled female spectators sing along from the shadows. Scrap-cloth streamers (zibendera) hanging above, and large woven mats (majamvi) demarcate the performance space itself below. In the center sits the "kinara," a colorful miniature mosque filled with freshly cut jasmine flowers. The bright light of kerosene lanterns cuts through a haze of burning incense, transforming the men in their white robes into celestial-looking forms.

The host of the event paces back and forth between the rows of performers, replenishing bowls of incense (udi) and sprinkling his guests with rose water (mirashi). The host's role is to encourage them to make spiritual connections with God, whereby elevating the entire performance to a higher level of sanctity. Hosting a Rama ceremony is a popular way for people in Lamu to compensate God when they receive the things they have prayed for, such as the birth of a healthy child, a successful wedding, or good returns on a business transaction. Such a pact with God for Divine intervention is called

"nadhiri," and recipients of God's blessings (baraka) are obligated to repay God by performing a religious act.

There are several characteristics that make Rama maulidi a particularly worthy way to compensate God. First of all, people believe that reciting maulidi praise poems is a holy deed, illustrated in the use of Qur'anic verse and the application of the sacred substances mirashi and udi throughout the performance. At its best, a Rama performance provides participants with an entry-point into the mystical dimensions of the unseen world, and an avenue toward the material things they require in the tangible world. Attaining baraka seems to encompass each of these goals, and is the objective shared by most Rama performers today. When I asked a Rama group member in Lamu why he hosts a Rama ceremony at his house every year, he explained:

Because it is a tradition (uradi), its *sunna* (the recordings of the Prophet's actions). Maulidi is *sunna*, and its full of blessings (thawabu) from God. First of all, Maulidi contains verses from the Qur'an, and when you read them, you receive ten blessings for each word. We also use the Qur'an to send prayers to our ancestors. During the Maulidi ceremony, when you say "Praise be to Him", you receive ten blessings. When you recite it ten times, you get one hundred blessings. And for one hundred times, you get one thousand blessings. So I have kept it as a tradition.⁹³

Because Rama performances are usually public affairs, the hosts' baraka is shared by the whole neighborhood. In this way, Rama is similar to other cleansing rituals, such as circulating the bull (kuzingusha ng'ombe) around town,⁹⁴ which purge the community

⁹³Interview with Sharif Abdul Rehman al-Basakut of Lamu, 10.6.95.

⁹⁴For a detailed description of the Lamu version of this elaborate ceremony see El-Zein, 1974. Interviews with Mahfudh Mohammed Basharahil of Mamburi, 4.26.96; Mebaraka Juma and Kibwana Said of Takaungu, 4.15.96.

of the sins that have caused their recent misfortunes. Rama maulidi can provide deliverance if God accepts the ceremony as a legitimate medium of purification. Individuals participate in Rama with the hope that their performance will appease God, their ancestors, and the spirits who have the ability to improve their lives.

Rama as Competitive Ngoma

Unlike other competitive ngomas in Lamu, which focused on artistic creativity, lyrical dexterity, physical stamina, and costumes and props, Rama was considered a ritual activity judged according to the level of spiritual intensity a group was able to maintain throughout a performance. Other criteria included: the uniformity of dress, requiring each performer to wear a long white robe (*kanzu*) and a hand-embroidered white cap (*kofia*); the uniformity of motion, requiring each performer to memorize the movements and be able to take tempo cues from the tambourine rhythms; the memorization of the seven verses and the chorus; the emotion with which the performers executed various movements; the volume with which the performers sang; the enthusiasm with which the tambourine players played; and the group's ability to inspire spectators to become religiously intoxicated by the performance.⁹⁵

It was in the interest of the Lamu elite to know which Rama group was considered best able to meet these standards at any given time. The most reputable group was commissioned to perform for private performances the waungwana held on special

⁹⁵In addition to these "official standards," there are separate criteria used to evaluate the hospitality provided by the host of a private Rama Maulidi, commissioned for personal occasions such as weddings and circumcision ceremonies.

occasions, such as commemorating a deceased relative or officially opening a new house.⁹⁶ Whenever one Rama group was selected over another to perform for such an event, their status rose above their rivals'. Rama groups fell in and out of fashion, as leadership changed and members transferred their allegiances to different groups. Since patrons were as capricious as members were, a Rama group's rank changed from week to week, keeping competition unpredictable to say the least.

The organization of the early Rama groups was similar to the way they operate today. The leader is responsible for managing the group's schedule, looking after the tambourines, and facilitating communication between members. When a tambourine needs repair, the leader collects a small donation from each member and sets it in the kinara. A similar procedure takes place when a member of the group needs emergency financial assistance. In extreme cases, larger contributions are made and the kinara becomes a relief fund.

The social security benefits of membership in coastal ngoma groups must not be underestimated, as the work of Ranger (1975) and Strobel (1979) illustrates. Yet, I am constantly reminded by contemporary performers that Rama is concerned first and foremost with bestowing spiritual rewards on its members, rather than material ones. It is Rama's ability to provide religious sustenance to the Lamu community that has made it so resilient.

⁹⁶Rama maulidi is an al-Basakut clan tradition, and Abdul Rehman remembers accompanying his grandfather, Said Athman, to Mdoa in Somalia, where his relatives performed it annually. "Basakuti", as he is commonly called, has maintained ties to those relations by inviting them to his own Rama Maulidi ceremony, which he hosts every year to commemorate a deceased relative. Interview with Abdul Rehman al-Basakut of Lamu, 10.6.95.

Secular ngomas, such as Beni, Chama, Lelemama, and Mwasha are rarely if ever performed on the coast anymore. Elders enjoy remembering the happiness and excitement that surrounded the ngoma competitions of the past, yet they never forget to mention the ostentation they inspired. Before Kenyan Independence, ngoma competitions in Lamu were characterized primarily by the huge feasts (karamu) people held before and/or after the performances. Wealthy residents took turns hosting the events, which attracted hundreds of spectators and special guests from as far away as Mombasa. In those days, ngoma feasts significantly enhanced the social status of the local elite who sponsored them. Abdalla Kirume, a Lamu elder, remembers the important part that feasts played in ngoma competition:

Everyone used to say, “my group is the best.” But the group that defeated the other was the one that spent more money on slaughtering cows. One time, we slaughtered seven cows and then somebody came and told us that the other group had slaughtered eleven.⁹⁷ So at that moment, twenty-seven more cows were slaughtered by our group . . . Ultimately, the competition was based on expenditure. The group that provided the largest feast attracted more people.⁹⁸

Several women I spoke with recalled how people used to show off their group's grandiloquence by parading around town displaying the tails and heads of the cows, goats, and camels their group had killed.⁹⁹ Eventually, even wealthy patrons went

⁹⁷Ngoma competition was so fierce that each group sent out spies to check on the activities of their competitors. Habu, a ngoma expert from Matondoni, was put to work as a spy for his mother's ngoma group during his childhood. Interview with Habu of Matondoni, 8.5.96. Several women ngoma leaders remember sending children back and forth to spy on the activities of rival ngoma members. Interviews with Amina Hamisi of Malindi, 8.3.96; Momo Athmani and Umi Ahmadi of Tchundwa, 6.23.96; Yumbe Bakari and Nana Mzee of Kiunga, 11.3.96.

⁹⁸Interview with Abdalla Mohammed Kirume of Lamu, 9.13.95.

⁹⁹Interviews with Yumbe Bakari and Nana Mzee of Kiunga, 11.3.96; Maulidi Sabina of Lamu, 7.27.96; Momo Athmani and Umi Ahmadi of Tchundwa, 6.23.96; Kadi binti Mohammed of Matondoni, 11.3.95; Hauna Mwalim of Siyu, 10.23.96.

bankrupt trying to keep enough livestock on hand to live up to their own reputations.

Most of the narrators of these stories express more than a hint of shame when recalling such indulgences.

Ngoma's Decline

In the 1970s, ngoma competition in many places on the coast became so vehement that members who transferred their allegiance from one group to another risked public disgrace.¹⁰⁰ Each ngoma group has a story that explains the specific circumstances that led to its collapse. Some of the people I interviewed described the sense of relief they felt when ngoma competitions finally came to an end.¹⁰¹ Former ngoma leaders, on the other hand, expressed nostalgia for an era in which they had thrived.¹⁰² Particular individuals were also credited with putting a stop to the competitions.¹⁰³ Kadi binti Mohammed remembers how ngoma competition in Matondoni¹⁰⁴ was abolished that way:

A long time ago there were very successful ngoma groups, but its as if they were bewitched. Back then, there was a large shed in Matondoni, which was so full of cows that if you saw it you would think that it belonged to a cow herder. There were forty cows here and eighty cows there, all of which were slaughtered

¹⁰⁰Omari Haji tells a terrifying story of the time his mother transferred her affiliation with the ngoma group in the Mkunguni neighborhood to the Mtaa Pwani neighborhood of Matondoni. Her former group members taunted her so much that she was finally forced to re-locate. Omari remembers the vicious song they sang to his mother as she left the old neighborhood, warning the new group that she was a traitor. Interview with Omari Haji of Matondoni, 8.5.96.

¹⁰¹Interviews with Ba Omari of Lamu, 9.2.93; Hauna Mwalim of Siyu, 10.23.96; Kadi binti Mohammed of Matondoni, 11.3.95; Baraka Mzee of Siyu, 10.23.96; Momo Athmani and Umi Ahmadi of Tchundwa, 6.23.96.

¹⁰²Interviews with Maulidi Sabina of Lamu, 7.27.96; Salima Jazaka of Lamu, 10.11.95., Yumbe Bakari and Amina "Nana" Shee of Kiunga, 11.3.96.

¹⁰³Interview with Amina Hamisi of Malindi, 8.3.96.

¹⁰⁴Matondoni is one of Lamu's satellite villages on Lamu Island.

and eaten during the ngoma competitions. There was meat in the morning, and meat in the evening . . .

That was when Shee Abudi was the town clerk. He is the one who finally declared that ngoma was causing our town to fall apart. So all of the cows were sold off, and from that time the ngoma groups died out and were never revived again.

The decline of ngoma competition on the east African coast seems to correspond with the Islamic reform movement that swept through the Muslim world in the 1970s, in response to the Iranian Revolution. Ngoma was seen as a liability in many Muslim communities during that time. The correlation between this movement and the decline of traditional ngoma is nowhere more explicit than in Siyu, where the clubhouses women used for ngoma practice were turned into women's mosques.¹⁰⁵ Hauna Mwalim, a Siyu resident recalls what this transformation meant to her:

When we stopped performing ngoma we forgot about our rivalries completely. It wasn't just one person who persuaded us to stop. No one took special action against us or anything. The other ngoma group collapsed and then ours collapsed. We were happy that God restored the peace.

We now live in peace. Today we don't have enemies. We've decided that those activities were sinful and now we're repenting and doing good. That's why we've converted our old clubhouse into a mosque, where we celebrate maulidi and worship. And the other group has done the same. We're all united now.¹⁰⁶

Even during episodes of religious reform, Rama, like other maulidi rituals, has been salvaged as a form of worship.¹⁰⁷ Its place betwixt and between ngoma and prayer has led to its recurrent use as a Muslim ritual on the coast, while secular ngomas have all

¹⁰⁵Interviews with Baraka Mzee of Siyu, 10.23.96; Hauna Mwalim and Lali Ahmed Kale of Siyu, 10.23.96.

¹⁰⁶Interview with Hauna Mwalim of Siyu, 10.23.96.

¹⁰⁷See David Parkin's discussion of Maulidi among the Digo, 1989:161-175.

but faded from memory. A recent Rama revival in Lamu, led by Bakari Shaika and Abdul Rehman al-Basakut ("Sharif Baskuti"), promises to keep at least one Rama group alive in Lamu, despite protests from certain portions of the coast's Islamic community. A long-time Rama enthusiast in Lamu sums up the challenges that Rama groups continue to face today:

There are local Muslims who oppose Rama maulidi. They receive payments from people in Saudi Arabia, who want to insure that it doesn't continue. They have paid them a lot of money. If the Arabs counted all of the money they've spent, it would be billions and billions. Yet they have failed.

The Saudis want us to stop practicing many of our traditions. For example, they don't want us to say prayers for the dead on the way to the burial (ziara). And yet, the prayer, "Takbiri," is for glorifying God! They don't want us to read prayers for the dead, to eat in the mosque, to play the tambourines while reading maulidi. They have tried many ways to stop us, but in vain.

Inevitably, the future of ritual ngomas such as Rama is in the hands of the new generation. Many young boys in Lamu are eagerly learning to recite Maulidi verses and accurately execute the difficult gestures that accompany them. Rama provides an opportunity for young boys to share a sense of spiritual intimacy with their male elders. And in the absence of the kind of neighborhood rivalry that motivated people to join Rama groups in the past, this may have to be enough. In many respects, the current Rama maulidi group in Lamu characterizes the spiritual community that Habib Saleh hoped for; it's members are neither held together nor torn apart by competition. And as "Sharif Baskuti", one of the group's leaders asserts, "anyone with the will to learn is welcome to participate."

It is this kind of hospitality that brings more and more visitors to Lamu for the annual Maulidi celebration every year. And for those four days dancers, dressed in robes as well as rags, circle the house where their saint once lived, singing praises to ancestral spirits for their collective salvation. If redemption is to be found in ritual acts that make brothers out of strangers, and welcome outsiders in, then the Lamu community has a chance with maulidi ngoma.

Conclusion

In the exploration for domains of ritual activity, this chapter has located performance sites where people who embraced certain elements of Islam and African cosmology came together. These sites were found in a fourteenth century Hadhrami court in Mogadishu, in sixteenth century Vumba Kuu, within the walls of Fort Jesus in the seventeenth century, in the streets of Zanzibar in the eighteenth century and in the coconut forest of Lamu in the nineteenth century. In addition, specific symbols that were combined in these ritual activities have been identified. These include musical instruments such as the ngoma kuu, matwari, and the siwa, as well as devotional objects such as mirashi, incense and amulets, all of which were used by various Muslim and non-Muslim ritual experts and their followers throughout the east African coast.

In tracing the elements of Sufi practice that inspired an attraction to Islam among coastal Africans, this chapter has also provided clues to how Islam became the religion of

a growing number of east Africans over the past six hundred years. Through a flowering of Swahili poetry and the incorporation of African motifs in divination and healing rituals, Sufi sheikhs and their followers converted Islam to fit an African context without necessarily converting Africans into Muslims. Travelers such as Ibn Battuta noted this transformation as early as the fourteenth century, when Muslims had already established a chain of Sufi tariqas along the east African coast. Ibn Battuta's descriptions provide evidence that an amalgamation of African and Arabic cultural symbols was at the heart of Sufi spirituality from the beginning. Perhaps this is most evident in the reference Ibn Battuta makes to visiting the grave of the Sultan of Mogadishu for prayers, a traditional Sufi practice called “*ziara*,” which is usually followed by a procession called “*zefe*.” These traditions still make up the most important ceremonial aspects of the annual Maulidi celebrations east Africans host *throughout the coast*.

Sources written during the nineteenth century demonstrate that Muslim and non-Muslim treatments were used simultaneously by coastal peoples, who consulted both *waganga* and *walimu*--depending upon their ailment. Objects such as talismans and charms were imbued with power by skilled ritual experts specializing in dream interpretation, making armies fall, rainfall, predicting the future, and healing the sick. That Muslims and non-Muslims frequented both kinds of specialists meant that most coastal people had not been indoctrinated to believe that one religious system was more effective than the other, but that they both worked under different circumstances. The variety of witnesses that describe the ritual synergy that existed on the coast includes a

European explorer, a missionary, a foreign merchant,¹⁰⁸ an Arabian Princess, and an east African scholar. Each of their narratives describe coastal religious life from a unique perspective while at the same time echoing the others' fascination with the overlapping activities that coastal people engaged in.

The secondary sources presented here also emphasize the popularity of ritual pluralism on the coast, illustrating the unique ways coastal people have combined Islam and African religious practices. The focus of many of these studies has been the participation of Muslims and non-Muslims in spirit possession ngoma. By revealing the composite identities of popular coastal spirits, these studies explore the strategies people used to cope in their increasingly multicultural environment. Perhaps more than any other activity performed on the coast, spirit possession rituals demonstrate the selective process that Africans have used in their appropriation of certain Islamic symbols, such as rose water, incense, and various pieces of Arabic clothing and finery.

In other rituals, such as Rama maulidi, the African techniques that were selected for use by Muslims are evident. The verses are memorized and performed orally in Swahili, using a call and response form that is characteristically African. Unlike orthodox Muslim rituals, Rama also includes an African rhythmic element produced by goatskin tambourines that are crafted in the fashion of locally made drums. In addition, Rama

¹⁰⁸Also see Norman Bennett, 1971. Edward Ropes' letters confirm that Muslims and non-Muslims regularly participated in each others' public religious celebrations. Among the many ceremonies that Ropes describes are Diwali, the Hindu New Year, Idd, the Muslim celebration, and a Malagasy festival. Each of these entailed large street processions that included European-style military bands comprised of Goan (Christian) musicians, sword-donning Arab (Muslim) troops, slave groups performing (African) ngomas, and soldiers of multi-ethnic and diverse religious background.

maulidi has been traditionally performed by ngoma groups, which compete on a regular basis and follow similar criteria that are used to judge other types of coastal ngomas.

By highlighting the work of Habib Saleh and his fellow Sufi sheikhs, this chapter provides an explanation of how each of these seemingly opposing religious philosophies coexisted and why. Without minimizing the ritual complexity of the coast, this study highlights specific sites where people of diverse religious background performed rituals together, and identifies specific symbols that they used to do so. While some of these were obviously Sufi rituals, others were not. What is important is that Sufi sheikhs were influential in creating a religious milieu for activities that united people of diverse ethnic, social and religious affiliation. Equally influential were the African waganga, who expanded their notions of ritual convention to include Muslim practices. In conjunction, these leaders helped to create a unique ritual system that mediated some of the differences between Muslims and non-Muslims, and provided a framework within which coastal people enhanced their spiritual links to each other and to those in the hereafter.

CHAPTER 4

“MTU KWAVO”¹: VAVE AND BAJUNI IDENTITY

Even in Vave, there is a section that says, “*Twalitia fatiha nne za Mtume, zisizo kunyume, sinishikeni.*” (We pray in the name of the Prophet four times. Our prayers go directly through him.) We ourselves also prayed in the name of the Prophet four times so that God would guide us. Now that God has received our prayers, it is time that we return to our towns. That will be a great thing and God will help us.

(Mwalimu Mshamu, 1996)²

Introduction

On the first day of May, 1996 I was invited to attend a meeting of the **Barani People's Welfare Association** in Malindi town. The group consists of Bajuni refugees from Kiunga district, the northern-most portion of the Kenya coast, which shares a border with Somalia. For over 500 years, violent incursions by pastoralist immigrants from Ethiopia and Somalia have led to periodic exodus by the Bajuni, the Mijikenda, and the Boni (Aweer) peoples, who have occupied the coastal region between the Sabaki River near Malindi and the Juba River near Kismaayu in Somalia. The continuous nature of these invasions from the North is the basis for an origin tradition that has been passed down for centuries by coastal peoples, including the Bajuni, which explains their

¹“Mtu Kwavo” is a Swahili phrase meaning, “Everyone has a right to his/her homeland.” Members of the Barani People's Welfare Association recently put this phrase on various signs designating the land that was stolen from them in the 1960s and 70s from Somalia “bandits.”

²Mwalimu Mshamu is the Chairman of the Barani People's Welfare Association. This is an excerpt of his opening remarks at the meeting of the Association on May 1, 1996.

dispersal from a common place known as "Shungwaya"³ sometime in the thirteenth century.

According to James de Vere Allen (1993), the Bajuni are a confederation of eighteen clans (kimasi), known as the "ten of the Miuli" and the "eight of the Bana." Allen proposes that the Miuli clans have been sedentarized farmers much longer than the Bana clans, also known as the "Katwa Bajuni," who were forced to give up their pastoralist lifestyle in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century⁴. There are several competing genealogical accounts that refute the African heritage of the Bajuni people and focus on Arabian origins. A Bajuni genealogy recorded by Suleiman bin Surur El-Manthiry provides a clan list to prove that the Bajuni, or Bani-Juni were the children of an Arab from southern Yemen (Hadhramaut) named Juni bin Harith bin Omar bin Ma-awia bin Harith bin Ma-awia bin Thor bin Tei of the El-Mathkuri clan.⁵ As elucidated in the following sections of this chapter, Bajuni heritage remains a controversial subject that stimulates intense debate among people of the northern Kenya coast.

After Kenyan Independence in 1963, border security between Kenya and Somalia was jeopardized, and armed raiders encroached upon the area again, forcing the local people to re-settle in more protected villages in the Lamu archipelago and in towns

³Allen (1993) locates "Great Shungwaya" on the Kenya mainland opposite Pate Island. Several other scholars have recorded Shungwaya traditions that fix the mythical homeland of the Mijikenda, the Bajuni and several other African peoples at different sites along the coast from the Juba river near Kismaayu in Somalia to the Sabaki river near Malindi in Kenya. Allen explains the "Shungwaya phenomenon" as a series of coastal states that were established on the mouths of rivers along the coast. See Allen, 1993:52

⁴See Allen, 1993:105. Ibrahim Noor Shariff (1984) breaks the Bajuni clans into two different groups as follows: MIULI: Muomwe, Mkismayuu, Mchithindini, Mveko, Mchandaa, Vathipigoni, Vakoyama, Vyangove, Vangumi, Vagaade and BANA: Nkiliyo, Awtila, Amishiri, Varishimale, Vafirado, Halikawa, Vayava, Vadaile.

⁵See Suleman El-Manthiry, 1943. I thank Said Abdulrehman El-Mafazy of Lamu for providing me with his private copy of this document. This particular version of Bajuni history is also in Enrico Cerulli, 1957.

located in Malindi district to the south. Refugee settlements such as Ngomeni, established as temporary Bajuni villages, have become home to many of the members of the Barani People's Welfare Association, who have been forced to live in exile for over thirty years. Due to the lack of commitment by Kenya's political leaders to protect the rights of the peoples whose land has been stolen, the Association has failed to obtain the governmental assistance needed for a safe re-settlement. Increasingly they talk of going back to their farms without government protection. But the risks are great and the danger is very real.

I know this because I accompanied a group of Bajuni farmers to a place known as Vumbe on the mainland opposite Pate Island⁶ on March 25th and 26th, 1996. I went along to videotape an oral tradition called Vave, which is associated with a farming ritual performed before the clearing of the forest by fire. The danger involved in this procedure was augmented by the deleterious chance of meeting up with bands of Somali mavericks, known locally as "mashifta," and armed with weapons they acquired after troops involved in the U.N. invasion of Somalia pulled out. Since that time, raiders from the Somalia side of the border have terrorized the villages on the northern Kenya coast with armed attacks and looting sprees, and regularly hold up buses along the highway between Lamu and Malindi. An armload of audio-visual equipment would have been an easy target for them--especially since our weaponry consisted only of a few machetes.

⁶Allen (1993:106) cites Charles Sacleaux's (1939-41) entry for "Katwa" as evidence that the Katwa Bajuni inhabited the mainland opposite Pate Island. Sacleaux conducted his research in the late nineteenth century. His entry also mentions that the Bajuni treated the Boni peoples as clients. On my expedition to Vumbe, both Bajuni and Boni farmers participated in the burning of the bush, but a patron-client relationship was not apparent to me.

Vave in Motion

After reaching the mainland, our party disembarked from **two sailing dhows**, which had carried about twenty men, a half dozen chickens, two goats, cooking utensils, straw mats, kerosene lanterns, a bag of rice, a large can of fresh water, and me and my stuff from Faza (Rasini) town on Pate Island. The sun was setting and we immediately began the two-hour trek through mangrove swamp and over sand dunes to a part of the hinterland forest that the farmers had cleared during the previous three months. Piles of dead tree branches filled the huge spaces that the farmers were to ignite into arable farmland the next day. A narrow footpath circumvented the plot to allow the farmers a way in to light the fire, and a way out to escape the blaze. This was the only firebreak to keep the flames from jumping into the surrounding forest. As I walked this path in encroaching twilight that evening, I came to understand the magnitude of the task that had already been accomplished by the farmers, as well as the one still left undone.

Upon our arrival, **the farmers**, consisting of Bajuni residents of Pate island and Boni mainlanders, established a campsite and began preparing a fire for the evening meal. The elders, Mohammed Juma (M), Mohammed Haruni (B), Bwana Madi (H), Bunu Mbarukuu (K), Omari Shee Athmani (E), Shalima Fumo (S), Bamkuu (G), each known for their knowledge of the Vave tradition, began reciting the first verses, as they ceremoniously slaughtered the goats. The haunting lyrics of **Vave** rose mournfully from the lips of two soloists in a call-response pattern. One singer posed narrative riddles and

the other solved them by continuing the narrative correctly. Like each of the twenty-four⁷ sections (milango) of Vave, the first one begins in the name of God.

B:Bismillahi tuambe. Bismillahi tuambe. Ilahi tuombe, Mvumba zivumbe na itile nane. Amabaye wakucha nasende mwamboni. Maana una mambo iye walikwamba, una maneno aliakinena. Maana walikwamba huu mbuzi wa hitima na kikango cha buni. Kina mambo chali kwamba kisha kina na maneno chalikinena. Maana chali na tamaa, hicho kikango cha buni na mbuzi wa hitima. Maana kina mambo hichi kikango cha buni. Kina na maneno chlikinena. "Huamba lalava ni zicha. Hiyo nyute zichukucha ambao akucha nasende zichani. Hizi zicha nda nsonge za mocho na tange. Zikiaviande tutazikokanya. Maana zicha nda nsonge hizo nda mocho na tange. Zikiaviande tutazikokanya. Maana kuna mambo chali chukiamba. Tunene maneno ya inde mamboni. Haye zicha nda nsonge. Haye mvulana, nda mocho na tange. Zikiaviande tutazikokanya.

In the name of God, we pray. In the name of God, we pray. We pray in the name of God, the Creator of all creatures and the eight heavens. Whoever is afraid should not go to the forest because it is dangerous. The one who warned you knows what he is saying. They sacrificed this goat and fried a pan of dried coffee beans⁸ for the ritual. The sacred words spoken during the ritual solved the problem. This means that frying the coffee beans and sacrificing the goat was done for a purpose. This means the frying pan of coffee beans was miraculous. The pan spoke these words, "There will be a war. All of you are nervous, but those who are afraid should not go to the war. This is a struggle between fire and

⁷I collected the names of nineteen chapters of Vave from several Bajuni experts. My list is as follows:

1. Vave ya turkwae (how can it be done)
2. Vave ya tazikwae (how one is buried)
3. Vave ya lichepiondo (for overcoming fear)
4. Vave ya kichanga (recited on mats)
5. Vave ya mbuzi (to slaughter the goat)
6. Vave ya bibi (for the wife)
7. Vave ya tavukae (for crossing - success)
8. Vave ya mwaka (or the 1st day of the farming year)
9. Vave ya kuku (for slaughtering chickens)
10. Vave ya kushika mwitu (for surveying the forest)
11. Vave ? (for taking chickens to the fields early in the morning)
12. Vave panda vitae (for marking - to summon everyone with a horn)
13. Vave ya kukota (for lassoing - making the torches)
14. Vave ya kishungi kata (to cut bangs - for making the fire break)
15. Vave ya nimekomelea basi kutungu sisi (for completion of reciting the poem)
16. Vave ya kamasi (for the clans)
17. Vave ya shawi la mbaya (for the evil one)
18. Vave ya kumuwaga bibi yako (to say good bye to your wife)
19. Vave ya mto wa mashaka (a river of problems - for the difficulties)

⁸"Buni" are dried coffee beans that have been fried in sesame seed oil. The Bajuni often served this dish in ritual settings, as J.A.G. Elliot (1925-26) witnessed during his visit to Bajuniland in the 1920s.

the cut forest. If the war begins, we will stop it." This means the battle is a war between fire and the cut forest. If the war begins, we will stop it. This means there was a problem the ritual solved. Let's discuss matters unrelated to the war. Oh, the war is a battle. Oh, young man, it's between the fire and the cut forest. If the war begins, we will stop it.

H: Bisimillahi tuambe. Haye ndoo Vave, ndoo. Zia zinivave na mvili wangu unisuke mai. Nda kichukucha, iye alokwenda kutwa na yuva likitwa mbayo huvaa mikononi. Alikiradidi mbayo eh, Juma maulidi. Ni kwa kutinda udi na michi ya ziva. Zicha nda kijuni mzawa mwichuni. Matandu humiza kuni. Matandu humiza.

In God's name, we pray. Let's perform Vave, let's perform Vave until my whole body aches and sweats. This is for the one who is nervous, the one who worked the whole day with the ax in his hand, until the sunset. He hung up his ax on Friday to attend maulidi. It's for cutting incense and trees on the island. The war is for the bird born in the forest. Branches swallow the firewood. Branches swallow it.

B: Maana zicha nda kijuni iye mwana mzawa mwichuni. Mkuti hula kuni matandu humiza. Maana mbwa simba wacho mwenda wa kichako na maguu papo haoandoi kambani. Maana nda kijuni iye mvulana eh, mwana mzawa mwichuni. Mkuti hula kuni matandu humiza.

This means the war affects the bird, the young bird born in the forest. The coconut palms ignite the cut wood. This means it is a struggle for the wounded lion, which crawls along on his bottom with his lame legs set in a trap. This means it's a struggle for the bird, oh young man, the one born in the forest. The coconut palms ignite the cut wood and the branches swallow it.

H: Malime eh uwe malime! Nyuka akalime mtonyi natome ndio kazi yake. Nda simba ati zicha eh iye fahali mjesi. Humucha zivumbe na kunkimbia kisha ndie jaguji muo hangoji. Wala hamuhuji walikuia nini. Nda asikari zicha za mola Jalali, asotenda heri kesho atapawa iye. Maana kisha ndiye dawa eh iye alao hupoa ndio maridhawa ya kwendea janani. Rigombo!

Farmer, oh farmer, wake up and go to work! And the fishermen should go fish because that is their job. The war affects the lion--the fierce lion. All of the creatures fear him and keep away from him. He is the great, fierce one, who fears nothing. He never asks why you are there when he meets you. The war is for the soldiers. The war is for God, the Glorious one. Tomorrow, God will punish all sinners for their sins. Then this means there is only one kind of medicine and the one who takes it will be healed and go to heaven. Let's sing Rigombo!⁹

⁹I worked with Omari Shee and Munib Said Abdulrehman of Lamu on these translations. I am indebted to both of them for their assistance.

The animal metaphors in the opening verses of Vave remind the farmers that they, like the weakest birds and the strongest lions, are subject to the whims of nature and the wrath of God. Those who are brave enough to stay are warned of the challenges involved in the work ahead. The half-hearted are told to leave while they still can. Sinners are also asked to depart, for they will certainly cause disaster. The evil spirits, known to occupy the forest, are confined by the farmers' successful appeal to the spirits of their ancestors and the Muslim saints. Their assistance is forthcoming only if the pre-burning rituals are carried out according to custom. After sacrificing the two goats and reciting the initial verses of Vave, the farmers at Vumbe appeared confident that they had fulfilled these obligations adequately. After a round of "Randa," a joyful dance described in detail below, the farmers gathered around large plates of goat meat and rice (pilau) and quietly satisfied themselves.

Soon after the huge pot of food had been consumed, the elders responsible for reciting the Vave tradition moved out into a nearby opening in the forest to resume their task. One group walked off into the bush to assume the role of visitors arriving to assist the farmers with their work. As soon as the group was out of sight, the leader that remained assumed the role of "host" and welcomed the "visitors" to come forth. From a distance, the other group responded, slowly moving closer. The Vave verses continued as follows:

E: Bismillahi tuambe, Mungu tuombe. Kuva iva tumwa mtume simama. Na siku ya kwima ni kama hii yeo. Ima Jiburilu na Mikailo nampiga Israfilu hiyo panda ya kuzimu. Ima na Mayasa na mtume Issa, na mitume wa kwisha na Ibrahimu. Haya itindie mwitu isizie komba vagurie na varwa barani. Basi valikwamba

“hiya” venye tumbi yuu nasi wa tamau hunena “hiyau”. Haya kongo eh mvulana eh. Uye uvone mlango unyamise shingo ungie kwa ndani.

In the name of God, we pray. God, we pray to you. Oh, Prophet we want you to be with us on this beautiful day. Be with us, Angel Gabriel and Angel Michael¹⁰ and Angel Israfil, who will blow the trumpet on Judgement Day. Be with us Mayasa and Prophet Jesus, and the last Prophet, and Abraham. The ax cut down the forest and forced all of the raccoons out. Those who wear their hair long¹¹ say "this" and we say "that". Welcome, young man. Come to the door, and bend your neck when you come in.

B: Haya imi na misongi nambiwapo kongo kambiwa kongo, sinyongi kuingia. Maana ni kweli itindie mwitu isizie komba vague va kibarani. Maana yalinali yeo hapa ikitinda ikichama ninga na valivo iye. Haya yalinali eh mvulana eh. Hapa ikitinda ikichama ninga na valivo iye.

I'm here with my belongings. When I'm welcomed, I don't just come in. It's true that the ax cut down the forest and the racoons left. There is evidence of the ax's work here. It's true, young man, that the ax did the work. There is evidence of the ax's work here.

E: Bismillahi tuambe. Ima tumwa ima. Mtume simama na siku ya kwima ni kama hii yeo. Nachuimbe kimwiche na via mwenechu chukumbuku kwechu chwalipo zaliwa. Ue mbeza kondo wambijili mambo. Tuambulike wimbo wa mbayo kuvaaya. Kiva kwa huko taa na kukaribisha palipo makosa tukitambua. Maana mgeni ni tongo havoni mlango. Kambiwa kongo hanyongi kuingia. Haikongo eh, eh mvulana. Uvune mlango unyamise shingo uingie kwa ndani.

In the name of God, we pray. Send us righteousness. Be with us Prophet today. Let's sing in the language of the forest. Oh, my brother, let's remember our homeland, where we were born. Those who tell the stories satisfy our longing. Let's sing a song about the ax cutting. Just stay over there where there is light and we will welcome you. We'll always know who made the mistake. A visitor is blind and can't see the door. When he is welcomed, he can't come in. Oh, he can't come in. Oh, young man. Break down the door, bend your neck when you come in.

B: Ni kweli nachwambe zili. Ni kweli nachwambe zili za miniasili na kina Bashali. Valo changulia. Ni kweli nachwambe kwa nukuta isi nakuzikaribisha. Mpalipo makosa inyi venyeve huchambua. Lakini nikwambizie inyi hamyambo huvavuza yambo. Habari ya mambo mbayo ichendeo.

Imi nambiwapo kongo sinyongi kuingia. Maana imi mgeni ni tongo sivoni mlango. Nambiwapo kongo sinyongi kuingia. Lakini nikwambizie hamyambo,

¹⁰The angel Michael is believed to control the rain.

¹¹This refers to long hair, which may be a reference to the Portuguese.

habari ya mambo, mbayo ichendeo. Basi nivuliza imi nipache nikwambie nawe usikie mambo ya zamani. Maana hukwambia kongo imi hukwambia hamyambo. Nilikuvuza yambo, habari ya mambo mbayo ichendeo. Basi nivuliza imi nipache nikwambie nawe usikie mambo ya zamani. Haya nivuliza eh mvulana eh. Nami nipache nikwambie nawe usikie mambo ya zamani.

It's true, let's perform it. It's true let's perform it the way Bashali and his friends did. Its true, lets sing slowly, bit by bit. You'll be able to tell when a mistake is made. But when I ask, "How are you?" I'm really asking what the ax did.

When I'm welcomed, I don't come in because I am a blind visitor and can't see the door. When I'm welcomed, I don't come in. But I asked you, "how are you?" "how are things?" and "what did the ax do?" Now ask me and I'll tell you about the past. When I say "welcome", I also say "how are you?" I taught you something about what the ax did. Just ask me and I'll tell you about the past. Just ask me, oh young man. I'll tell you things about the past.

This dialogue between "the host" of the ceremony and "the visitor" illustrates the competitive nature of Vave and its place within a genre of oral poetry that coastal wordsmiths employed for centuries. When a question is posed, such as "what did the ax do?" it must be answered in the next verse, or it becomes obvious that the orator does not know how to respond correctly. Since an expert poet would never miss a chance to prove his prowess, he always recites the appropriate response immediately after a question is posed to him. The sequence above suggests that E forgot the next set of verses, which describe the procedures involved in cutting the forest. This mistake provided B with an opportunity to humiliate his opponent by suggesting he would share the appropriate response if E admitted his ignorance, and posed the question back to B. When considering the length and complexity of Vave, this narrative device allows experts to help amateurs learn the verses through trial and error. I was told that years ago, whenever someone made a mistake, an elder held up a walking cane (bakora) to alert everyone to

the error.¹² It is by this method of group critique that the Vave tradition has been passed down the generations of Bajuni farmers.

As demonstrated by the verses above, Vave tells a story that requires its performers to reenact a work routine that their ancestors wanted them to remember. It details the steps a farmer must take in order to survey the forest for good farmland, to clear it by cutting, and to burn away the brush and prepare the soil for cultivation. Each of the tasks that are associated with these jobs is described in its own verse, of which there are 24 in total. Today, most of the verses are omitted and only a few key verses can be recalled. The Vave experts with whom I spoke admitted many of the words are remnants of an ancient Bajuni language that is unintelligible to them. This, and the fact that it is only recited once per year, has contributed to the slow deterioration of Vave since the Bajuni were forced off their land in the 1960s.

Vave and the Formation of Bajuni Identity

The origin of Vave, like the origin of the Bajuni people themselves, is a mystery in many respects. The Bajuni are a people of complicated ancestry, as Allen rigorously explores in Swahili Origins (1993). This is reflected in the various names visitors to the coast have been used in reference to the people who have occupied the coast between Malindi and Kismaayu at different moments in time. For example, in the tenth century,

¹²Interview with Tora Abushiri of Kiwayuu, 11.11.95.

the Arab geographer al-Mas'udi used "Ahabish" to refer to coastal immigrants from Ethiopia.¹³ In the seventeenth century, the Portuguese called the African residents near Malindi "Mosungulos"¹⁴ and "Vana gunes."¹⁵ The Reverend Thomas Wakefield used the name "Wab'unya" in the late nineteenth century,¹⁶ while Stigand referred to them as "Katwa" and "Watikuu" in the early twentieth century.¹⁷ Elliot described the people north of the Lamu archipelago as "Garreh" and "Bajun."¹⁸ Today, coastal people use terms including "wagunya" and "watikuu" to refer to the Bajuni in a derogatory way.

This collection of names imposed by outsiders does not prove that Bajuni forebears did not have a set of customs that were reproduced across the generations in order to provide group identity and historical continuity. Indeed, any adult Bajuni person can readily name any number of practices, rituals and beliefs that are uniquely Bajuni. Besides Vave, the Bajuni have another set of oral traditions known as "Kimai," which highlights the maritime component of Bajuni culture.¹⁹ Other Bajuni verbal arts include the sung poetry that accompanies Bajuni dances such *Kirumbizi* and Ndongwe, the epic stories called "Ungano,"²⁰ and riddles known as "Chandove."²¹ I have collected samples of these Bajuni forms of expressive media, which are distinct from those

¹³See Freeman-Grenville, 1962; Trimingham, 1975:23; Allen 1993:27.

¹⁴See Freeman-Grenville, 1980.

¹⁵See E.G. Ravenstein, 1884.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷See C.H. Stigand, 1913. Tolmacheva (1993) reprints this with notes.

¹⁸See Elliot, 1925-26.

¹⁹Interviews with Abubakar Mohammed Baharo "Kuchi" of Kilifi, 2.29.96; Chief Tora of Kiunga, 10.22.95. For Kimai lyrics see Carol Campbell, 1976. For a detailed study of the sea-faring component of Bajuni culture, see Prins, 1965.

²⁰Interview with Someobwana Ali of Lamu, 3.22.96.

²¹Interviews with Hadija Omar and Esha Hamisi of Lamu, 3.23.96; Momo Athmani and Umi Ahmadi of Tchundwa, 6.23.96.

performed by other coastal groups. In my mind, these traditions confirm that Bajuni culture (utamaduni) not only exists in the present, but has a deep historical foundation, from which Vave first emerged.

When contemporary Bajuni elders are asked about Vave's origins, they usually answer one of two ways. One response includes a discussion of the composer, a man called Bwana Mahadhi, whose name and memory are indisputably fixed in the verses of Vave.²² Some of the Bajuni men I spoke with claim Bwana Mahadhi is a recent ancestor of theirs, who lived about 150 years ago.²³ Others insist that he was a man of "long ago," when the Bajuni spoke an ancient language, still sprinkled throughout Vave. This second explanation emphasizes Vave's historical depth, and is accompanied by the following story. Here it is recounted by Tora Abushiri, a Vave expert from Kiwayuu, in a narrative style that integrates verses from Vave itself. These sections include the direct transcription, in the Bajuni dialect of Swahili.

Vave has been performed for a very long time. It started so long ago that even my grandfathers didn't know the date of origin. It started at the beginning of the universe. Vave was a conversation between a son and his father. They were the only ones in the whole world who knew the words. They didn't want to teach anyone else. Do you see? When the father was cutting trees in the forest with his son, they were conversing in their own language, just like other languages such as English, or Swahili, or Arabic. They conversed in a language all their own. If they wanted to fetch water, or do anything else, they used Vave, which is a form of poetry. And the son and the father understood each other. People tried to understand, but they couldn't catch on to it.

One day, the father, who was named Kisimbe Kondo, told his son, Jutta, to climb a tree and cut the top branches. Do you understand what I mean by cutting

²²Could this be the Siyu hero named Bwana Madi, nicknamed "Bwana Madi Ngoma", who is mentioned in Stigand's version of the *Pate Chronicle*? Other versions (321, 344) name him "Hamad Ngoma" and "Hamadi Ngoma" respectively. This man is said to have defended Siyu against attack by Sayyid Said bin Sultan 's troops in the mid-nineteenth century. See Tolmacheva, 1993:116-117; 359; 407.

²³Interview with Mohammed Kale, Mohammed Ali, Hassan Mohammed, Twahiru Ali Famau, 6.7.96.

the top branches? If its a very big tree, then you must cut off the top part, which is called “mlachilachi.” But the tree was very large and terrifying, and the father was very harsh and forced his son to climb up in the tree to cut the top branches.

That’s when Vave was born and came to be known.

The father told the son, “Climb up and cut the “mlachilachi.” “Go get the mlachilachi.” So that is how we begin reciting Vave. The son said to the father, “Nipandeje kuangua mlachilachi mbona chini kuna nyati, kati kuna nyoka, juu kuna nyuki?” (“How can I climb up there to get the mlachilachi when there is a Water Buffalo at the base, a snake in the middle, and bees at the top of the tree? So how can I climb and get the mlachilachi?”)

That’s what the son said to the father. His father replied, “Chukua bunduki umpige nyati, uchukue na kigungo umuuwe nyoka, uchakue na mtungo, umuumuwe nyuki. Lakini leo panda uangue mlachilachi!” (“Take a gun and shoot the Buffalo, take a big stick and kill the snake, then take fire and remove the bees. But I want you to climb up and get me the mlachilachi today!”) The son began crying because he was afraid of the huge tree.

You see, the tree had a lot of brush at the base, and that’s what he meant by a buffalo (nyati). The father told him to shoot the buffalo with a gun, meaning that he should use a tool and clear away the brush. And in the middle of the tree, there were a lot of vines, which he called a snake. The father told him to kill the snake with a stick after he had cleared the bottom and climbed up. And the son told his father that there were bees at the top. Do you understand? This meant that there were a lot of branches there. And the father told him to remove the bees with fire, meaning that he should take a large tool and cut off the branches.

Then the son began to cry, and the father got angry and went away. He said, “You children of today don’t want to work, you don’t know how. You’ll all be homosexuals, you’ll be this and that . . .” The father took a gun and shot the buffalo, meaning that he cleared the base of the tree himself. He took a large stick to kill the snake, that is, he went to the middle and cleared away all of the vines. Then he took fire to keep the bees away and cut all of the branches without making a single branch fall down. He was so talented. He used to climb up trees by using his chest and climb down by using his stomach. He was an expert tree climber. He knew how to climb the trees just like they were his brothers.

So, he cut down all of the branches except for one, and put them in a pile at the top of one side of the tree, in order to demonstrate his superiority over his son. Then he chopped down the remaining branch and can you imagine how the tree shook when he let all of those branches fall to the ground? The tree really shook and he fell out of the tree and landed on the pile of sharp branches that had fallen, and he was stabbed to death. The son wailed for his father, and instead of saying, “Oh, Father,” he said, “Oh, Vave!” That’s how Vave was born.²⁴

²⁴Interview with Tora Abushiri of Kiwayuu, 11.11.95.

In addition to its detailed description of the procedures carried out by ancient farmers, Vave encapsulates the kind of rivalries that inspired identity-formation among the Bajuni. For example, the story that Tora Abushiri began above goes on to explain that a man from Simambae was passing when he heard the young boy wailing, "Vave, Oh Vave!" He stopped to listen to the boy as he sang the sad song that told of his father's misadventure. The poetic form in which the boy recalled the episode was so strange and beautiful to the man that he took off his traditional white waist wrap²⁵ and recorded each of the words the boy recited with a piece of charcoal. After the boy had finished the tale in its entirety, and people from the town had gathered to mourn Kisimbe Kondo's death, the stranger ran back to Simambae unnoticed.

Over time, Jutta shared the tradition he and his father had composed with members of his clan, who incorporated it into their oral repertoire by memorizing it and reciting it to each other. When it came time for a performance competition against the people of Simambae, the experts from Jutta's village believed they had their opponents beaten. Everyone, especially Jutta, was astonished when the orators from Simambae answered the Vave passages correctly. When the boy realized what had happened, he responded to them by saying:

“Wasimambae ni wizi, wengi ni majambarikozi, wanijepee jahazi na nanga mbili za chuma.”

The people from Simambae are thieves, and professional thieves at that! They have stolen a ship and its two iron anchors from me.

²⁵Tora Abushiri refers to this cloth as "vilote" and "hamis."

And the people from Simambae answered:

“Wasimambae siwezi wala siwajambakozi. Ni mbambanuzi mambo amebambanua.”

People from Simambae are not thieves, nor professional thieves. We just want to keep people informed so that the future generations will know.²⁶

The value of Vave as an archive of knowledge is apparent in how the people of Simambae respond to the boy's accusation. For people who had obtained the epic poem by spurious means, they were certainly not ashamed of their crime. In fact, they justified their actions as a duty to their children. This suggests that Vave was widely perceived to contain the kind of information that must be shared generally throughout the region, and not controlled for the benefit of a single group.

At first analysis, it seems odd that the Vave tradition does not include the name of the place it was first composed. The only clue to that location is a cryptic passage of Vave:

"Maana munenavo Vave, Vave kwao ni shinani. Vave ni kwa Bwana Mahadhi alozawa kisiwani. Maana kisiwa kisicho kombo. Hio iu sio lahani."

"You people who recite Vave, do you know where it came from? Vave originated from Bwana Mahadhi, who was born on an island. The island is perfectly round. I'm not just saying that--everybody knows its true."

This ambiguity makes room for a range of interpretations, which are hotly debated among the Bajuni. For example, Tora Abushiri believes the site is Kiwayuu, even though that island's long and narrow shape does not fit the description. Mbwana Tora Hatib ("Chief Tora") of Kiunga, on the other hand, is convinced that Vave originated on the mainland, as his own version implies:

²⁶Interview with Tora Abushiri of Kiwayuu, 11.11.95.

The Vave tradition is made up of metaphors that tell of an incident that happened a long time ago. One time, when people from Sendeni and Mvundeni were reciting Vave at a competition in Mvundeni, it was discovered that some visitors from Simambaye were secretly listening to them. They are believed to have stolen every last one of the poems, which are referred to in metaphor as a boat and its anchors.²⁷

After closer analysis, it is apparent that the exact site of Vave's origin is irrelevant. The only detail of consequence is that it was founded among a group of islanders, and not on the mainland. The island-mainland distinction was probably among the first important factors that differentiated the Bajuni from their enemies. Perhaps the "us" verses "them" distinction was quite general at the time Vave was created--something akin to cattle thieves against semi-sedentary farmers.²⁸ Historical records attribute the peopling of the islands to frequent attacks by nomadic pastoralists, who raided mainland villages of their cattle, their crops, and even their women.²⁹ Any of that would have been ample reason for island refugees to disassociate themselves with herders and create an identity of their own. This conflict is ultimately expressed in the portion of the story that reveals that the thief who stole Vave from its founders was an outsider from Simambae, on the mainland.

²⁷Interview with Chief Tora of Kiunga, 10.22.95.

²⁸Prins (1965) suggests that the Bajuni, like other coastal groups, are strategically ambiguous about who they are, where they live, and what they do in order to "fit in" wherever they are and whomever they are with. See Prins, 1965: 270-275.

²⁹The Pate Chronicle includes several references to such migration, as does Elliot's account (1925-26).

Vave's Role in the Making of Bajuni Men

My interpretation of this so-called "theft" is that Bajuni elders lost control over the transmission of Vave. At some time in the not-so-distant past, learning Vave by memory was an important component of the male passage from childhood to adulthood.³⁰ Control over that process constituted control over the entire society, since the making of men also meant the reproduction of Bajuni governing institutions, the family, the culture, and the mode of production. If a generation of young men usurped the power of their elders and learned the Vave tradition themselves, this might be remembered as a "theft" that ultimately threatened the way that Bajuni society was reproduced thereafter. If, by chance, this process was started among the people of Simambae, they would forever be held responsible for the corruption of Vave and perhaps even the demise of a more pristine Bajuni way of life.

There are many catalysts that might have caused this phenomenon to occur, including the economic opportunities that were made available to young men with the growth of coastal commerce. A first step in this direction would have come as a rebellion against the way Bajuni manhood was achieved. We know from documentary evidence that nomadic pastoralists performed a variety of manhood customs that the Bajuni chose not to inherit for themselves. One of them is described in a twelfth century Chinese account of a coastal wedding ceremony, at which the groom produced the male sex organ

³⁰One Bajuni informant explained that oral traditions and epic stories called "ngano" were customarily told to young boys recovering from circumcision wounds. Interview with Somoebwana Ali Borohoa of Lamu, 3.22.96.

of an enemy as a gift to his wife.³¹ Alternatively, Bajuni males were expected to willingly ignite large tracts of forest for cultivation, and brave the open seas for fresh fish. It is not surprising that the skills involved in these acts of bravery and strength are recorded in Bajuni oral traditions such as Vave and Kimai, which describe the challenges Bajuni youth would face as men.

Vave's role in male rights of passage seems to explain the secrecy that still surrounds it today. My own presence at the ceremony I participated in had been arranged through various Bajuni assistants and then confirmed with the Vave experts themselves. Neither my status as an outsider, nor my status as a woman seemed to be a bone of contention among the group of all-male farmers who invited me. Upon realizing that I was the only woman on the expedition, I began inquiring about the role that Bajuni women may have played in Vave in the past. I was informed that there are at least two female elders who people remember as Vave experts.³² Most women, however, did not recite Vave, but participated in Randa. They are especially remembered for providing rhythm for the dance by beating the "mwandi" pole with sticks (vigongo).³³ This source of percussion is still used by young boys at the annual ngoma competition held in Lamu during the Maulidi festival. It may represent the only example of this traditional Bajuni beat still in practice.

³¹See the twelfth century Chinese description of this "Barbara" wedding in Paul Wheatley, 1975:97. See also Allen, 1993:33.

³²These women were named Mwana Chacha and Mama Fatuma. Interviews with Twahiru Ali Fama, Mohammed Kale, Mohammed Ali, and Hassan Mohammed of Lamu, 6.7.96; Tora Abushiri of Kiwayuu, 11.11.95.

³³Interview with Abubakar Kuchi of Kilifi, 2.29.96; Tora Abushiri of Kiwayuu, 11.11.95; Yumbe Bakari and Amina "Nana" Shee of Kiunga, 11.3.96.

Other coastal people may have also believed that Vave was the magic through which the Bajuni gained autonomy over the islands and adjacent mainland between the Lamu archipelago and Kismaayu. It is true that Vave holds secrets that all of the inhabitants of this region depended on for their survival. The Bajuni learned much of this information from the Boni forest-dwellers, whom they have shared a close alliance with for centuries. Perhaps the real "theft" involved in Vave pertains to the transfer of knowledge between the Boni³⁴ and the Bajuni. The Bajuni readily admit their reliance on Boni expertise, something I witnessed myself during the burning at Vumbe. It is not inconceivable that the "ancient" Vave language so often referred to by Vave experts is actually the Cushitic language (Aweera) of the Boni. And yet, the Bajuni seem to have sustained an attitude of supremacy over the Boni, perhaps reminiscent of the superiority complexes so prevalent among their pastoralist ancestors. Ironically, even nomadic pastoralists relied on the know-how of the hunter-gatherers, with whom they exchanged the honey, ivory, hides, dried meats and wild herbs that allowed them to concentrate on their preferred mode of existence.

Although Vave clearly makes distinctions between herders and farmers, it also clarifies the important role that livestock played before the Bajuni became preoccupied with farming, fishing and harvesting mangroves. If Allen's hypothesis is correct, the

³⁴Other hunter-gatherers in the area are the Sanye peoples, who are believed to have had close relations with runaway slaves and various Mijikenda peoples, especially the Giriama. They are also believed to have acted as clients of the Gallas, much like the Boni did. See references to the 'Sania' by Hobley, 1929:28; J.R.W. Pigott, 1889.

Bajuni actually emerged from a pastoralist group known as the Katwa,³⁵ who immigrated from present-day Ethiopia and Somalia.³⁶ When they reached the coast, these people gradually became more sedentary, although cows, goats and donkeys remained highly integrated into their way of life. We know this because of the walled towns Bajuni forefathers built from at least the sixteenth century, presumably to protect their enclosed herds from raiders.³⁷

A paranoia about spear-wielding cow thieves from the north has been passed down by generations of Bajuni, causing them to adopt a defensive mentality recognized in various sections of Vave.³⁸ This is most obvious in a portion that requires visitors to prove that they are genuine farmers, and not pastoralist pretenders, before they are allowed to participate in the ceremony. In the following excerpt, B and S take on the role of local hosts, and E assumes the role of the visitor:

B: Naye mwanangu wa mcha siye, iye hafi kwa kilili, wala fumbalili. Hili fumo kali halimvuazi. Maana mgeni ni mtofu uwe mvili dhaifu na ndiani ndefu uiendeme. Nawe umefanya akili nawe kwa kwenenda leli. Usiku hulali kwa vacheka mai. Navo hucheka mai na kucheka mai kuundovo vakisua matava ivu. Hufanya kuu ndovo vakisulia kuu mai. Maana hukuvava imi mbavu zangu mbili. Nikuvunda kingili na mapande yati yati.

Maana ni mwanande mwana naloza inde ni buge na mmande kula ndiani. Kisha ni mwanande, imi naloza inde na mai ya mande mwenyewe

³⁵The Katwa are mentioned as people living on the mainland opposite the Lamu archipelago in Stigand's version of *The Pate Chronicle*. See Tolmacheva, 1993:70. Today, members of the Katwa clans are distinguished among other Bajuni by their avoidance of fish. Prins also mentions this, 1965:269.

³⁶Allen provides an array of evidence to support this theory. He ultimately refers to these people more specifically as the Katwa Bajuni and the Katwa-Segeju, who he believes migrated to the coast from Somalia and Ethiopia in several migrations. See Allen, 1993:33-35;159.

³⁷See Allen, 1993:110-112.

³⁸The fear that the Orma (Oromo-speakers) evoked among people on the coast stemmed from a long history of Oromo-speaking raiders who plundered Southern Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya for centuries. According to the sixteenth century Ethiopian court priest named Bahrey, who may have been of Oromo (Galla) descent, the Oromo were considered an extremely vicious lot. Bahrey claims that he made his record of Galla history is, "in order to make known the number of their tribes, their readiness to kill people and the brutality of their manners." See Bahrey, 1993.

huolea. Maana humveka mwana huku inde buge lali la mlima. Lile buge lali la mlima shimazi pepo za inde. Maana humveka mwana iye akilinda buge humveka mchuma akilinda shimazi. Maana shimazi ni sumu, maana mmande ni tamu, buge ni thaumu. Shimazi ni sumu alao haponi. Maana hili buge ilo lali la mlima shimazi pepo za inde. Maana kongo uwe mgeni uvone mlango unyamise shingo, ungie kwa ndani. Haya hukwambia kongo, eh mvulana uwe uvone mlango unyamise shingo, ungie kwa ndani.

My brave son will not die from weeding or from sleeping on a bed of sticks. He won't be killed by a spear. You are tired visitor, and your body is weak after your long journey. You must be very brave to come at night. You never sleep, you spend the whole night fetching water. You fetch bucket after bucket of water to put out the fire.

My ribs are aching. My ribs ache when I cut the tree stumps. I am a true farmer who was born in the wilderness. I use dew for my bath. I used to leave my son outside to sleep in the fog near the mountain, where it was very windy. I left my son there to take care of the fog and my slave to take care of the winds. The winds were poisonous and killed everyone they touched. Dew is sweet, fog is bitter, the winds are poisonous and killed everyone they touched. The fog came off the mountain with the bad winds that blew from there.

Welcome, visitor. Watch out for the door, bend your neck and come in. We say, "welcome" young man. Watch out for the door, bend your neck and come in.

E: Kama ni mwande, kama ni mwande na lozawa inde buge na mmande shimanzi kiolea. Tena mmande kaolea buge kifulia eo ruhu ya "man akrar makin." Maana mmande ni tamu eh, buge ni thaumu, shimazi ni sumu, alao haponi. Lakini andama mkondo ambijili mambo upulike wimbo ambao hufumbwaya.

I'm a farmer. I'm a farmer who was born in the wilderness. I bathe in the dew and fog. I bathe in the dew and wash my clothes in the fog. Today I'm feeling fine. Dew is sweet and fog is thirsty, the winds are poisonous and kill whoever they touch. But stay on the path, concentrate on what we say, listen well to what we sing and the proverbs we tell you.

S: Ni mwande gani waloza inde buge na mmande ukila ndiani? Uwe kama ni mwanade waloza inde weche madayande ya inde mwamboni. Bisumila twambe eh mvulana eh, Ilahi tuombe mvumba zivumbe na itile nane.

Which farmer was born in the wilderness? Who ate the fog and the dew on his way here? If you're a farmer who was born in the wilderness, show us the evidence now! Lets begin in Gods name. Lets pray to God, who created all creatures and the eight heavens.

B: Na itile nane. Maana ni mwande imi naloza inde buge na mmande hulila ndiani. Maana nina ala mimi mikononi mwangu na ziani mwangu ninazo alamu.

Imi mbele papike na nyuma papike. Hapa kachikachi papike zombo. Maana ni mwanande imi mwana naloza inde buge na mmande hulila ndiani. Maana hukwambia kongo uye uvone mlango unyamise shingo ungie kwa ndani.

And the eight heavens He created. I'm a farmer who was born in the wilderness. I ate the fog and the dew on my way here. My tools are my evidence and I have cuts from branches on my back. I have evidence in front of me and behind me. And I'm carry tools in my arms in the middle. I'm a true farmer, who was born in the wilderness. I ate the fog and the dew on my way here. So how will you welcome me? Tell me to watch out for the door, to bend my neck and come in.

With this evidence I have proven that I'm a true farmer who was born in the wilderness, and bathed in the dew. So how will you welcome me? Tell me to watch out for the door, to bend by neck and come in!

E: Maana ndoo mbee heri, enda mbali shari na iti za vavi ukienda shukia. Kashukie vavi na vaovu pia. Ushukie tandu na mashina pia. Taka kunipani, taka kunipani, taka kunipani. Taka kunipani eh mvulana eh. Kipokea kongo kikupa usimbo. Utanipa nini?

Let peace be with us and bid evil goodbye. When you must go to the land of evil, accept their welcome. Accept the evil's welcome. Accept their welcome from the branches to the roots. What do you want to give me? What do you want to give me? What will you give me, young man, after I accept your welcome and hand you my walking stick? What will you give me?

B: Utanipani? Maana nitakupa kiemba cha chachi nyembamba mikili ya simba ali maungoni. Hapo takupa na kichi ukalie kachi. Unipe hadisi uieo nao. Maana takupa kichanga na yoe la kuimba. Na mpiga panda uve naye uwe. Haya takupa panda eh mvulana eh na yoe la kuimba. Na mpiga panda uve naye uwe.

You ask me what I'll give you? I'll give you a turbin made of soft cloth, with fringe like a lion that will lie on your back. Then I'll give you a chair for you to sit on, when you'll tell me what you've come with. I'll also give you a mat and a voice to sing with the zumari player. I'll give you the voice to sing with the zumari player, young man. You'll sit there with the zumari player.

Spatial, Cultural and Religious Heritage

The portion of Vave above may contain a clue to where some Bajuni ancestors originated. The mountains mentioned in this set of verses might refer to the Bali

mountains of Ethiopia, from which the Juba River descends to the coast. If the precursors of the Bajuni were pastoralists who lived in these highlands, the Juba River would have been a convenient route to the coast. Perhaps the search for fertile grazing lands and permanent sources of fresh water led migrations southward over time.³⁹ It is also possible that highlanders were forced off their lands by enemy cattle-raiders, whose "poisonous winds killed everyone they touched." Or, the "winds" might be a metaphor for an epidemic or a famine that compelled people to leave. Collaterally, the Juba River is known to have been an important conduit of goods and information, which led those with trade aspirations toward economic opportunities available on the coast.⁴⁰ The material comforts afforded by coastal civilization were likely to have been a motivating factor. In addition to the luxuries mentioned in the verses above, a wife, tobacco, fresh water, and beef stew are also listed as gifts exchanged on the coast.

Another piece of this puzzle is found in a Segeju⁴¹ oral tradition, which refers to a pre-Shungwaya homeland known as "Misri." Both Hollis' 1899 recording of the Segeju tradition and Baker's 1918 version⁴² mention Misri as the place where the Segeju claim to have originated before migrating to the coast. Allen ascribes this reference to a geographical location somewhere along an ancient trade route that extended over-land

³⁹Henry Stanley Newman (1898) claims that British Captain Dundas raved about the "luxuriant vegetation" that lined the fertile Juba River valley in the nineteenth century. See Newman, 1898:133.

⁴⁰Pouwels (1987) briefly mentions the Juba River as a "route used by interior Somali people who have followed it on migrations to the coast." See Pouwels, 1987:7

⁴¹The Segeju are a coastal people who, along with the nine Mijikenda groups, claim a common place of origin at Shungwaya. Segeju traditions link them to Cushitic-speaking pastoralists from the north, rather than to fellow Bantu-speakers. Segeju history and their historical connection to the Katwa is so crucial to Allen's thesis that he devotes an entire chapter to them. See Allen, 1993:Ch.5.

⁴²This version of the Segeju tradition is known as the "el-Buhry version." See Allen, 1993:124.

from the Gulf of Aden to central Kenya during the first millenium. Many of my Bajuni informants use "Misri" in reference to Egypt, where some say their ancestors originally came from.⁴³ This suggests that some Bajuni may be the descendants of the ancient immigrants, who traveled along a trade route that led down the Nile river from southern Egypt, throughout the Sudan and Ethiopia, and finally down the Juba river to the "Swahili" coast.⁴⁴ Allen puts forth convincing evidence that the Segeju and the Katwa (both potential forebears of the Bajuni) were once culturally, if not genealogically linked.⁴⁵ I believe that the reference to mountains in the Vave tradition may offer additional support for Allen's complex historical synthesis of the peopling of the northern coast of east Africa.

Of course, this accents the African cultural heritage of the Bajuni while de-emphasizing the impact that Persian and Arab immigrants had on coastal civilization. This is consistent with contemporary scholarship, which means to balance previous historical analyses that highlight contributions made by foreigners and downplay local influences.⁴⁶ Rather than consciously focusing on one or the other, I have found that

⁴³A.I. Salim also notes Egypt as one of the places that the Bajuni claim to have come from. See Salim, 1973:19.

⁴⁴Allen provides an alternative definition of "*sahel*," the Arabic word for "coast," which is how the name "Sawahil" ("Swahili") for coastal people emerged. He claims that *sahel* also means "a port used for inland trade," which is the definition that Arab travelers such as Ibn Battuta meant. Allen depends on the latter definition to confirm his "Misri" trade route hypothesis. See Allen, 1993:59.

⁴⁵Allen (1993) traces the clan names of both the Bajuni and the Segeju to the Rendille and the Aweer Kilia (Boni), and others associated in traditions with people known as "Gabbra," who are pastoralists. Allen suggests the term "Bajuni" is a derivation of the terms "Badui" and "Baduj," a derogatory term that the Swahili used in place of "*Beduin*" - an Arabic reference to people who resist Islam. See Allen, 1993:180. One of the coastal elders I spoke with also uses the term "Beduin" when describing coastal people who did not follow orthodox Islamic practices. Interview with Mahfudh Basharahil of Mambui, 4.26.96.

⁴⁶For an influential example of this trend see Mark Horton, 1994.

coastal performances clearly articulate the interconnectedness of traditions that stem from African systems of thought, and those that stem from the Arabian Peninsula.

Vave is a perfect example of this. Each chapter opens in the name of Allah, the God of Islam, while concurrently evoking ancestral spirits and the shrines devoted to them. One section of verses, which focuses on reciting the names of prophets and angels seamlessly flows into a section devoted to ritual sacrifice, which explains the correspondence between variously colored chickens and their respective importance to the course of the fire. Each chicken symbolizes a different natural force and is slaughtered only when needed. Mohammed Bunu, one of the farmers present during the ceremony at Vumbe summarized the elaborate iconic scheme by citing specific Vave passages:

“Kuna kuku mweupe. Kuna kuku wa mamba, mvili wa simba. Na yale manyasa yakipamba damu. Kuna na latete fahali mweupe wa Nzimetemete, nlangomwe. Kuna na wa ivu wa kuvukia ikoo ipevu.” (There is a white colored chicken that is killed when the fire is set. There is a roughed-feathered chicken that has a body like a lion. That one is killed when you want the fire to blaze. There is big speckled cock that's killed when the fire is burning well. And there is an ash-colored adult chicken that is killed when everything has been burned.)

One group of Vave experts asks the other, “Walivuka na ari, utavukae? Mida ya kuvuka bandari ukifika ni valivo ie.” And the other group responds, “Akanza kwa bisi mida ya kuvuka. Bandari ikifika, “Bismillahi”. Akaanza kwa ia imwa imwa akisikilia pali na ikomo. Akaanza kwa kuku, kuku mwehundu wa mamba, mvili wa simba. Kundu zikivamba na yale manyasi ya kipambaza. “ This means that they slaughtered a red chicken in the early morning. And they continued reciting Vave until they came to the part that mentions slaughtering the speckled cock. And then they mention that when the fire is over, a white adult hen is slaughtered to cool down the fire.

In many respects, therefore, Vave reflects how eloquently the Bajuni people have interwoven African and Islamic religious themes over time. Bajuni cosmology so

intricately combines the two worldviews, that they are understood in utter complementarity. This interview with a group of Bajuni brothers⁴⁷ clearly demonstrates this:

Q: Is Vave Islamic, or was it here before the arrival of the Arabs?

H: Vave is Islamic.

Q: Do you have to have an Imam (a Muslim teacher) to perform Vave?

H: Yes, for Vave.

A: An Imam?

T: No, Imams stay in the mosque.

A: No, there are no Imams.

H: The Vave experts are called Imams.

M: The experts are called Imams. They are the ones who lead the Vave songs.

H: We are not talking about the Imams that lead prayers, but the experts who teach Vave.

Q: So those people were necessary?

M: Yes, those Imams were necessary.

Q: Are the first verses of Vave taken from the Qur'an?

M: Yes, the first verses begin in the name of God. There must be an Imam.

Q: So the founder of Vave was a Muslim?

M: Yes, he was a Muslim.

Q: That's quite important to know. Yet, I thought that slaughtering chickens was an African tradition. Therefore, there are parts of Vave that are African and parts that are Islamic--correct?

A: The chickens are slaughtered on the day the fire is set. Different colored chickens are gathered. There is a white chicken, a gold chicken, a chicken that is slaughtered when "heneno" is said at the beginning of the ceremony, there is a chicken with rough feathers...Do you understand?

H: And there is a red chicken.

A: There is a red chicken. Do you understand? The chickens must be there to make the fire a success. If the fire is dying down, a certain chicken is slaughtered to make the fire grow bigger. There must be a Muslim witchdoctor (mwaliimu) there who knows how to recite the Qur'an while the fire is being set. He writes some magic words down on paper so that the wind comes.

T: He makes the wind blow.

A: The white chicken is held up and the flames of the fire become very high. There has to be a Muslim witchdoctor there and chickens must be present when Vave is performed.

Q: So if the fire burns well, no chickens are slaughtered?

A: No chickens are slaughtered....There is a Muslim witchdoctor who controls the burning itself. You can't burn without him.

⁴⁷Interview with Mohammed Kale (M), Mohammed Ali (A), Hassan Mohammed (H), Twahiru Ali Fama (T), 6.7.96.

T: You can't burn without him. He analyzes the stars to decide the right timing of the burning.

A: He decides which time the burning will take place.

T: He uses Islamic witchcraft (falaki). He checks on the wind velocity, the angle of the sun, and things like that.

A: If there is no wind, he writes a spell that makes the wind blow.

T: That is called "mpepea." (fanning)

A: That's called "mpepea." Do you understand? That's how it works.

Q: Have you ever attempted to set the fire but it didn't work?

A: We have failed several times on Manda island.

Q: Really?

A: We set the fire, but it didn't catch and the farm was left uncleared.

Q: Was it because it rained?

A: Sometimes there is not enough wind, or when the stars are cool the fire can't catch properly.

T: When they are cool ("buruji").

A: The stars are cool.

T: There are stars for rain and for wind...

A: For fire.

T: And for fire. The star for fire sometimes gets cooled by the star for rain. When you try to set fire when the rainy season approaches, it can't catch.

A: It doesn't catch.

Q: So it's God's work?

A: It's God's work.

T: It's God's work so we can't do anything about it.

A: It's witchcraft (falaki).

Q: That's why Vave is so important?

A: Vave discusses all these things.

T: Vave talks about all those things.

A: Vave discusses falaki, the Qur'an, the stars, the angels, the witchdoctors . . . all of that is discussed in Vave.

Much of this interview describes ritual strategies that coastal people have been practicing for centuries. The term "falaki" encompasses the mystical techniques Sufi healers (walimu) perfected in collaboration with local experts (waganga), trained in African methods. Their cooperative efforts explain the popularity of amulets filled with Qur'anic verses and leopard claws, which both Muslims and non-Muslims wore as

protective charms.⁴⁸ A specialist trained to read the Qur'an, control the winds, concoct potions with local herbs, and summon angels and ancestral spirits would have been an extremely valuable asset to farmers dependent upon blessings from beyond to carry out their hazardous work. In this context, it is not surprising that so much of Vave is an appeal to supernatural forces for assistance:

M: It is true, it's the ancestral shrine and the ancestral spirits that we call. The shrine and the ancestral spirits, and the ancestral spirits who owned this land. The shrine is for Adam, the oldest prophet, and Muhammad, another of the prophets. Muhammad is God's prophet, who was born in Saudi, where we go to worship...

Vave represents just one of many coastal manifestations of the slippery slope people navigate between Islam and their ancient belief systems.⁴⁹ Bajuni farmers ultimately hedged their bets and worshipped a variety of African and Islamic ancestral spirits simultaneously. As Islamic magic (falaki) became more popular on the coast, the Bajuni incorporated the most practical elements into their ritual activities. Social pressures from the local ulama to do away with "heathenistic" practices (haram) may have motivated the Bajuni to make Vave into something more analogous to Islamic prayer. This might explain the absence of kin lists and the presence of Muslim prophets and angels. Another line of Vave provides further evidence of the emphasis the Bajuni ultimately placed on conversion to Islam:

⁴⁸This subject is taken up more rigorously in chapter 3. For more information on nineteenth century charms see chapter 10 in Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari, 1981; David Parkin, 1991.

⁴⁹Several scholars have studied this process among the Mijikenda including: Parkin, 1970:217-233; 1972:passim; 1979:passim; 1989:161-175; 1994:passim; Robert Bunge, 1974.

B: I told my father to declare that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His prophet. I also told my mother to declare it and I also declared it. I told my father to repent and my mother to repent and I also repented. We welcome the shrines and the ancestral spirits and the ancestors. The shrines are for Adam, the oldest prophet, and Muhammad the most respected. God help us get through. Muhammad is God's prophet, who was born in Saudi, where we go to pray. We also pray to Mayasa and the prophet Jesus and to the last prophet we pray to is Abraham. There was Abraham and Moses, who was given the book, and Muhammad brought the religion. When the leader came, we all began to pray.

The final portion of Vave that I recorded, called "Tavukae" ("Success"), offers additional evidence of this multi-layered world-view:

B: Even if there is no chance that everything will burn, we still hope it will. The elders and the young people met in one place, and the scholars met in another. The scholars recited the Qur'an from back to front. They prayed four prayers to the Prophet, which were accepted. They burnt incense and the scent rose to the heavens. They also burned some brush to pray to the Sky God for help in setting the fire. We burned incense to pray to God to help bring us through. There were four descendants of the Prophet, who prevented anyone from passing.

E: The first one was named Omari, the second was Abubakar, the third was Athman and the fourth, Ali Haidari. Those were mighty men, who were ready to fight against all troublemakers. That's how I found out that Doyala was captured by Galata. When I asked how it happened that Doyala was captured by Galata, I was told to go and watch them fight. So I took my spear and I tied my baby on my back so if I was killed, we'd die together. When I got there, I saw Omari fighting the heathen with his sword. He is a mighty man, who is willing to fight. He will lead the way to heaven. He is God's soldier.

B: He will fight all evil. Those are the things we discuss when we're about to set the fire. There will be a loud roar and flames will flare and everyone will be anxious. I will bring a rough-feathered chicken that looks like a lion. Lets sing Vave together. We call the rough-feathered chicken "manga". I'll also bring a gold-colored hen and I'll slaughter it on our way to set the fire. I'll also bring a white speckled cock to the fire setting. Hamadi, the gossip, and Obo Shadi will also be there because they are expert singers.

E: Hamadi, the gossip, will prepare the herbs very carefully. Hamadi, the gossip, and Obo Shadi are singers. I'll bring an explosive white object that will explode everywhere, and drums that I'll leave on top of the hill. The sound of the utasa (metal plate) will be in the air. We will all dance Mwashha and have a lively performance. The drummer will beat the drums with two sticks as we cheer him

on. The witchdoctor will not take responsibility for anything that happens and people should not come with their children. If the witchdoctor can't read or write then he should give the pens and the books to us. If the witchdoctor is an expert, then he will make a jini appear to make the fire huge. It will be like feeding a cow by dipping a rope in water and letting it drink the drops. I will put all of the cows to one side. All of the cows will be put into an enclosure on one side. Tomorrow, I'll put the cows aside so that they don't get burned. Tomorrow there'll be a huge fire with flames that will burn anyone who gets too close. Listen carefully as we discuss how we will carry out the job.

There are several excerpts of this section that offer further insight into the spiritual beliefs of the Bajuni. One is the reference to the "sky-God," which reflects a belief system common to many east African pastoralists.⁵⁰ Others mention the worship of ancestral shrines, of which the Oromo (Galla) of Ethiopia, the Mijikenda⁵¹ of Kenya,⁵² and even the Muslim descendants of Persians and Arabs erected for their dead. Historical records provide some help in sorting this out.

Al-Idrisi (1154) describes the worship of stone shrines that were anointed with fish oil by the so-called "Zanj" peoples of the northern coast.⁵³ And the travel log Elliot kept during his late nineteenth century visit to the "Bajuni Islands"⁵⁴ certainly suggests that ancestral shrines were of particular importance to the peoples who lived on them. He noted several large stone pillars marking what he surmised to be African, Islamic, and even Christian (Portuguese) burial grounds. Elliot sketched a design carved into a tomb he discovered on Chula Island, which looks much like a motif used by Bajuni craftsman today.

⁵⁰See Allen, 1993:194.

⁵¹Parkin, 1991:207 cites the following: Prins, 1952:90; Werner, 1915:43; Johnstone, 1902:33, 41.

⁵²The Mijikenda word "koma," which refers to an ancestral grave, is the term used in Vave.

⁵³See Trimmingham, 1980:5.

⁵⁴Elliot specifically refers to the islands between the Lamu archipelago and the mouth of the Juba River. See Elliot, 1925-26:10.

The patterns confirm that at least some of the tombs built on the Bajuni Islands represent the shrines alluded to in Vave. The primary difference between Bajuni shrines and those used by orthodox Muslims and Christians was that the Bajuni seem to have worshipped the shrines themselves, not only the ancestors who were buried in them. This passage from Vave clearly refers to the worship of an ancestral shrine, or "shela koma." Then, almost as a second thought, the shrine is classified as "Islamic," probably due to the Muslim influences mentioned earlier in the chapter.

E: Shela koma na mizimu. Shela koma na mizimu ati? Jadi na venye zivanda vachangulizi va iti. Maana shela koma alovwa javi alotia pefu. Maana ni mtu mmoya. Maana ni shela koma na mizimu koma na mizimu. Ati jadi na venye zivanda, jadi na vakaa iti. Ni shela koma eh mvulana eh. Alovwa javi alotia pefu ni mtu mmoya.

Ancestral shrine and nature spirits. Is it really the ancestral shrine and nature spirits? Ancestors and ancient owners of the land. This means the ancestral shrine laid the mat and lit the incense. It could only be one person. This means the ancestral shrine and the ancestral spirits and the nature spirits. Is it really the ancestors and the ancient owners of the land, the ancestors and the ancient inhabitants of the land? Its the ancestral shrine, oh young man. The one who laid the mat and lit the incense can only be one person.

BM: Ni machambi ndia eh. Ni kweli ni shela koma, mizimu mema na mizimu ya nyuma. Tukiamkuwa. Maana ni Adamu, iye alehi salamu, nasi ni kaumu. Tukampokea. Maana huu shela koma aliIsilamu. Huu shela koma aliIsilamu. Maana ni Mumwe iye naye wa mweli kisha. Ni moya wa mweliwa Mungu. Maana ni Mumwe upale kumwe, huangusa vaume mmoya mmoya. Kisha ni mumwe iye uavie vamwe, uteweke ngome Pate ziwani.

It's a kind of offering to the ancestral spirits. It's true it's an ancestral shrine, the good spirits and the spirits of the past. We call them. This means it's Adam, peace be upon him, whom we are descendants of. We welcomed him. This means this ancestral shrine is Islamic. This ancestral shrine is Islamic. This means that this Creator is the true and only one. The only true God. This means the Creator of all creation, is the one who takes human life, one after the other. Then, it's the Creator, the killer of all creation, who controls the sea wall of Pate.

Another clue to the Bajuni shrine mentioned here may be found in a story that

Bwana Kitini of Pate narrated to Captain Stigand in 1908, when he orally transmitted the

Pate Chronicle.⁵⁵ It tells of a woman who lived in the town of Shanga in the thirteenth century, before the Sultan of Pate had the male inhabitants of the town killed, and made those who remained his prisoners.⁵⁶ While the Sultan's soldiers were carrying out this deed, one heroic "maiden" is said to have commanded the earth to swallow her alive before she be captured. When Sultan Muhammad wa Ahmad ("Bwana Fumomadi") heard of this miracle, from the soldier who had witnessed the event himself, he erected a shrine for her on the very spot the miracle had occurred. Building such a monument for a prestigious male member of the local ulama was not nearly as remarkable as erecting a shrine for a woman from Shanga, which partially explains why it is included in the Pate Chronicle. But there is also another reason, which becomes evident upon further investigation of the heroine.

It is significant that Bwana Kitini did not refer to the woman from Shanga by her clan name. This means she was probably neither of Arab nor Persian descent, and therefore not from a family worth mentioning. The fact that none of the recorded versions of the Chronicle discuss the people of Shanga in any depth,⁵⁷ suggests that they were a people of mixed ancestry, who had most likely fled to Pate Island to escape persecution from mainland raiders such as the Orma. If that is true, then the woman's place in Pate history is derived solely from her mystical abilities.

⁵⁵Captain Stigand transcribed Bwana Kitini's oral account of the Pate Chronicle in 1908, and published it as Land of the Zinj in 1913. Although Stigand's version was the first to be published, Bwana Kitini wrote down a version in Arabic in 1903, which later became known as the Hollis manuscript. It was later translated and published in 1914 by Alice Werner. See Tolmacheva, 1993:15.

⁵⁶Some of the people who now live in Siyu claim that their ancestors were forced from Shanga during this incident.

⁵⁷The MS321 version refers only to them as "Kinandangu," a Swahili term meaning "hopelessly greedy." See Tolmacheva, 1993:346.

And yet, Bwana Kitini explicitly describes the woman as "God-fearing," and claims that the soldier who witnessed the episode was transformed into a faithful servant of God by her example.⁵⁸ Moreover, the Sultan himself was quite particular about the way in which the woman's grave was cared for. The narrator tells us: "The soldier was put in the shrine to live there to perform the services, light the lamps at night, and pluck up the grass growing in the doorway. When their father died, his sons tended the mausoleum . . ."⁵⁹ Since Stigand's version of the Chronicle is the only one that includes this story, which he transcribed directly into English, we cannot cross-reference the terms Bwana Kitini used for "shrine" or "mausoleum." If the shrine was remembered in Arabic terms, it probably resembled that of a Sufi saint, albeit *female*. If, on the other hand, the shrine was remembered in local African terms, then the grave was probably like the "shela koma" mentioned in Vave. In any event, this tale is a metaphor for how the ancient people, who ultimately became known as Bajuni, paid homage to their most revered ancestors. The Pate Chronicle and the Vave tradition have this in common.

Randa

Like many coastal rituals I have observed over the years, Vave evokes a gamut of emotions by alternating between prayer and dance. Between the chapters of Vave, the farmers get a chance to engage in a light-hearted circle-dance called **Randa**, which features the impromptu composition of lyrics that are often quite hilarious. After the

⁵⁸See Tolmacheva, 1993:43.

⁵⁹Ibid.

experts recite the last verses of a chapter, one of the farmers calls out, "Rigombo eh, Rigombo eh, Rigombo" and the others respond, "Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha." This signals the transition from Vave to Randa. The following is an example of the kind of lyrics that the farmers sing during a Randa performance:

S: Muda wa shamusi kwima. Muda wa shamusi kwima. Tange ikikoa yuva mutavona mishumati. Kana mavingu a vua. (When the sun is overhead at noon).
x2 (When the cut forest is heated by the sun, you'll see clouds of smoke from the fire that look like rain clouds.)

Group: Kana mavingu a vua. Kana mavinga a vua. Mutavona mishumati. (Just like rain clouds, just like rain clouds. You'll see clouds of smoke.)

S: Rigombo eh Rigombo eh Rigombo.

Group - Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

S: Kana mavingu a vua muda wa shamusi. (You'll see clouds of smoke when the sun is overhead.)

O: Muda wa shamusi kwima . Tange ikikoa yuva mutavona mishumati. (When the sun is overhead. After the cut branches have been heated by the sun, you'll see smoke clouds.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

H: Mago eh mago eh mago. x4 (Oh logs, oh logs, oh logs)

O: Anguse magogo mpe nguvu nari. Anguse magogo. (chorus) x4 (Throw on the logs and make the fire roar. Throw on the logs.)

H: Mago go shela koma na mizimu. (Let the logs burn in the name of our ancestors and the sprits.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

H: Magogo na mizimu ati. (The logs and the earth sprits.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

H: Magogo mke hupigwae mbano? (The logs...how do you ask a female log?)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

H: Magogo asichukuche kivuno. (The logs....let there be a great harvest.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

H: Magogo ni heri ni kauma meno. (The logs...I grit my teeth.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

S: Vipingoni ni salama, vipingoni ni salama. Chumuie Bamkuu, Abushiri na Saidi. (Everything is fine in Vipingo. Everything is fine in Vipingo. We've come to help Bamkuu, Abushiri and Saidi.)

O: Abushiri na Saidi. Abushiri na Saidi chumuie Bamkuu, Abushiri na
(Abushiri and Saidi. Abushiri and Saidi. To help Bamkuu, Abushiri and)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

E: Tusomeni kama juzu tusomeni kama juzu. Kila mtu kara lake, eo chumuie Bamkuu iye na jamaa zake.

(Lets sing like we read the Quran, sharing the verses. Today, we've come to help Bamkuu and his friends.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

H: Magogo zia zangu huni vava.

(Oh logs, my joints are aching.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

H: Magogo zote sarara zapinda.

(Oh logs, all my muscles are tight.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

E: Magogo ule ni mwana haramu. (Oh logs, that is a bastard.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

EH: Magogo nyawe tampamba dochi. (Oh logs, I'll decorate your mother.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

E: Magogo eo kama ni uile. (Oh logs, I've come today.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

E: Yo mame sangali ndamile. (Oh mother, I shouldn't have come.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

E: Yo mame vale vatunga ya nane. (Oh mother, look at the eight herders.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

E: Yo mame vangali nitukuzile. (Oh mother, they would have kidnapped me.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

E: Yo mame vale vatunga va hini. (Oh mother, those herders are evil.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

E: Kesho vandamwa na huandamwa. (Tomorrow we will set the fire.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

E: Yo mame uchi yiu mbwa vavai. (Oh mother, the unburned branches will be used as firewood.)

Chorus: Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware, chacha.

E: Uwe magogo hunipe vacha mashoka. (Oh logs, the ax will cut you.)

When I asked Chief Tora how this dance got its name, he explained that "randa" is a machine that sands down wood--a perfect metaphor for the way fire clears the forest.⁶⁰ I had a more difficult time finding anyone who would tell me what the Randa chorus meant. Most people insisted that "Chacha Rigombo kwerekweche mwana ware" was composed of old-fashioned Bajuni vocabulary that nobody knows the meaning of any longer. But when translated into standard Swahili, the words seem to tell of a man

⁶⁰Interview with Mbwana Tora Hatib of Kiunga, 11.22.95.

named "Chacha Rigombo" who is tickling (kereketa) a virgin girl (mwanamwali). This explains why the sentence stimulates hysterical behavior by the farmers, who break into this chorus whenever Vave becomes unbearably serious.

The first time this took place, I was completely caught off guard. From behind the video camera I sensed a dramatic emotional shift as the farmers began shuffling around in a circle as if they were intoxicated. I remember trying to swallow the lump in my throat that had formed just a few minutes earlier at the sight of the big tears on the cheeks of the Vave experts as they recited the names of their ancestors. When the farmers began laughing and falling down on the ground, I assumed they were mocking the sanctity of the occasion. Then I noticed that the elders had joined in the raucous dance, and I knew that Randa was an official break from the emotional intensity Vave required of us all.

The Burning

At about 4:00 am, just before the first prayers of the day (alfajiri) were called, the farmers ended the ritual and slowly dispersed to get a couple hours of sleep. When we all awoke, there was excitement in the air and men were rushing around making final preparations for the burning. The farmers cleared the path that encircled the plot, double-checked the firebreaks, prepared their torches, and distributed kijojo,⁶¹ a sweet rice mixture, to everyone. After the work had been done, groups of farmers sat down to study the sky and the direction of the winds. The sky had become increasingly gray as the

⁶¹This is prepared with leftover rice from the feast the night before. It has ritual significance and is always mentioned in connection to setting fire to the forest.

morning had progressed. The quiet conversations turned into feverish discussion about the possibility of rain. It had not even occurred to me until then that rain would spell disaster for the farmers and make months of heavy cutting all for not. The collective feeling of helplessness was unbearable. And for the first time, I understood the importance of summoning help from above. We needed it!

At 1:00 pm the wind picked up and shifted toward a direction the farmers thought most suitable. Everyone grabbed their torches and quickly ran to their positions. There was an awful silence that fell over the farmers as they waited for the fire-bearer to come around and light their torches. The wind shifted again and the men became quite nervous. A messenger ran towards us and told our quadrant to extinguish the torches and wait. Large puffs of smoke from across the acres of cut trees billowed up into the air. They looked exactly as the Randa lyrics had described them; like dark, heavy rain clouds. My heart was beating so fast that I thought it would jump out of my chest!

Then a man came running toward us with a burning branch and lit the torches of the men who surrounded me. We all ran together in a line, the men igniting piles of cut timber along our path and I trying to stable my camera to tape them. When the flames of their torches got too close to their hands, the farmers hoisted them into the middle of the plot. And as the flames grew higher and higher, the fire became more beautiful than I could have imagined.

The heat from the raging fire was so intense that I thought my video camera was melting. My whole body trembled with fear. I knew if the wind switched direction, or if

the fire jumped across the path and lit the forest that surrounded us, we would all be killed. Shouting from all directions intensified the excitement. Men were running back and forth along the path, igniting new torches and re-setting portions of the plot that had not caught fire. By now, the entire sky was filled with black smoke that would alert the anxious wives of Pate that their husbands' dangerous work was in progress. I remember thinking that I could hear their prayers, which provided me with some spiritual relief. And for the first time, I felt practical appreciation for the rituals that the farmers had been engaged in the night before.

Homecoming: A Conclusion

All of the rest of that day seems much like a dream to me. I was so thrilled, yet so exhausted that I hardly remember the long walk to the dhow or the voyage back to Faza. I do recall the crowd that gathered on the seashore as we sailed nearer to town about six o'clock that evening. The farmers were singing Randa songs and laughing as they recounted stories about the day. I was surprised to see so many people look relieved that we had all returned in one piece. As the group of us dispersed, my friend Athman Ali, who had escorted me on the expedition, drew me aside. He explained that some Somali bandits on their way to our camp had been intercepted by a group of Boni allies the previous night. Not wanting to disrupt my work and cause panic, he had kept the information to himself. He added that he had spent most of the night praying for our safety. I was stunned. This news and the events of the last two days had really taken a toll

on me. I literally crawled into the bed that my friends Tima and Bwana Mzee had prepared for me and slept. At long last, I was vertical, cool and safe.

Although the return trip from Vumbe was anticlimactic compared to the Vave ritual and the burning of the forest, other coastal communities make much more out of the farmers' homecoming. Of particular interest is a custom known as "Rangaite," which Bajuni farmers in other places along the coast performed to celebrate a successful fire. Takaungu elders recall that residents of the Bajuni neighborhood, "mtaa Gunya," established the Rangaite tradition and popularized it among other farmers in the area. Some of them also remember hearing Vave recited among a group of Bajuni elders who passed away more than fifty years ago. When I asked the last living member of the Bajuni enclave, Uba Mzee, about this, he confirmed that only a few of his ancestors knew the verses of Vave. After they passed away, it disappeared.⁶² All that remains of the elaborate ceremony they once performed is Rangaite, which seems to have died out over the past decade.

Other informants have filled in more details about Rangaite.⁶³ It's name is derived from the word "rangi," or "color" to signifying the black charcoal farmers applied to their faces, arms and legs. As they returned to their homes from the forest, they sang songs about the work they had completed and were greeted with fresh water and a traditional

⁶²Interview with Ali "Uba" Mzee of Takaungu, 4.2.96

⁶³Interviews with Ali Abdalla and Fatuma Juma of Takaungu, 4.20.96; Mohammed A.M. Mazrui and Ali bin Salim of Takaungu, 3.1.96; Baheri "Maembe" Ndamungu of Tezo Mbuyuni, 4.17.96; Mebaraka Juma and Kibwana Said of Takaungu, 4.15.96; Muhunzi "Tarumbet" Kibwanga, Saidi Mwamanzi, and Asha Binti Masudi of Takaungu, 4.6.96; Tarumbeta, Abu Bakar Mbwana, Saidi Manzi of Takaungu, 4.2.96; Twahiru Ali Famau, Mohammed Kale, Mohammed Ali, and Hassan Mohammed of Lamu, 6.7.96.

porridge called "bogi". Like "kijojo," "bogi" is sweet and filling, and has ritual significance. Everyone who knew of Rangaite mentioned the porridge and described how it was kept hot and waiting for the farmers' return. The dish must have been a very important symbol of gratitude for the farmers' courageous efforts. The sooted appearance of the men singing raucous songs undoubtedly brought villagers out of their houses to help them celebrate. In Bajuni neighborhoods outside of Bajuniland, such as the one in Takaungu, Vave was not transmitted to young men as part of their rite of passage. In these places, the fire-burning experience itself may have been a test of manhood. This may explain the elaborate homecoming ceremonies in societies that did not make Vave central to the burning tradition. Further research into agricultural performances such as Rangaite will shed more light on this question.

CHAPTER 5
"I TOOK IT AWAY WITH MY MOUTH AND PUT IT INTO THE DRUM:"¹
HISTORICAL NARRATIVES OF NGOMA ORIGINS

We need to study the diffusion of dances . . . in this way we shall learn much more than we know about the processes of diffusion and adaptation in eastern African cultural history over the last one hundred years. In this way, too, we shall be able to learn more about the particularities of Beni and to discover how far the story told in this book is indeed a very special case and how far it is part of the general history of eastern African culture.

(Terrance Ranger, 1975:166)

Introduction

Exploring the origins and transmission of various music and dance traditions is an insightful way to trace patterns of cultural migration. This chapter tracks down the origins of select ngoma "packages" that emerged on the coast of Kenya during the past century and follows some of the people who physically transported them from place to place. The chapter discusses how people integrated new ngomas into their local repertoires of cultural practices, sustained and adapted them over time. Rather than presenting a history of ngoma that uses a chronological time-line to describe the dissemination of various dances along the coast, this study takes a processual approach. This method encourages listening to how people narrate their memories of ngoma and the dance associations they participated in, and allows patterns of description unbound by specific notions of time to

¹Interview with Sheikh Abdalla Fadhilli, the founder of the Lelemama ngoma in Matondoni village on Lamu Island, 11.3.95.

emerge and be recognized. Thus, the vivid details and layered language of narrative performance is elevated to its rightful role in the translation of the ideas that inspired cultural production, development and circulation along the east African coast throughout the past century.

When discussing the origins of various dances and the development of competitive dance associations with coastal people of different ages, it is apparent that historical knowledge regarding performance is shared by members of the same generation. Unfortunately, young people today have very little to say about coastal ngoma because many of the old dances vanished before they had a chance to see them. Middle aged informants are often nostalgic when they remember the ngomas they saw or the organizations they participated in as young people. They emphasize the traditional aspects of past ngomas, which signify the simpler practices and beliefs of the ancestors. Members of the oldest living generation, the elders (wazee), lament the disappearance of practices that symbolized the cultural integrity of coastal society, which they agree has now deteriorated. Unlike their children of middle age, they have a deeper understanding of how the ngomas evolved over time and space, and their memories are not clouded by such romantic images of that history. They remember the specific people, objects, and practices that made the ngomas great. They also recall the conflicts that eventually led to their demise. It is on their recollections that this chapter is based.

The organization of the chapter follows the organizing categories coastal people generally make between ngoma types; indigenous African ngomas, some of which have

been brought to the coast by upcountry African slaves or migrant workers, and imported ngomas that were brought with Arabian and European traders, colonialists, and missionaries. This first section of the chapter is devoted to ngomas that east Africans brought with them to the coast. There is plenty of historical evidence that attributes the initiation rituals and spirit possession dances found on the coast to Yao, Nyasa, and Ngindo slaves, who were captured from their homelands in the Lake Nyasa region of Tanzania and brought to the coast to work. Others have been claimed by hinterland peoples such as the Mijikenda, whose practices have corresponded with coastal customs for centuries. Each of the ngomas that will be analyzed demonstrate the crucial role that east African ngomas, dance organizations, and competitive performances played in mediating the differences between these peoples, and establishing a distinct coastal society.

The second section of the chapter focuses on how imported ngomas, such as Chama from Arabia, and Beni from England, were popularized and ultimately disseminated along the coast. Like upland east African ngomas, imported performances were packaged with new clothing styles, fashion accessories, instruments and musical forms never before seen or heard of on the coast. What made these overseas dances so unique was their military orientation, distinguished by the foreign weapons displayed by the well-disciplined, hierarchically ranked performance groups. The social impact that these popularly supported ngoma groups played in changing coastal attitudes about people of different ethnicity, economic class, social status and gender has been analyzed

by Strobel (1978) and Ranger (1975). The question that remains, is how popular new ngomas were distributed from place to place and why.

Finally, the chapter turns to how various coastal communities have adapted performance traditions to fit particular social milieu over time. This section explains why some ngomas remained elusive to outsiders, while others were performed especially for spectator entertainment. The rise and fall of certain ngomas is also explored here.

The Transfer of Upcountry Ngomas to the Coast

There are several historical scenarios that explain why people born in the interior of east Africa found themselves at the coast. First of all, in the early nineteenth century, there was an increase in trans-Indian Ocean trade on the islands of Lamu and Zanzibar. This provided traders with an incentive to develop better networks between the interior and the coast, which ultimately bolstered the economies of both regions. To supply the increased demand for African goods and slaves for export, upcountry peoples such as the Nyamwezi of central Tanzania, established professional long-distance trade caravans that specialized in organizing hundreds of human porters (*wahamali*) to carry goods from inland trade centers to coastal entrepôts.²

The Nyamwezi were among the most famous for leading ivory-laden slaves from their inland headquarters in Tabora down to Zanzibar, where they established transit settlements alongside the quarters occupied by other upcountry immigrants. Each year

²See Gwyn Campbell, 1989; T.O. Beidelman, 1982; Robert Cummings, 1973.

during the first half of the nineteenth century, 10,000 to 15,000 slaves were led to Zanzibar, where most of them were exported by slave ship to southwest Asia and the Americas.³ Those who remained on the island occupied a huge section of the town, known by Europeans as "the native quarter," where they lived in clay ghettos as migrant traders, domestic servants, and plantation slaves for wealthy merchants and plantation owners.⁴

Upcountry laborers eventually became part of large immigrant communities that emerged in major trading towns along the coast such as Bagamoyo, Pangani and Mombasa. These communities were made up of diverse groups of people from throughout east Africa, who sustained many of their unique cultural practices, as well as developed new ones. Some of the dances were confined to small, isolated communities, while others were performed all along the coast from Kilwa to Lamu. New ngomas became popular as others faded out of fashion. Some were short lived and others lasted for decades. The following excerpt, taken from a letter written by Edward Ropes Jr., an American resident of Zanzibar in July of 1883, laments the declining popularity of one kind of ngoma and describes the emergence of a new one:

Things have changed fearfully since you were here visiting . . . (A)ll those big dances of the mahamalies (porters) near T.T.'s house and the sword dances and fandangos at Nazi Moya are all passed. They are getting too civilized, they prefer a band and soldiers and rum to their old native customs, and it just spoils everything . . .⁵

³Norman Bennett, 1986:23. See also Glassman, 1995:105.

⁴See the map Guillaing made of Zanzibar in 1846 and Baumann's 1895 Zanzibar map in Abdul Sheriff, 1987:120. For a vivid description of "the native quarter" of Zanzibar in 1872 see Richard Burton, 1872:96-97.

⁵Bennett, 1973:31-32.

Ropes' comparison between dances he calls "native" and more "civilized" ngomas is a reference to the rise of a European military ngoma called Beni, which will be discussed in more detail below. In his study of coastal ngoma, Terrance Ranger refers to a report made by a Zanzibar correspondent for the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) just three months prior to Ropes' letter above. The report explains the admirable work of a UMCA missionary in Zanzibar, who taught freed slave boys living at the mission how to play European instruments in hopes of starting up a "band" there.⁶ Both Ropes' letter and the UMCA report confirm a growing popularity of the European military-style brass band in Zanzibar in the 1880s, which in subsequent years turned into a coastal-wide cultural phenomenon. It is important to point out that African ngomas were not substituted for imports such as Beni, but rather co-existed with them, as a later description by Ropes clarifies.

To further illustrate this important point, it is pertinent to draw attention to a Mijikenda ngoma called Mwavinyo, which coincided with Beni in Mombasa during the era of labor protests in the 1930s and 40s. Like Beni, Mwavinyo became very popular among dockworkers, in particular. Chivila Mgunya, a Chonyi ngoma expert who founded a Mwavinyo association near the port of Kilindini during this period, recalls the supportive community that the ngoma group fostered among his fellow dock workers, who had left their home villages and come to Mombasa for cash wages.

⁶ Ranger refers to the May 1883 issue of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa journal *Central Africa*. See Ranger, 1975:13.

Dressed in traditional regalia, which included ostrich feather arm bands (kio) and headdresses (kituku), the **Mwavinyo dancers** attracted hundreds of spectators to their performances.⁷ In many respects, ngoma leaders such as Chivila facilitated worker solidarity by providing group members with a support network. This was in lieu of the kinship structure that most of the African immigrants depended upon for security in their home villages. By recreating this model for co-workers, ngoma organizations like Chivila's Mwavinyo group allowed people of mixed ethnicity and common experience to collectively cope with the daily challenges they faced.

Chivila does not mention the specific ethnic breakdown of his Mwavinyo group, yet a majority were most likely Mijikenda and ex-slaves, with a few members of Arab descent and some from upland Kenya. Most of the casual laborers in Mombasa were also farmers, whose crops were tended by women and children until they could get home to plant or to harvest. After decades of land alienation, either by Arab plantation owners, Indian financiers, European settler farmers, or Colonial government officials, many of Chivila's co-workers farmed small plots on other people's property, either illegally or on conditions outlined by their landlords. The particular challenges that these docker-farmers faced is what drew them together as dancers of Mwavinyo, and ultimately as organized protesters, who led city-wide labor strikes in 1939 and 1947.⁸

⁷Interview with Chivila Mgunya of Mwamkura, 4.23.96.

⁸For a detailed historical analysis of the labor disputes organized by Mombasa dock-workers in the 1930s and 40s see Cooper, 1987.

Like the Beni dance associations, recognized as the driving force behind the Mombasa strikes, Mwavinyo groups attracted people who needed the support of a well-organized social institution in an unstable environment. In sharp contrast to Beni's European attractions, however, Mwavinyo lured participants with distinctly African motifs more familiar to upcountry and hinterland peoples. Yet, for those born and raised on the coast, Mwavinyo was just as exotic as the ngomas with western or middle-eastern flavor, though they rarely received as much attention by Colonial officials.⁹

Despite the dearth of references to African ngoma groups in the archives, there was a plethora of ngoma organizations for permanent, semi-permanent and transient residents of Mombasa to choose from, depending upon their ethnic affiliation, social status, type of employment and cultural taste. While ngoma groups were often associated with one particular group or another, past participants insist that their choice of ngoma was based on their personal preferences rather than pressure from fellow clan members, co-workers, or neighbors. This suggests that involvement in urban ngoma associations reflected individual needs and expectations as much as it reflected the political, social and economic objectives of the group as a whole.

Membership in dance associations was quite a bit different in rural communities, where ngoma groups represented highly competitive residential areas. In several villages along the coast, the pressure to join the neighborhood group was so intense that dissenters

⁹The large street processions, which characterized Beni, Lelemama, and an annual Indian festival, were the public ngomas the Colonial officials frequently considered a threat to the town's peace and security. Consequently they are the ngomas that are most vividly described in the archives.

were forced to physically relocate. One ngoma expert from Matondoni village on Lamu Island tells a story of his mother's defection from the Mkunguni neighborhood to the mtaa Pwani neighborhood, when he was a child:

As she moved along the road from our old house, the new ngoma group from Mtaa Pwani escorted her. I was a small child at that time... I held onto her clothes so that she wouldn't go, but she pulled away from me and walked on with the members of the new group. Part of the group, that went in front of her, performed Beni, and those in back performed Vugo.

As my mother was led away from Mkunguni, her former group sang this song of warning to the leader of her new group:
Kibibi kapae moto. Fundi, habari utupe. Kwani haya si matoto. Mtu na rafiki yake. Ngwena mengia kwa sato. Menlia nyama yake." (Old woman, go fan the fire. What do you have to say to us, leader? This is not just a small matter between friends. Take heed, when a crocodile sneaks into a python's den--it steals all of the meat to eat.)¹⁰

According to many coastal informants, this experience was not extraordinary, but indeed quite normal. In fighting among members of village ngoma groups was as common as group switching, which often resulted. Since there were usually only two ngoma groups to choose from in small towns or villages, leaders had the dual objective of keeping their own members at peace while enticing members of the other group to transfer their allegiance. As far as ngoma groups were concerned, success equaled people; the criteria of a good ngoma group was the number of members it maintained as well as the number of spectators it attracted during a performance. At the most basic level, ngoma competition--especially in rural areas, was a competition over people.

The fierceness of competition over loyalty to a particular ngoma group is articulated best in the stories coastal elders share about the ngoma wars that broke out in

¹⁰Interview with Omari Haji of Matondoni, 8.5.96.

their villages. Salima Jazaka, a former leader of a women's ngoma group in Lamu, explains how it used to hurt her when disgruntled members of her group abandoned her for another leader. She remembers a song she used to sing to express her sadness "Long ago I was loved like a corsage. And now I am hated like rice without coconut milk. Whoever gets some, eats it, but whomever doesn't, won't care."¹¹

Another story is told by an elder of mixed Mijikenda, Arab and slave heritage, named "Tarumbeta," (T) who lives on a farm on the outskirts of Takaungu town. Tarumbeta and his neighbors, Saidi (S) and Asha (A), describe such a battle, which erupted in the 1960s, when a group of one hundred Nyamwezi dancers from central Tanzania settled in Takaungu for over a year.¹²

The three begin the story by explaining that Kayanda, a Takaungu resident of Nyamwezi origin, initially invited the dancers from his home village to perform for his son's wedding. They describe how Takaungu locals were immediately enchanted with the dancers' exotic clothing, their hairstyles and the innovative props and drum rhythms they used to perform a traditional Nyamwezi ngoma called "Bati." Local families in Takaungu were happy to host the visitors, and the narrators of this story explain that the Nyamwezi were so numerous that they slept everywhere there was a space--some even slept on peoples' verandahs!

¹¹Interview with Salima Jazaka of Lamu, 10.11.95.

¹²This kind of mass migration was common among peoples from Nzega District during this period. Since the Nyamwezi chiefs and headmen made it quite difficult for commoners to inherit land rights, many Nyamwezi had no long-term attachment to their homeland. See R.G. Abrahams, 1981:58-59. For more on the Nyamwezi of central Tanzania see Bennett, 1971; S. Tcherkezoff, 1987.

To nobody's surprise, the two local ngoma leaders, Mashee Nduku and Mehamisi wa Jahazi, were eager to invite as many of the newcomers to their houses as they could. They wanted to increase the size of their ngoma groups, which were called "Jumuiya" and "Sabili," respectively. The ruthlessly aggressive Mashee Nduku managed to approach most of the Nyamwezi before her rival had a chance, and managed to convince the majority of the Nyamwezi to join her group. Only by appealing to the wedding host for help was Mehamisi wa Jahazi able to coax the remaining few to join her group. This incident is remembered for causing an uproar that ultimately divided the entire population of the area into two factions.

The Nyamwezi presence also led to a complete breakdown of the cultural norms that had been established by the descendants of the Mazrui Arabs, who had been granted ownership of Takaungu by the Sultan of Zanzibar in the late 1830s. Ultimately, after a year in Takaungu, Nyamwezi social conduct was deemed incongruent with Mazrui values and they were run out of town. A portion of the narrative provided by Tarumbeta (T), Saidi (S) and Asha (A) summarizes the impact that the Nyamwezi and their Bati ngoma had on the local people:

S: No one really knows exactly how the trouble started between Nduku, Mehamisi wa Jahazi, and Kayanda. But they began fighting. Nduku persuaded most of the Nyamwezi to join her group. And Mehamisi Jahazi took those who were left. And then they began competing. They tied tall wooden stilts on their feet and danced while they were high above everyone, like this (demonstrates). That's a Nyamwezi dance style. After they finally left Takaungu, some of them went to Vipingoni. They were chased from Takaungu and they scattered all over the place.

T: That kind of ngoma was called Bati.

S: Yes, that ngoma was called Bati.

A: Because Bati became so popular, local people even started to braid their hair in the Bati style.

Q: Was it only performed by women?

A: Women and men.

S: Both women and men. That was the way that the Nyamwezi interfered with the culture--until they were chased out. The women and men danced together. Some of them even danced with the local peoples' wives.

T: The girls from Takaungu town began participating in the Nyamwezi ngoma.

A: They just fell in love with the Nyamwezi men.

T: The elders said that they would "spoil" ("deflower") their daughters. So they sent a report to the Chief, and all of them were chased out of town.

S: The Nyamwezi migrated to other villages.

T: They used to perform for celebrations. They performed here for a whole year.

S: Yes, they performed for an entire year!

T: They performed from here to Mombasa, and then they left. And we've never seen them again since.¹³

Some of the most popular features of Bati, such as stilt walking and co-ed dancing, were new to Takaungu, although they had been incorporated into public ngomas such as Beni decades earlier. Yet, despite its novelty, only the Bajun settlers of the area continued to perform Bati after the Nyamwezi were expelled from Takaungu. In fact, the Bajun eventually established it in their homeland on the mainland opposite the Lamu archipelago, where it remains a standard wedding dance today.

There is a parallel between Bajuni claims to the Bati ngoma, ultimately banned by the Mazrui, and Bajuni claims to land that was usurped by the Mazrui in the 1830s. Colonial records of the struggle for control over land in and around Takaungu focus on conflicts that arose between the Mazrui and the British during the late nineteenth century, and neglect the claims that other groups made on the land. One Bajuni elder named Ali "Uba" Mzee, who was raised in the neighborhood of Takaungu called mtaa Gunya, "Gunya" being the local name for "Bajuni", explained that from the early part of the

¹³Interview recorded in Takaungu, 4.9.96.

nineteenth century, the Bajuni and the Mazrui were "co-owners" (wenyeji) of Takaungu and the surrounding hinterland.

According to Uba Mzee, the co-habitation of Takaungu and the surrounding environs began officially in 1837, when the Sultan of Zanzibar granted land between Takaungu and Gasi to the Mazrui. Years before that, Bajuni merchant sailors had become business partners with Mazrui planters, who needed field slaves as well as a method by which to transport their produce to coastal trade centers. The relationship was further extended when the Bajuni assisted the Mazrui against the Galla, a pastoral group from Somalia, who the Bajuni had been battling on and off for centuries.¹⁴ When the Bajuni agreed to act as mercenaries, they did so only after negotiating a treaty for half of all of the land they recovered. In Ali Mzee's own words, the history of this negotiation is as follows:

There was a time when the Mazrui and the Bajuni were united. Once, the Galla came and raped the Arab (Mazrui) women and the Arabs wrote a letter telling them (the Bajuni) the story and asked for their assistance. The Bajuni asked them what they needed, and the Mazrui told them that they wanted help pushing the Galla out. The Bajuni told them that they were ready to help remove them, but asked them what they would receive in return. The Bajuni made a treaty saying that if they helped remove the Galla, they would receive half of the land they reclaimed. Thus, any land owned by the Mazrui was to be split in half and given to the Bajuni. For example, if a Mazrui had an estate, half went to a Bajuni.

The Arabs agreed to those terms, and the Bajunis succeeded in expelling the Galla. You know, if you want to succeed you must use your mind properly. The Bajuni were very clever!

After the Galla left, the Bajuni remained for a month to decide whether they would stay in the area, or return to their homeland. When they made their decision to remain, they signed a treaty that claimed that the land around Takaungu was co-owned by the Mazrui and the Bajuni.

¹⁴ See Salim, 1973:19; Allen, 1993. Both authors suggest that it was the Galla who forced the Bajun to abandon their predominantly agriculturist lifestyle and become a seafaring people.

When the Bajuni leader, who had officiated all of these procedures went on a journey, the Mazrui leader, who was supposed to send the document to Nairobi for certification, tore it up instead. By then, Arab rule had been abolished by the British, so the document was supposed to be sent to British government officials stating that the land was to be divided between the Bajuni and the Arabs. But the document was destroyed.

That is why the Bajuni are lagging behind to this day! Its because the Mazrui tore up that treaty and now we have no land to claim. We are now just like slaves, and when we need anything, we have to beg like beggars.¹⁵

In 1938, a Bajuni representative attempted to put the record straight in a letter to the Provincial Commissioner in Mombasa, which stated that the Bajuni had cleared the forests of Takaungu by themselves and later co-founded the town proper with Sheikh Rashid b. Salim b. Mbaruk El-Mazrui in 1830.¹⁶ It is likely that Bajuni fishermen established a semi-permanent settlement in Takaungu long before the Sultan granted the land to the Mazrui--especially since it is one of the safest harbors on the coast.¹⁷ Local Mijikenda group's claim to have hunted and farmed the area, as well. The matter boiled down to the fact that the Mazrui had more political clout with the British regime than did the Bajuni or the Mijikenda, which gave them access to the means of legal ownership to land through certification. The following time sketch is based on British Colonial documents housed in the Kenya National Archives, secondary historical research, and oral testimonies from people in Takaungu. In combination, these sources present a clearer understanding of how the Mazrui came to control so much of the land in and around Takaungu:

¹⁵ Interview with Ali "Uba" Mzee of Takaungu, 4.2.96.

¹⁶ See Mohammed bin Yusuf, KNA, 1938.

¹⁷ While the port at Takaungu was ideal for small fishing boats, there is a dangerous sand bar that prevents large dhows from safely docking there. For this reason, much of the trade goods shipped in and out of Takaungu exchanged in the nearby Kilifi Bay.

Early 1800s - Bajuni fishermen began clearing the forest near the harbor, which they used first for fishing camps, and then gradually settled more permanently to farm. Giriama and Kauma farmers also coincided with the Bajuni during this period--all being subject to periodic attacks by Galla raiders.

As years went by, trade increased between the Bajuni, the Mijikenda, and Arabs from Mombasa and Malindi, who established slave-cultivated agricultural plantations in the area. The Bajuni were among those who supplied the Arab planters with African slaves, and also shipped their agricultural products to major coastal entre-pots, such as Mombasa, Lamu and Zanzibar.¹⁸ The Mijikenda themselves were captured and put to work as slaves until their frequent escape to fortified runaway slave villages and European Christian mission stations forced plantation owners to import slaves from the Lake Nyasa region of Tanganyika.

Unlike the Bajuni or the Mijikenda, who practiced shifting agriculture, the Arabs claimed property rights over fixed plots in Takaungu. After several joint efforts to expel the Galla from the region, the Bajuni finally challenged Arab claims to the land and demanded that it be divided equally between the residents who had hunted and farmed Takaungu for centuries.

1830 - Sheikh Rashid b. Salim b. Mbaruk, a Mazrui Arab, officially established the stone portion of Takaungu town by using hundreds of his slaves to dig wells and build permanent stone structures, including the Jaamii mosque, known also as the Friday mosque.¹⁹

1837 - The century old rivalry between the Busaidi Arabs and the Mazrui Arabs of Mombasa ended with the deportation of many Mazrui political leaders by the Busaidi Sultan of Muscat, Seyyid Said.²⁰ To ease the pain of defeat, the Sultan granted the liwaliship of Takaungu to Rashid b. Salim b. Mbaruk's family, which provided the political clout the Mazrui needed to usurp Bajuni and Mijikenda claims to land in the area. A wave of Mazrui religious scholars left Mombasa and settled in Takaungu, bringing with them their elevated economic and social status.

1860 - 1890 - The famous rebel, Mbaruk bin Rashid, of the Mazrui family in Gasi, ravaged the coast between Vanga and Malindi, burning villages, raiding for slaves, and stealing crops from people's fields. A series of epidemics, droughts, famines and locust infestations also plagued the area during this time, forcing groups of Mijikenda and Bajuni to offer themselves and their children as working dependents to more prosperous clan members, as well as Arab plantation owners, European missionaries, runaway slave communities and the rebel leader, Mbaruk.

The Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) increased its political and economic authority on the coast and supported the Sultan's efforts to sustain slavery. Meanwhile, the British Anti-Slavery Society gained popular support in England, inspiring the British government to strengthen its ties with European missionaries, who increasingly turned their coastal mission stations into asylums for runaway plantation

¹⁸Interview with Ali "Uba" Mzee of Takaungu, 4.2.96.

¹⁹Interview and tour of Takaungu with Mohammad Abdalla Mohammad Mazrui of Takaungu, 2.29.96.

²⁰See Pouwels, 1979:109-119.

slaves. Throughout this period, the Busaidi Arabs attempted to sustain the plantation economy and maintain legal authority over the coastal strip of east Africa from their headquarters in Zanzibar.

1895 - The IBEAC and the Sultan of Zanzibar conceded authority over the Kenya coast to the British Protectorate. The subsequent system of Indirect Rule was administered by the British Consul General, Arthur Hardinge. British forces took over Takaungu and deemed all Mbaruk's land claims null and void.

The death of the Mazrui liwali of Takaungu, Salim bin Khamis, increased tension in the region and led to a year-long war of succession between the British and the Mazrui rebels, who continued to be led by Mbaruk and his son Aziz. This crisis eventually forced locals to abandon their fields and flee the area. Many took refuge in the British-protected town of Takaungu, in other communities near Mombasa, such as Rabai, at the mission stations, in runaway slave settlements, or with Mbaruk's army.²¹ Some Bajuni returned to their "homeland" on the mainland opposite the Lamu archipelago during this period.

1896 - Mbaruk's surrender put an end to Mazrui political control of both Takaungu and Gasi. Hardinge appointed a member of the Zaheri lineage of El-Bajun as the new liwali of Takaungu. Mbaruk bin Rashid's family was dispossessed of their land and many resettled in German controlled Tanganyika.²²

1907 - Abolition of slavery in east Africa.

1908 - Mbaruk bin Rashid's family was pardoned for Mbaruk's crimes. Sheikh Rashid b. Salim b. Mbaruk submitted claims for 1,000 slave plots which, under Sharia law, were due him in lieu of their labor.²³

1909 - The Land Title Ordinance was applied to Malindi District and a large part of Takaungu Sub District was claimed by the Mazrui. Although several occupants on the plots applied for certificates of ownership and requested that their land be surveyed, this was never completed.

1912 - All land in Takaungu Sub District became Crown Land with the exception of 41,000 acres known as the "Mazrui reserves #1-4," land that had already been adjudicated, and another 10,000 acre tract near Tezo called "Mazrui reserve #5."²⁴

1913 - A group of Mazrui appointed seven board members to handle all land disputes against the British Crown. Rashid b. Salim b. Mbaruk, the assistant liwali of Takaungu, was selected as the clan representative.²⁵

²¹See Fred Morton's (1990) case for slave abandonment of their farms during this period, rather than the maintenance of a squatter system, a scenario that Cooper (1980) suggests.

²²See Pouwels, 1982:58.

²³See KNA , File CP 61/129 (Reel 105), May 17, 1923. See also Salim, 1973:112.

²⁴Report by the Department of Local Government Lands and Settlement, September 29, 1954. KNA , File CP 61/129 (Reel 105) See also Salim, 1973:124.

²⁵See Salim, 1973:124, note 95 for the names of the members of the Board.

1938 - Muhammad bin Yusuf, a representative of the El-Bajun, wrote a letter to the Provincial Commissioner in Mombasa declaring, "I have the honor to present our claim for Takaungu. When our elders came, they cleared the forest themselves and founded the village together with Sheikh Rashid bin Salim in 1830."

1954 - A report by the Department of Local Government Lands and Settlement described the unadjudicated land claims and persistent legal battles over land in Takaungu "an embarrassment."²⁶

This is not to suggest that the Mazrui themselves did not have difficulty proving the validity of their own claims to land in Takaungu. Mazrui land rights were challenged by the British beginning in 1895, when the newly established British Protectorate finally suppressed the thirty-year rebellion led by Mbaruk.²⁷ A second time-line follows land grabbing between the British and the Mazrui in the Gasi area:

1910 - British Colonel Owen Thomas made a land purchase agreement with Mbaruk's family for 120 sq. miles of land near Gasi. Thomas paid 1/3 of the total amount for the land on the date of the agreement.

1914 - The Land Titles Ordinance was applied to Vanga District and Mbaruk's family applied for a certificate of ownership for a large tract of land in the Gasi area. The Deputy of Titles issued a certificate of title for the land claimed by the Mazrui Board with the understanding that the rights of the ex-slave residents farming on the land would be upheld. As Rashid b. Salim b. Mbaruk agreed to those terms, no official land survey was deemed necessary.

1915 - The Mazrui Board wrote a letter to the Provincial Commissioner complaining that Colonel Owen Thomas had not yet made the remaining payment for land partially purchased in 1910.

1919 - The British Crown informed the Mazrui representative, Rashid b. Salim b. Mbaruk that only communal Mazrui claims, and not individual family claims to land would be considered.

²⁶See "Summary of Present Situation" in KNA, File CP 61/129.

²⁷ Mbaruk bin Rashid of Gasi made a series of slave raids that plundered coastal villages between Vanga and Malindi from the 1860s to the 1890s. In pursuit of seeking vengeance against the Busaidi Arab overlords for usurping Mazrui control of Mombasa, Mbaruk organized large numbers of runaway slaves and coerced others to join his militia. For more information see Morton, 1990. For a concise and well- detailed historical analysis of these incidence see the introduction to Salim, 1973.

1922 - British official, C.B. Thompson confirmed in a letter that Colonel Thomas only made partial payment to the Mazruis for the land in question, although there was no documentation to prove it. Thompson also mentioned that the land occupied and farmed by long-term residents, as well as ex-slaves and followers of Mbaruk, had been sold out from under them by the Mazrui. The land was left unjudicated.

These time-lines offer an historical perspective on the interconnectedness of rights over land, ethnicity, and social status among coastal peoples. This history is filled with bitter disputes that separated some people and united others. Although slaves from upcountry east Africa were forced, unwillingly to the coast, they arrived with life-cycle rituals and performance practices that already existing coastal communities absorbed as their own. The Bajuni's acceptance of the Nyamwezi ngoma, Bati, is a recent example of how that process worked itself out.

This section has outlined two historical periods in which east Africans of diverse ethnic and religious background used ngoma competition to mediate their differences and solve problems they had in common. In the 1930s, [Chivila Mgunya](#), a migrant laborer from Chonyiland, transplanted a traditional Chonyi dance called Mwavinyo to Mombasa, where he facilitated group formation and community building among fellow dockworkers. When people joined his ngoma group, they joined an association of people who shared the same urban environment, struggled with similar working conditions, and were equally preoccupied with taking care of their families and farms elsewhere. Under these circumstances, the ethnic and religious differences between them became less

relevant, and as ngoma group members they cooperated in making truly revolutionary changes to the systems that oppressed them.

The transplantation of upcountry ngomas in coastal towns was further explored in the case of the Bati ngoma, first brought to the coast by a group of Nyamwezi performers in the 1960s.²⁸ Like Chivila, who sustained his ties to Chonyiland by founding a traditional Chonyi ngoma group in his new environment, Kayanda wished to re-establish ties with his Nyamwezi relatives by bringing a Bati group to Takaungu. This culminated in an extraordinary expedition by one hundred Bati performers, who traveled all the way to Takaungu to bless the wedding of Kayanda's son according to Nyamwezi custom.

Realistically, Kayanda took some risks in attempting such a venture, since the scheme required his entire community to host the visitors and accept them as guests in their homes. Tarumbeta, Saidi and Asha, three of Kayanda's neighbors, explain how the Nyamwezi slept in every corner and ate people's food without contributing to any of the farm work at all. Their only obligation was to perform the Bati ngoma, which became so popular among the locals that a complete cultural transformation occurred during the year they lived there.

The Nyamwezi dancers, with their beautiful facial scarifications and braids, decorated themselves in elaborate adornments and performed movements never before seen in Takaungu. The highlight of the Bati performance was when two male dancers appeared on stilts cross-dressed in female garments. The ngoma attracted thousands of

²⁸For further information of urban ngoma movements see David Coplan, 1985; Veit Erlman, 1991; Christopher Waterman, 1990.

people from nearby villages to see the spectacle for themselves. Men and women performed together, people drank palm wine, and the merriment and feasting went on for days on end. The organizers of the performances, Masheha Nduku and Mehamisi wa Jahazi, were instant coastal celebrities!

Until the male elders of Takaungu town noticed that their unmarried daughters were spending more and more time on the outskirts of town. Their greatest fear was not the large crowds of drunken dancers, nor the new fashions that the Nyamwezi inspired among the locals, it was the disappearance of their daughters, who they had promised to marry off as virgins ("wanawali") to fellow members of the coastal elite. The last thing they needed was to have their daughters falling in love with Nyamwezi "heathens," bearing their children, and "spoiling" the family lineage. As soon as the Mazrui elders felt that the moral authority they maintained over the population of Takaungu had been comprised, they formed an armed battalion and marched into the Takaungu hinterland to see the Nyamwezi on their way.

For the local elite, the year that the Nyamwezi were in town had been pure hell. They had watched their pristine society, known for its religious piety, become increasingly paganized by Nyamwezi dancers, who did nothing but tempt the local population with their unrestrained lifestyle. The Mazrui, who had been deemed the "owners" of the town by the Sultan himself, were particularly concerned that the Nyamwezi presence would bring an end to their control over the fate of their community.

The three narrators of this story close with a brief ending that explains how the town quickly returned to normal soon after the Nyamwezi were run out of Takaungu. Masheha Nduku and Mehamisi wa Jahazi re-instituted local ngomas into their performance repertoire, and basically forgot about the Nyamwezi, their dances, and their customs.

Yet, for a brief time, everything in Takaungu had been turned upside down; men and women danced together, elite townspeople celebrated with farmers, sons of local families were initiated by their Nyamwezi "brothers," and people of diverse ethnicity and religion established relationships that superseded their differences. As far as Mehamisi wa Jahazi and Masheha Nduku were concerned, they became more famous and more powerful than almost anyone in the vicinity. Two seemingly powerless women, one of slave heritage and the other an outsider, took control of Takaungu for an extended period of time. They did so by integrating the Nyamwezi into their social framework, which was based on wealth in people, and fitting the Bati ngoma into their competitive framework, which was based on innovation and surprise. For those who remember the year that the Nyamwezi lived in Takaungu, the words "happiness" (furaha), "feast " (karamu), and "excitement" (raha) fill their stories, and many have personal anecdotes to tell about someone in their family who was particularly transformed by the brief but very powerful Nyamwezi presence in their lives.

Although the story ends the way it started, with people in Takaungu going about their daily lives as usual, it is improbable that life there could have been exactly the same.

Especially when considering all of the new connections that were made between wenyeji (natives / owners) and wageni (visitors / outsiders)--people who had never made an effort to get to know each other before the Nyamwezi came to town. The value of oral narratives like this one is not whether the story is true, but in the complex social relations that it describes. By putting performance at the center of the story, the narrators explain how important music and dance competition was among coastal peoples, who had few other public for a to express themselves so freely. Without understanding how ngoma groups operated and how leaders attracted and maintained control over such large numbers of people, it would be difficult to understand how coastal society functioned.

This story demonstrates how two unlikely leaders, Mehamisi wa Jahazi and Mesheha Nduku, skillfully divided the Nyamwezi visitors up between themselves to further enhance their powerbase --the ngoma groups they led in weekend competitions. As the hosts of these huge events, which featured an exotic dance called Bati that was performed by authentic Nyamwezi dancers with beads, scars, and stilts to prove it, the two women found themselves at the center of coastal life for an entire year! Yet, just as easily as the true wenyeji of Takaungu had lost control of their land when the Mazrui Arabs came to town in the 1830s, Masheha Nduku and Mehamisi wa Jahazi lost control of the Nyamwezi visitors in the 1960s, when they were kicked out of town by the self-same "owners."

Perhaps the "trouble" that the narrators allude to when they tell this story did not occur as a result of the contest over who would control the Nyamwezi, but over whether

or not the social code of conduct among members of the Takaungu community would be preserved. When major changes in the behavior of those closest to the Nyamwezi became evident to the moral majority of Takaungu town, conflict arose. While some describe the Nyamwezi expulsion as the consequence of a generation gap between young Bati enthusiasts and old-fashioned elders, others use the incident to underscore the tension between the "Arabs" in town and the "Africans" on the farms, which persists to this day.

Cultural Imports: Chama and Beni Ngomas

Here I focus on ngoma packages that coastal people have adapted from places outside east Africa--namely Arabia and Europe. The dances featured here are military ngomas, one called "Chama," which celebrates Arabian swordsmanship, and the other known as "Beni," which mimics the pomp and circumstance of British army corps. By comparing and contrasting the growth and development of these two ngomas on the coast, this section explains how many ngomas came packaged with costumes, material objects, instruments, and in this case, weaponry, that was transported with the ngoma as it spread along the coast.

It is appropriate to consider Chama first, since the Arab sword-dancing tradition preceded European marching bands in east Africa by at least five hundred years.

Although Chama did not become a coastal phenomenon, as Beni did, it has survived the test of time. Unlike Beni, which died out completely in the early 1960s, Chama is still performed in Matondoni village on Lamu Island today, albeit rarely.

I witnessed a live **Chama performance** in 1996, while I was conducting field research in Lamu. I asked the group leader, Ali Madi, to perform for me so that I could record the ngoma on videotape. We arranged a performance at the Lamu Fort and invited a class of American college students to attend with their local Swahili language tutors.²⁹ This was a significant event for the dancers, who had only performed the event a few times in the past several years, and then for large weddings hosted primarily by wealthy Matondoni families. They were seldom invited out of town, let alone to Lamu, to perform Chama for a large audience.

The group of thirty-odd dancers and drummers spent all afternoon preparing themselves for the evening performance. This is quite a task, since each **dancer's costume** consists of a neatly pressed white robe (kanzu), a hand-embroidered white cap (kofia), as well as an elaborate assortment of accessories including: leg rattles (kengele), a flower corsage (kishada), a colored sash (kihoshi), a wide leather belt (ukanda), an authentic Arabian sword (upanga), a leather shield (ngao) and a cotton handkerchief (hankachifu).³⁰

After the group members had assembled, **Ali Madi** inspected the performers to make sure that their costumes matched and their accessories were situated properly. Modeled on the attention to detail exhibited by real soldiers, the correct placement of

²⁹These students were on a semester abroad program with the School for International Training (S.I.T.), which has its headquarters in Brattleboro Vermont. I first visited east Africa and Lamu as a student on the S.I.T. program in 1987. While conducting my dissertation research in Lamu in 1995-96, I served as a consultant for S.I.T. students and gave formal lectures on the history of east African coastal performance. The Chama performance was held at the Lamu Fort on 10.5.96.

³⁰Interview with Athmani Kitoka of Lamu, 10.4.95; Ali Madi of Matondoni, 10.17.95. This information also comes from notes taken from the Lamu Museum cultural exhibit of performance accouterments.

each ornament is mandatory. In fact, consistency in every aspect of the performance, including costume, dance style, and rhythm are the measure of the group's competence. Several Chama members explained that the difference between victory and defeat in Chama competitions is often a minor detail, that failed to go unnoticed by the captious audience.

The Chama dance is highly stylized and admired most for its complicated sword handling maneuvers and fancy footwork. Chama's technical requirements prohibit amateurs from participating in the performance, making it more exclusive than many of the more popular coastal ngomas. The complicated choreography requires agility, poise, and adroit sword-handling skills. Chama dancers emulate an archetypal Arabian swordsman, who executes graceful movements with a masculine beauty beyond compare.

The performance that I saw began with a **line of dancers**, who entered the performance space in single file. The performance took place in the courtyard of the Fort, under a star-filled sky. Bright lights lit up the courtyard and cast long shadows in the surrounding spaces. This created an aura around the dancers, making them appear even more celestial. They took tiny steps and flashed their swords above their heads as they swayed slightly from side to side. They made several patterns before composing themselves into a semi-circle around their leader. Next to him, the zumari player paraded back and forth, blowing haunting, high-pitched notes into the night. The dancers wove back and forth, snake-like, before filing into a straight line to demonstrate a collective sword-handling technique, and then a delicate handkerchief routine.

Halfway through the performance, the dancers formed two lines facing each other. Dancing partners rhythmically made their way in between, until they reached the end and rejoined the lines. While the center of attention, some dancers took the opportunity to exhibit their talent as well as their sense of humor. The audience roared with laughter and rushed up to tip their favorite dancers with shilling notes. The dancers appeared undistracted by their fans' approval and kept their stylized posture throughout. The three-hour performance ended the way it began, when the dancers filed out slowly, one after the other. They did not relax and unwind until after every member of the Chama group had left "the stage."

It may seem curious that people in Matondoni have sustained this ngoma for such a long time. The answer to this puzzle lies in the attachment that people in the village have to the dance, which they consider their most famous "traditional" ngoma. They believe this is in spite of the fact that most people in Matondoni believe Chama was imported from Zanzibar, where it was first adapted from the Omani original by immigrant Arabs there. Abdalla Fadhil, a ngoma expert from Matondoni explains the history of Chama and how it spread around the Lamu area:

These ngomas (Goma, Chama and Shangwe) are performed in Matondoni, but they originally came from Unguja (Zanzibar). And the njugas (leg rattles) also came from Zanzibar. From Zanzibar, Chama was first performed in Matondoni. From Matondoni, Chama spread to Mkunumbi and Makowe, but the roots of Chama remained in Matondoni. People of Mkunumbi and Makowe performed Chama, but it was not as good as the one in Matondoni. People from Matondoni had incredible Chama!³¹

³¹Interview with Abdalla Fadhili of Matondoni, 10.3.95.

In this excerpt, Abdalla Fadhil suggests that despite Chama's foreign origin, the people of Matondoni take pride in being able to perform it better than any of the dancers in nearby villages. To further validate their claims to this ngoma, Matondoni dance experts enhanced Chama with their own, original dance called Shangwe, which they perform at the end of each Chama performance. In Fadhil's words,

We made Shangwe up ourselves after we had learned to perform Chama. We altered the dance styles and invented new ones, which were very good. Shangwe was very well received by everyone who saw it...We performed Shangwe at the end of Chama, to see Chama off.³²

By elaborating on a dance that came from outside Matondoni, local dancers created an entirely new ngoma, that was both import and original--a hybrid they could be proud of. It was not enough for the ngoma experts to be the best Chama dancers on the coast, they wanted to improve the dance itself and make it their own.

Ali Madi, the current leader of the Matondoni Chama group, suggests that it was Matondoni's isolation that facilitated the maintenance of traditional ngomas such as Chama:

Matondoni is a good site for different kinds of ngoma because it is quiet and we have less work to do. No one is employed or committed to a certain schedule. Therefore, if someone wants to go and join in an ngoma, they can do so without worrying. And we don't have anywhere else to go, so that's the way we entertain ourselves.³³

Ali Madi's explanation for Chama's resilience points to the community's lack of exposure to modern influences--such as hectic work schedules and contemporary forms

³²Ibid.

³³Interview with Ali Madi of Matondoni, 10.17.95.

of entertainment. Although this may explain why some smaller coastal communities have managed to retain historically important cultural practices, while some larger towns have not, this is only part of the answer.

The decision that the people of Matondoni made to perform Chama rather than Beni, for example, is an appropriate case study. Beni, as described by Ranger (1975), was coastal-wide very early after its emergence on the coast in the 1890s. It lasted until the early 1960s, when it was overshadowed by the Independence movements in both Kenya and Tanzania. Beni was a marching ngoma that came packaged with British, Scottish, and American military uniforms, band instruments and royal paraphernalia that was worn by the leaders of the groups, known as the "King" and "Queen." Overall, Beni was an incredibly cost-intensive ngoma to reproduce outside of the major towns it was first performed in--namely Zanzibar, Dar es Salaam, Mombasa, Malindi, and Lamu. Communities that considered incorporating Beni into their local competitive ngoma repertoire were expected to accept the entire package, which meant buying imported brass instruments, bass drums, woolen fabrics for uniforms, and velvet and silk worn by the "royals." Many of these items were only available in major coastal towns, which put small, isolated villages at a disadvantage simply by virtue of transportation problems.

When I asked Abdalla Fadhil why Beni never caught on in Matondoni, he explained:

A: Beni was performed by people in Lamu.

Q: Therefore you couldn't perform it?

A: No. In Matondoni, we had Chama and Goma, but Beni was in Lamu.

Q: Why didn't you have Beni here?

A: That was their ngoma, Beni was Lamu's ngoma. We weren't used to Beni, we were used to ngomas such as Chama, Goma, Shangwe. People of Lamu were accustomed to performing Beni.

Q: As a drum leader for different kinds of ngoma, you never taught yourself how to play the Beni drum?

A: I never once taught myself to play the Beni drum. I never played it.

Q: Then how do you know how to sing Beni songs?

A: I heard the beat played. When you hear the drum beat, you can sing to it and dance to it. You just have to hear it and see it being performed. If your mouth and feet work, you can perform any dance, simply by imitating it. I even know Kumba and Kisonge, two ngomas that are performed by the Manyema people (from eastern Zaire). I have also learned their songs and sung them here.

Fadhil's answer to this question is revealing. He adamantly dispels any doubt that Beni was too sophisticated for people in Matondoni by suggesting that Beni was as easy to catch on to as any other dance; anyone could perform it. Although Beni was incredibly popular in Lamu, it simply did not interest him.

Fadhil also explains that Lamu was "accustomed to" Beni, which may mean Lamu had the resources to cover the cash and labor-intensive details Beni competitions required. For a small village like Matondoni, Beni was too much to handle. Instead, ngoma experts in Matondoni focused their energies on sustaining their "traditional" ngomas, which they did by continuously updating and improving them. Rather than asking why people in Matondoni chose to sustain the ngomas that provided their community with a sense of cultural continuity, a more appropriate question is why would they ever have chosen to adopt an ngoma as frivolous as Beni.

Beni was first established in Lamu at the turn of the twentieth century by a patron of the arts named Ali Muhammad Zein al-Abidin, or "Bwana Zena" as he was popularly known. As Ranger suggests, Bwana Zena was a member of an elite family that enjoyed both economic and social status, which he publicly displayed by hosting dance competitions that featured sword dances such as Chama.³⁴ Bwana Zena was the sort of man whose extensive travels back and forth from Lamu to the large towns on the mainland made him a cultural purveyor of sorts. No doubt, Lamu residents depended upon Bwana Zena and his family for keeping them apprised of the latest fashions, technology, food, music and dance that people in Malindi and Mombasa were raving about. Thus, when it came time for one of Bwana Zena's children to be married, a tremendous amount of pressure was on him and his relatives to put on a good show.

To do so, Bwana Zena invited a Beni group called "Kingi" from Mombasa to perform for the wedding in Lamu. The brass instruments, the elaborate European costumes and weapons were a sight to behold for people in Lamu. The event attracted so many people and was such a huge success, that Bwana Zena decided to start his own Beni group in Lamu, which would reign supreme over all of his rival dance groups in town. Bwana Zena knew that Beni was too extravagant, too expensive, and too western for locals to get a grasp on. He believed that Beni would make him the consummate Lamu patron of all time! Beni was the answer to any egomaniac's prayers! Athman

³⁴See Ranger, 1975:26-27.

Kitoka, a Lamu elder and Beni enthusiast recalls the history of Beni in Lamu, from its beginning to its demise:

When I was about fourteen years old, I knew one man from Lamu, who first established Beni, called Bwana Zena from Langoni. And at that time, Beni was not yet performed in Lamu, the only ngomas that existed in those days were the ones I have already explained (Chama, Ndongwe, Goma), but there wasn't any Beni. But this man I knew. And although I was very young and I couldn't understand much, I think he brought Beni from Mombasa and decided to form a Beni group here in Lamu.

After he met with his friends to discuss which group he should bring, he decided to bring Beni. It was a group called "Kingi"--that was its name, and they began to perform Beni. And that group was big, with a lot of people. But because there was only one group, conflict arose between different kinds of people and they split the group into two parts. So some went to Mombasa to bring back their own Beni group called "Manispa" ("Municipal").

But at that time I couldn't involve myself with Beni, I was just a child and I just went to watch Beni. I didn't have enough time to watch the end of the performance because I had to be home at nine o'clock to go to bed. There were two Beni groups that continued to perform in Langoni, and then Mkomani wanted to have their own Beni group too. So they formed their own group and they called it "Scotch," and they ordered their drum all the way from Europe, not just from Mombasa, like the others.

The groups always performed on Sundays, if Kingi performed this Sunday, then Manispa would perform the next Sunday, and Scotch the next Sunday. Then Kingi, which was the first group, began to collapse. The first group to establish Beni was also the first to collapse. And the group that was called Kingi was renamed "Kambaa." The name "Kingi" was no more, Kingi became Kambaa.

After that, Kambaa became a very big group because it was from Langoni. And then Manispa collapsed and was no more, and only Kambaa and Scotch remained. So Scotch (Mkomani) and Kambaa (Langoni) began competing against each other. And when they were going to compete, the Kambaa group would send a letter to the Scotch group saying that on Sunday they would like to have a Beni competition. If the two groups agreed, then they began organizing their performances. If Kambaa began at Matumbatuni, in Langoni, and Scotch began in Mkomani, they would meet at the D.C.'s place, which is now the Lamu Museum.

The Kambaa group would arrive and face the Museum and the Scotch would arrive and face the Museum. Each Beni group was made up of different sections wearing different outfits. There were two rows, which formed long snake-like lines, but the rows had different sections of twenty people each, all wearing the same kind of clothes. Twenty people wore one kind of clothes, and twenty others wore another kind of clothes. There were about six or seven

different uniforms that they wore. Twenty might wear white pants and white coats, twenty others might wear black pants and black coats, and twenty more might wear black coats and white pants--each different.

When they competed, the D.C. was the judge, and at that time, the District Commissioners were Europeans. The D.C. would come and join one group, such as Kambaa. He began his inspection with the front section of the group and when he had completed looking at the beauty of the last section, he left that Beni group and went to inspect the other group. He then inspected the Scotch, from the beginning to the end. And then he would make a decision. He might decide that the Kambaa group performed Beni the best because the performers had the best style, their music was good, but perhaps they didn't have enough lamps and there wasn't enough light to see, their drums were not synchronized, and he would make note of it.

And then he would go to the second group, the Scotch group, and he might say they had nice costumes, and they had good performance style, and their music was good, but they had no spectators, and he made his decision based on those criteria. Each group was awarded different points. And because he couldn't just say which group was the best, he used the points that each group had been awarded to determine the winner.

Each week there were different developments that occurred within each group. They added different things and made various changes. When the Scotch group competed, I remember I was participating in Beni at that time, four members dressed up like Princes of the Kings. They led the group in front, as the leaders, and they prepared a model Man- O-War ship and put it on top of a vehicle to make it look like it was floating. And it looked exactly like a real Man-o-War ship. That was to be the last Beni competition, because the Kambaa group was totally destroyed by the Scotch group.

On that day the Scotch dressed up like Princes, in fact they wore the full dress of the King himself, and the D.C. was so delighted that he saluted the four who had dressed up just like Princes. He gave as big a salute as if he had seen the King himself. That day was a very important day for the D.C. because it was the last Beni competition ever to take place in Lamu. The other group collapsed because it was so badly defeated. So there were no more competitions, and if one group wanted to perform on a Sunday, they just performed alone, but there were no more competitions. That was about 1947, I believe.³⁵

More research into the history of Beni in Lamu suggests that Beni was not a continuous feature of life for residents in Lamu between the early 1900s and the 1950s. As can be expected, Beni only survived during periods of economic security, when people were not afraid that a large feast might be followed by a deadly food shortage

³⁵Interview with Athmani Kitoka of Lamu, 10.4.95.

caused by flood or famine. Consequently, people seemed to catch "Beni fever" after a good harvest, during a trade boom, when people were healthy, and life was "easy."

Beni's last heyday, as Athman Kitoka reports, occurred in Lamu in the late 1940s. Ranger demonstrates that Beni's revival, after years of sporadic activity, was a response to an increase in local revenue from the copra and cattle industries.³⁶ This made the competitive slaughter of cows between ngoma groups feasible again, which resuscitated Beni. Several Lamu elders remember that era as the prime of their lives; the days when, "you bought a cow for forty shillings."³⁷ Maulidi Sabina, a female ngoma leader in Lamu remembers Beni this way:

A: Yes, I participated in Beni. We performed Beni in skirts and buibuis, and sometimes without covering ourselves up as usual.³⁸ We used to slaughter cows and go to Twaifu, where the soccer fields are today. That's where the women and men used to perform and eat meat together. And then we all returned to town performing Beni. At noon, we used to go around carrying the heads and tails of the cows we had slaughtered.

Q: While performing Beni?

A: Yes, while performing Beni. We used to go around performing Beni. We tied on the heads and tails of the cows and danced (lelelelelelelele). "Ah asoweko mwambie. Ah asoweko mwambie." ("Tell the one who is not here.") We used to compete along the seafront.³⁹

The ostentatious feasts that marked weekend ngoma competitions in Lamu were second in extravagance only to the elaborate parades, which were a signature feature of Beni. Maulidi Sabina explains that the reason Beni was performed along the seafront was because that was the only space large enough to accommodate the huge marching band

³⁶See Ranger 1975:145.

³⁷Interviews with Abdalla Kirume of Lamu, 9.13.95, Lamu; Ali Jabu of Lamu, 10.26.95; Athmani Juhudi of Takaungu, 4.12.96; Mahfudh Basharahil of Mambui, 4.26.96; Salima Jazaka of Lamu, 10.11.95; Maulidi Sibina of Lamu, 7.27.96; Omar Said Amin of Takaungu, 4.15.96.

³⁸Maulidi Sabina is referring to the customary practice of adult Muslim women on the coast of east Africa to wear black veils (buihui), which they observe in honor of a modesty clause (purdah) that is found in the Qur'an.

³⁹Interview with Maulidi Sabina of Lamu, 7.27.96.

processions that performed. Each Beni group was comprised of an entire Lamu neighborhood, made up of hundreds of people. They were divided into units that were demarcated by their different military uniforms: Scottish kilts, American sailor suits, British khakis, American cowboy outfits, and British navy uniforms.⁴⁰ Each battalion had it's own leader, who called out commands. The King and Queen, dressed in authentic-looking British regalia, led the entire parade in the front section of the parade, which consisted of an entourage of Beni patrons, government officials, and honored guests. Mzee Bakamoro of Lamu describes the extent to which Beni participants went to impress such government officials, visiting spectators, and loyal fans:

We copied the King of England's robe exactly so that no one had to guess whose robe it was supposed to resemble. We got a picture of the real robe from Abdalla Maawiya. There was a cross stitched under the armpit of the robe. Even the D.C. (District Commissioner) himself noticed it, and was so surprised that we had seen that detail of the robe and replicated it!⁴¹

By studying the significance of symmetry among members of ngoma groups that performed Chama and Beni, it is clear that mimesis was as fundamental as originality.⁴² These two performance traditions were modeled after images, artifacts, and memories of Arab and British military rule. The memorabilia that became part of the grand military ngomas were cultural heirlooms that enabled dancers to re-enact historical situations they or their ancestors were involved in. The importance of mimesis in these re-enactments

⁴⁰Interview with Mzee Bakamoro of Lamu, 7.23.96.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Beni in east Africa might be compared to the Hauka movement in West Africa in the 1920s and 30s. Like members of the Beni ngoma groups, members of Hauka dressed up as European soldiers and mimicked them during ritual performances that included spirit possession. Paul Stoller writes about Hauka as a form of colonial resistance and Jean Rouch's film *Les Maitre Fous*, features a Hauka ritual performed in 1953. For a critical review of this work see Michael Taussig, 1993. See also Stoller, 1984. Also of interest is Jean Rouch, 1978.

lies in the ability of the performers to "become" the oppressors through mimicry.

Embedded in the act of becoming Arab soldiers and European colonial officials is an act of resistance, something that Paul Stoller (1989) discusses at length in his book, Fusion of the Worlds: An Ethnography of Possession Among the Songhay of Niger. Thus, both Chama and Beni ngoma must be remembered not only for their uncanny resemblance of "real" Arab and British soldiers and royals, but as therapeutic acts of socio-political recovery for the communities that performed them.

Neither are mimesis and originality mutually exclusive, as both ngomas aptly illustrate. Dancers brought Chama and Beni to life with imported objects such as Arabic cloth and European musical instruments as much as locally made paraphernalia. Two examples of this are the rhino-skin battle shields that were customarily carried by the leader of a Chama group, and the wooden cane that Beni commanders used to lead their troops. To the members of hierarchically organized ngomas such as Chama and Beni, articles such as the shield and the cane, coastal emblems of authority, were highly prized possessions. Although the shield has gone out of fashion today and is no longer carried by Chama performers, a similar leather shield is donned by the leader of another coastal ngoma known as Uta. The contemporary use of the shield as a symbol of authority provides evidence for its prevalence among ngoma leaders in the past.⁴³ The cane, on the other hand, has lost its power as an emblem of command and is carried by dancers of all ranks in several coastal ngomas including Goma and **Twari la Ndia**.

⁴³Interview with Omar Said and Issa Ali of Lamu, 8.8.96; Ali Jabu of Lamu, 10.26.95.

Because an ngoma performance was judged according to the authenticity of the performers' costumes, instruments, weapons, and adornments, some of the most spectacular performances were those which took place in urban centers, where wealthy patrons had access to such articles. When ngomas that required elaborate props made their way to smaller, less established communities, people improvised and replaced imports with locally made substitutes. This is how, for example, many of the ngomas first performed with swords turned into *stick-fighting dances*.⁴⁴ And why zumaris and other locally made wind instruments replaced brass instruments such as trumpets. Innovations were also made when ngomas from upcountry east Africa became popular on the coast. In some cases, handsewn wooden drums made of animal skin were replaced with oil drums, tin cans, and plastic containers. Other types of percussion instruments such as shakers and rattles were replicated by the sound of bits of broken glass tossed onto metal plates.

Coastal people's ingenuity has enabled them to adapt new ngomas to their own environments when there is no money to replicate or buy the articles that make up the ngoma package. Replacement instruments, costumes, and artifacts are reproduced to maintain many of the features that originally made the performance distinct and recognizable. Discovering which elements of ngomas lent themselves to alteration or substitution and which elements did not helps us to understand the variation in ngoma traditions from place to place along the coast and over time.

⁴⁴Interview with Lali Ahmed Kale of Siyu, 8.8.96.

Change and Continuity From Within

Change within ngoma forms seems primarily to be a product of movement from one place to another. When studying secret ngomas that have remained within a single family or society, change is drastically reduced from one generation to the next. A case in point is the Kimbagu ngoma performed on Pate Island, in the Lamu archipelago. For centuries, Kimbagu was prohibited from being performed or witnessed by anyone but members of Pate's royal family, the Nabhanys, who performed it on ceremonial occasions within the confines of their own quarters. These private performances were comprised of clan rituals and devotional activities that legitimized the family's political and economic control over much of the coast of east Africa from the 14th to the 18th century. Despite Pate's eventual political and economic decline, Kimbagu still symbolizes the noble ancestry of Pate's royal family, and until recently remained the ancient secret of the Nabhany clan alone.⁴⁵

Long after the decline of the coast's ruling families, ngomas such as Kimbagu and Chama retain an air of grandeur. Like the descendants of the Nabhany clan, whose ancient ngoma is reminiscent of their regal inheritance, the Matondoni elite perpetuated Chama as a source of historical legitimacy as "owners" of the village. Over time, both Kimbagu and Chama have increasingly been appropriated by the general populace of the villages they come from. Today, the people who perform these ngomas have a far more

⁴⁵The Kimbagu royal ngoma had not been performed publicly until very recently, when Mwalim Dini, a member of the Nabhani clan, was asked by the leaders of Riyadhha Mosque to perform the dance at the 100th anniversary celebration of the Mosque. Interview with Mwalim Dini of Siyu, 8.7.96.

diverse socio-cultural background than those who had exclusive control over them in the past. Because of this transformation, the function of royal ngomas has become less fixated on perpetuating the illustrious past of a particular family or group of elites, and more concerned with preserving a sense of cultural heritage and continuity among a majority of community members.

One of the ways in which the democratization of coastal ngoma seems to have taken place over the past century is that the leadership of the ngoma groups has managed to bridge the gap between elites and commoners. Sheikh Fadhili of Matondoni, whose apprenticeship with drumming experts of lower social ranking, enabled him to establish new ngoma organizations that appealed to almost everyone in his community. That the coastal elite were taught to perform these ngomas by the lower echelons of society is a hypothesis that is supported by Strobel's research on Lelemama in Mombasa.⁴⁶ In a chapter devoted to the history of Lelemama dance associations in Mombasa, Strobel demonstrates the ethnic diversity of the Lelemama groups that competed throughout the town's neighborhoods from the 1890s. Strobel shows that in the 1930s, when the second generation of Lelemama groups were active, women of high status increasingly joined their female house servants in public performances rather than simply supporting the ngoma groups financially. She also mentions that in 1932, one of the largest Lelemama-Beni groups in Mombasa, known as "Scotchi," was taken over by an "outsider" from Tanzania, where the ngoma is said to have originated.

⁴⁶Strobel, 1978:214-220.

All of this suggests a flattening of the rigid social hierarchy that existed on the coast in previous decades. Ngoma organizations provide an index to a social revolution, which allowed Muslim women of high status to perform outdoors for the first time, and newcomers and outsiders to occupy prestigious positions of authority. Perhaps it was this "opening up" of coastal society that provided the kind of social milieu in which Fadhili could collaborate with a Digo drummer, and under his tutelage establish a satellite Lelemama group in Matondoni. Fadhili also credits the introduction of another popular women's ngoma in Matondoni, called Changani, to a visitor from the Mrima coast, named Sadala, whose name suggests he may have been of slave heritage.

Another version of how these female ngomas were established in Matondoni is told by a female elder and ngoma-enthusiast named Mama Kadi of Lamu. Mama Kadi explains that the women's dance, Mwasha, was first introduced in Matondoni by a woman ngoma leader from Lamu named Salima Jazaka. Like her parents, Salima was also the leader of spirit possession ngomas such as Dunga, Pungwa and Twari. Salima's family involvement with spirit possession is a status marker, and is indicative of her alleged slave heritage. Despite her family's low social rank, Salima's social position did not prevent her from becoming the leader of "high class" ("kijoho") social dances such as Mwasha, which the elite women of Matondoni invited Salima to teach them.

Inviting a performance star from another village to perform for a private ceremony was not only a glamorous way to demonstrate social prestige, it provided an opportunity for Matondoni elites to be the first in town to learn the latest dances. Mama

Kadi's story illustrates that the transfer of performance skills was often a transfer from a member of a lower class to a member of a higher class. That the students of ngoma experts were often their patrons seems to have undermined the status that a cultural specialist like Salima Jazaka might have enjoyed in a more egalitarian society.

Mama Kadi further explains that Lelemama was introduced to Matondoni residents in a similar fashion. In that case, it was a homosexual man from Lamu named Zegha, who was commissioned to teach the new ngoma. In congruence with both Fadhili and Strobel, Mama Kadi's narrative seems to substantiate a general trend that suggests people on the margins of coastal society, such as people with slave background, outsiders, and homosexuals, were the ones who transferred new ngoma styles to elites.

A competing oral tradition claims that Lelemama, Changani and Mwasha were brought to Lamu and the surrounding villages by the distinguished Zanzibari guests of Sheikh Muhammad Zena and his daughter Salma--sometime in the 1920s.⁴⁷ The credibility of this theory is fortified by the fact that the Zena family has long been associated with the establishment of Beni in Lamu during the same period, a point Ranger makes in his analysis.⁴⁸ Several Lamu ngoma experts argue that elite ngomas were indeed founded and passed on by the "joho" for the "joho." Yet, if the transmission of the popular competitive dances had been left up to elites themselves, how did the ngomas attract such widespread participation among those on the margins? And why

⁴⁷Interviews with Ali Jabu of Lamu, 10 .26.95; Athmani Kitoka of Lamu, 10.4.95.

⁴⁸See Ranger, 1975: 78-81.

have the most famous drummers and song composers generally been of lower class background?

First of all, weddings, circumcision ceremonies, religious festivals and ngoma competitions were events which seem to have strengthened ties to diverse members of the community, allowed patrons to build up their wealth in people, and provided clients with opportunities to increase their support network of patrons. Such events were common throughout the coast and would have been unlikely places for elitism to flourish. Such performances generally included whole neighborhoods, if not whole towns, and attracted visitors and guests from all walks of life. With this in mind, it is likely that ngomas were spread both by drummers and members of the lower echelons of society, as well as elites. Thus, Fadhihi's story of learning to play the drums for new ngomas from a Mijikenda drummer and a visitor from the coast of Tanzania, and then using his status to popularize the ngomas locally is a likely scenario.

After the basic movements of a new dance were learned, it was up to the dancers to incorporate all of the other elements: costumes, accessories, props, decorations, hairstyles, song melodies and lyrics. This explains why the women of Matondoni were eager to learn from specialists like Salima Jazaka and Zegha, who had mastered the new dances and were privy to all the components associated with the latest ngoma fad. Most of the ngoma leaders I spoke with inherited their posts from a relative, who taught them to sing, dance and compose songs on the spot. Their family's reputation depended upon their command of the song repertoire that was passed on to them. This included songs

from long ago as well as contemporary tunes. The most renowned ngoma experts were the ones who sang a wide variety of songs off the top of their heads and catered to the demands of the patrons hosting the event.

Conclusion

The spread of new dances and songs along the east African coast is best understood when considering them as "ngoma packages" that people un-packed and re-packed in a variety of different ways according to local resources and objectives. The formation of ngoma groups often took place in response to a new ngoma, inspiring people who would not necessarily consider themselves dancers or singers to join in the latest dance craze. Membership in a ngoma group was an important way for people who lived in small villages to participate in urban cultural phenomena. The ways in which such people altered the new ngomas to accommodate their own economic and social reality explains the variation in the performances from place to place. Yet, even with local peculiarity, most of the coastal ngomas that spread along the coast retained a core set of elements, which distinguished them from others. Even when ngomas as popular as Beni were given local names, such as "Gwaride," the characteristics that made it unique were unmistakable. This explains why women from a small island village such as Faza could participate in a ngoma performed by women in Malindi and vice versa.

The balance of change and continuity that characterizes coastal ngoma reflects a pervasive mentality among many coastal communities, which want to sustain their links

to urban centers while preserving the traditions that make their societies distinct. The tension between retaining the ngoma's authenticity while incorporating novel elements is explicit in ngoma competition itself, which encourages groups to demonstrate originality while remaining within a framework of customary action. This explains the criticisms that some ngoma experts make about ngoma groups that fail to follow customary practice--such as the uniformity of dress among performers. According to Mwalim Aboud, a Goma leader from Ndaui Island, "whoever wears a colored kanzu spoils the appearance of the line," which looks best when everyone wears all white.⁴⁹ However, uniformity alone cannot make an ngoma group great, as this remark from Lali Ahmed Kale, a Goma leader from Siyu, explains:

The difference between our ngoma and the ngoma performed on the mainland can be seen in the dancing styles. The way they raise their canes up and down is one difference. And the way they arrange themselves into rows. As I have mentioned, this is a feature of the traditional performance. Do you understand? We have kept this ngoma going as a tradition. But the Goma performers from the mainland are allowed to wear a plain shirt, or a T-shirt, or anything they want. Someone might be on his way home from cutting mangroves and he would be allowed to join the performance in his work clothes. And they perform it haphazardly like this . . .

But for us, we follow the rhythm like this, and raise our canes up and down to the beat...First we perform with a cane. When we hold it like this (on the shoulder) its called "mshangilio". Then we change cane positions when the drum beat changes . . .We also use handkerchiefs for variation and to calm the performers down. Basically, our Goma is more graceful than theirs.⁵⁰

Both Mwalim Aboud and Lali Ahmed Kale discuss what makes their Goma performances better than the Goma performed by people on the mainland. They describe the difference in quality as a by-product of the mainlanders' failure to follow traditional

⁴⁹Interview with Mwalim Aboud of Ndaui, 8.6.96.

⁵⁰Interview with Lali Ahmed Kale of Siyu, 8.8.96.

aesthetics of uniformity, which they believe to be essential to the ngoma. They also mention that their performances include innovations, the Ndau group wears sunglasses when they perform, and the Siyu group uses handkerchiefs. To these ngoma experts, change and continuity are not discussed as dichotomous, but rather as necessary compliments of the other.

Final Remarks

In this dissertation I have demonstrated the important role that competitive ngoma has played in the lives of the diverse peoples of the northern Kenya coast over time. I have done so with the help of many coastal elders, whose stories, songs, and poems provide a vivid picture of how their involvement in producing music, dance, and oral tradition has affected their lives and the lives of those around them. This research suggests that performance traditions serve as crucial identity markers, which various coastal groups refer to when differentiating themselves from others. For example, someone of Chonyi-Kauma ancestry, who is a member of a ngoma group that regularly performs Mwavinyo, is considered a Chonyi because Mwavinyo is a ngoma performed exclusively by the Chonyi people.⁵¹ By participating in Mwavinyo, such a person privileges his or her Chonyi heritage. Similarly, if that person joins a ngoma group that performs Mtumbano, a traditional Kauma dance, he or she makes his or her preferred affiliation with the Kauma known. As this study has emphasized, plurality among coastal

⁵¹ Interviews with Chivila Mgunya of Mwamkura, 4.23.96; Kauma elders, 4.22.96 and 4.25.96.

peoples often has more to do with cultural and religious practice and group affiliation than with ethnic background. Ethnicity is an extremely evasive signifier that has eluded Colonial officials, western scholars, and coastal residents alike. The model I present here provides an innovative way to explore the socio-cultural complexity of the coastal population without subscribing to a racially based method of analysis.

This work also considers ngoma as a social mechanism that coastal people have repetitively used to mediate their differences. Mombasa women of varied economic strata united under Lelemama and expressed their discontent with the patriarchal system that stifled them. Influential Sufi leaders used ngoma to create social and religious links between former slaves and non-Muslims, and the coastal elite. And newcomers without any claims to ownership or elevated social status climbed the ranks of ngoma leadership to gain prestige and political influence. As I state above, participation in ngoma did not guarantee upward mobility for everyone, but it did provide important opportunities for members to increase their social capital, which remains a crucial source of security among coastal people today.

Another contribution this research makes to the study of east African coastal society is that it highlights ngoma's capacity to carry social messages that might not be articulated in other media. This raises the issue of poetic immunity, which provides singers and oral performance experts with the license to express sentiments otherwise prohibited from popular discourse. I have explained that this license does not protect performers from being the victims of verbal abuse in return, or being banned from

participation in an enemy's ngoma group. But well respected ngoma specialists rarely experience negative social consequences as a result of their social commentary, which is an expected and highly anticipated part of public performance.

Finally, this work hopes to stimulate an enhanced appreciation for the kinds of performance traditions that have been transferred down the generations by people who understood their historical and cultural value. Over the years, I have learned that the men and women who hold that kind of knowledge wish desperately to pass it on to young people who are willing to take on the responsibility of learning it carefully, and preserving it for future generations. For encoded in the words and movements they and their ancestors have performed over the centuries are clues that explain the vibrancy and resilience of east African coastal civilization.

CHAPTER 6 EPILOGUE

Instead of campaigning for the creation of a mature visual anthropology, with its anthropological principles all in place, we would be wise to look at the principles that emerge when fieldworkers actually try to rethink anthropology through the use of visual medium. This may lead in directions we would never have predicted from the comparative safety of theory.

(David MacDougall, 1997:293)

The transmission of knowledge on the eve of the new millennium is such that the information contained in this dissertation will soon be made accessible to anyone on the Internet. This is an exciting prospect, but one I have ambivalent feelings about. Most of these stem from the fact that the vast majority of the people whose knowledge is represented here do not have access to a computer, and therefore cannot enjoy the dissertation's hypertext format, the images, or the video clips it features. Throughout the process of interviewing, video taping, translating, editing, organizing, and writing up, this project has been a collaborative effort between me and at least one other person from the Kenya coast. As I get ready to launch the final version of it onto the world wide web, I feel alone for the first time.

I suspect that if my friends in east Africa were there waiting to catch it, after I flung it into cyberspace and disseminated it around the globe, I would be satisfied. Then it would be possible for the knowledge-sharing process to continue, for stories to be

added, links attached, networks created, and ideas to keep flowing. Dynamism is how the people of the coast transmit their history; they tell it, sing and dance it. They rarely write it. For writing is too fixed, too singular, finite, and immobile. Hypertext, in its ability to expand indefinitely, is really the perfect medium for ngoma memories. Unfortunately, most of the people on the coast will have to wait awhile longer before they are able to incorporate it.

Of course, there are skeptics who fear that computers will become another avenue of western cultural imperialism, which has already taken a toll on coastal customs. American sitcoms and soap operas have "contaminated" nightly television in Nairobi for years, and violent American films are typical fare at east African movie houses. All forms of mass communication are controlled by government institutions that favor foreign media because it is less expensive than funding local productions. As Kenyan filmmaker Anne Mungai explains, "after political independence, most (African) governments . . . did not appreciate the use of film as a means of recreation, information and education, as well as a way of alerting audiences to the problems of socio-cultural development."¹ Frustration in this regard is felt most among talented east African scriptwriters, directors, actors, and producers whose ability to create independent media is stifled by a popular craving for "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and *Terminator*.²

Very few east African authors receive government support to write screenplays based on local experiences, or to transpose east African stories onto film. There are a few

¹See Anne Mungai, 1996:65.

²See Manthia Diawara, 1996.

exceptions, two of them being women: Nanga Yoma Ngoge, a Tanzanian filmmaker who co-directed *Arusi ya Mariamu (The Wedding of Mariamu)*³ in 1985, and Anne Mungai, who directed *Saikati* in 1992. But these filmmakers are relatively unknown in their home countries. The few African films I have seen in Kenya were shown to small audiences at the French Cultural Center in Nairobi. In general, east Africans remain unaware that an authentic African cinema even exists.

My plan to establish a cultural center in Lamu that would eventually facilitate the development of locally produced documentary videos was thwarted by the more immediate needs of the community it was intended to serve. People on the coast are primarily concerned with finding work or sustaining the jobs they have, feeding their families, paying their children's school fees, and buying medicine for themselves and their sick relatives. The tourist industry, which literally keeps east African coastal communities alive, has suffered in recent years due to the lack of police security against bandits. In addition, torrential rains have flooded farmlands making them largely uncultivable, and people have been fighting a cholera epidemic, which only exaggerates the persistent medical complications caused by chronic malaria. Consequently, coastal people have not had watching and/or making documentary videos at the top of their list of priorities lately.

The contemporary realities faced by the people whose cultural traditions are featured in this dissertation adds a disturbing twist to it's narrative. It is not surprising that

³With co-director Ron Mulvihill. The film was awarded best short film at the Festival Panafricain du Cinema de Ouagadougou (FESPACO). See Diawara, 1996:102.

most of the elders I spoke with found relief from the pressures of modern life in their memories of the olden days. Correspondingly, it should not come as a surprise that the Center became a daycare center for Lamu children, whose parents were busy making basic ends meet. While I do not believe that my research is made insignificant by these realities, I doubt that it can be fully appreciated by people who are suffering the way coastal people are suffering today.

What Is Indigenous Media?

It is in this vein that I engage contemporary anthropological discourse on how western forms of expression and communication affect the non-western societies that employ them. A recent article in Linguafranca (July/August, 1998) highlights an ongoing debate between Faye Ginsburg, an ethnographic filmmaker and advocate for indigenous media, and fellow anthropologist James Weiner, whose article in Current Anthropology in April, 1997 deemed visual media inherently embedded in western ontology. Ginsburg argues, "It's outrageous to think that just because a Kayapo uses a camcorder he becomes western. If we drink tea, does that mean we are Chinese?"⁴ As much as I agree with Ginsburg's response, I do not believe that we should ignore the questions Weiner raises about what indigenous media is and what it is not.

Scholars such as Weiner challenge visual anthropologists to re-think their objectives. If, as Weiner assumes, visual anthropologists are simply interested in training native peoples to use video cameras the same way they would use them, then perhaps his

⁴See John Palattella, 1998:52.

critique of so-called "indigenous media" is warranted. If, as Ginsburg suggests, anthropologists train native peoples to operate video cameras so they can document and promote their own cultural values the way they see fit, then indigenous media is the appropriate next step toward indigenous peoples' self-representation. The question that comes to mind when thinking through these arguments, however, is whether or not the so-called "natives," if left to their own accord, would produce films and videos with the filmic sensibility western anthropologists would appreciate.

If I insert the people of Lamu into this scenario, the answer is, "probably not." At least that is the impression that the members of the Lamu Cultural Center's Committee had of their fellow coastal residents. As I explain in Chapter 1, the Committee disapproved of making the video equipment at the Center available to the public. They were afraid that local people would use the camera to document personal events such as weddings, which they determined to be culturally irrelevant to the coastal community as a whole. A second factor in the Committee's decision was that they were afraid that inexperienced residents would mishandle the equipment and it would ultimately be destroyed.

I include the letter I wrote to the Committee members summarizing what we discussed at our first meeting in [Appendix E](#). I do so in order to provide readers with an idea of what the Committee's collective notion of "indigenous media" was at that time. An excerpt from that letter hints at our primary goal for the Center: "In addition to providing a site for public viewing of the videos, the Center will also be a place where

people can learn how to conduct their own interviews and shoot their own live ngoma performances." The Committee eventually agreed that interested videographers would submit a proposal to Omari Shee, the Center's supervisor, who was to decide whether or not the event "would enhance the video collection."

After re-evaluating our definition of "indigenous media" from Weiner's perspective, I must admit that it is indeed embedded in a western anthropological ontology. The Committee and I assumed that coastal residents would carry on with the cultural documentation project I had started, and that they would video tape events we believed to be culturally relevant--primarily ngoma activities and oral traditions. I provided the community with over one hundred examples of how they might proceed with the project by making all of the videos I had produced on the coast between 1993 and 1996 available for them to watch. In this sense, I did commit the crime Weiner would accuse me of--passing on a value system intended to shape the way indigenous videographers portray themselves and their "relevant" cultural traditions.

Weiner makes me skeptical about whether an authentic "indigenous media" can exist under the terms in which it has come into being. Although Ginsburg claims that a video camera does not necessarily come with a western point of view, I wonder if she or any other anthropologist ever resisted the temptation to suggest what native peoples ought to film, or to teach them how to use the camera and the editing equipment. As I look through the summer issue (1998) of Cultural Survival Quarterly, dedicated

specifically to "aboriginal media," I cannot help but notice that many of the projects highlighted in the issue are as similar to each other as they are to mine.

Allow me to illustrate my point by citing one example. "The Garifuna Journey," featured in the "special projects" section of the journal, describes a video documentation project between the Garifuna Nation of Belize, and filmmakers Andrea Leland and Kathy Berger. The article begins with an excerpt of a document written by the President of the National Garifuna Council, Roy Cayetano, which attests that the project is indeed a "partnership" between the filmmakers and the Garifuna community. The author of the article elaborates on this partnership by stating:

Collaboration between the Garifuna community and the video producers was an essential component of the project . . . Garifuna tradition bearers, activists, and scholars guided the collection of materials in Belize and in some cases, conducted the interviews and operated the camera . . . When the outside producer came in with a fresh eye and asked questions about common cultural practices, the Garifuna were, at times, surprised by the outsiders interest in everyday cultural expressions. The extraordinary exchange that took place subsequently resulted in greater understanding and altered perspectives for both outsider and insider.⁵

The author goes on to discuss how the producers received feedback from the Garifuna on the video rough-cut, and revised the script accordingly. The final 46 minute documentary, "The Garifuna Journey" premiered at Chicago's Field Museum, where it was featured as, "a model to demonstrate the collaborative efforts between outsiders and insiders in documenting a culture."⁶

⁵See *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 1998:16.

⁶See *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 1998:17.

The "we-they" dichotomy is so central to visual documentary projects like "The Garifuna Journey" that it has become indigenous media's principal explanatory trope. This, I suppose, is a symptom of the latest phase of visual anthropology, which masks as a drastic advance from an earlier phase, characterized by a preoccupation with representing the natives' own visual world. This ambition was first articulated by the founding fathers of visual anthropology, John and Malcolm Collier (1967), Sol Worth and John Adair (1972), and continues to be put forward as a goal for contemporary visual anthropology by Howard Morphy and Marcus Banks (1997).

Most advocates for indigenous media today, however, believe anthropologists should abandon the pursuit of such "naive realism,"⁷ and hand over their cameras to the natives. Faye Ginsburg is a primary spokesperson for this approach, which she describes as "(A) new arena of cultural production in which specific historical and cultural ruptures are addressed and mediated . . ."⁸ Ginsburg compares this project to the work of ethnographic filmmakers David and Judith MacDougall, Gary Kildea, Dennis O'Rourke and Jean Rouch, which she suggests, "(A)re not based on some retrieval of an idealized past but create and assert a position for the present that attempts to accommodate the inconsistencies and contradictions of contemporary life."⁹

John Collier's attempts to capture the ways in which various Native Americans construct their world views through photography, and the MacDougalls' attempts to show

⁷See commentaries to Weiner's article by Faye Ginsburg, Annette Hamilton, Christopher Pinney in Current Anthropology. 28(2), April, 1997.

⁸See Faye Ginsburg, 1995:284.

⁹Ginsburg, 1995:265.

the processes of identity construction among the Africans they film, are quite similar pursuits. Rather than representing a dramatic shift, or an advancement in the field of visual anthropology, it seems to me that the objectives of "indigenous media" seem to mimic an earlier and more transparent quest for native vision. Whether or not westerners are willing to learn how to see through native eyes, rather than assuming theirs are "fresher," seems to me like the question we should all be trying to answer.

Weiner articulates this problem when he criticizes Ginsburg for not providing an insightful enough introduction to clips of *Qaggiq*, an Inuit film she presented with a paper on indigenous media in 1994.¹⁰ In Weiner's opinion, Ginsburg neglected her responsibility to translate the Inuit messages to the audience. In his words, she failed "to tell us something about the film that we cannot see for ourselves."¹¹ Here Weiner brings up the anthropologist's expected role as translator of so-called "indigenous media," which in my view is this project's essential flaw.

Weiner's blindness to the similarities between *Qaggiq* and other non-western films is just as much Ginsburg's problem as his own. If Ginsburg had not packaged *Qaggiq* as an example of "indigenous media," and taken on the role of cultural broker between the Inuit director and the audience, neither Weiner nor the rest of us would confuse "indigenous media" for an extension of western anthropology. As "camera people"¹² we visual anthropologists are accustomed to mediating cultures visually, and

¹⁰See Ginsburg, 1994.

¹¹Weiner, 1997:197.

¹²This term was coined by Eliot Wienberg, 1994.

it's a hard habit to break. We must have faith that Inuit, Navajo and Swahili videographers will develop their own filmic sensibilities that others will learn to understand and appreciate. And if the Lamu Museum overflows with video tapes of wedding ceremonies, then it will be because that is what people on the coast of Kenya believe to be culturally relevant and important.

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FIGURES

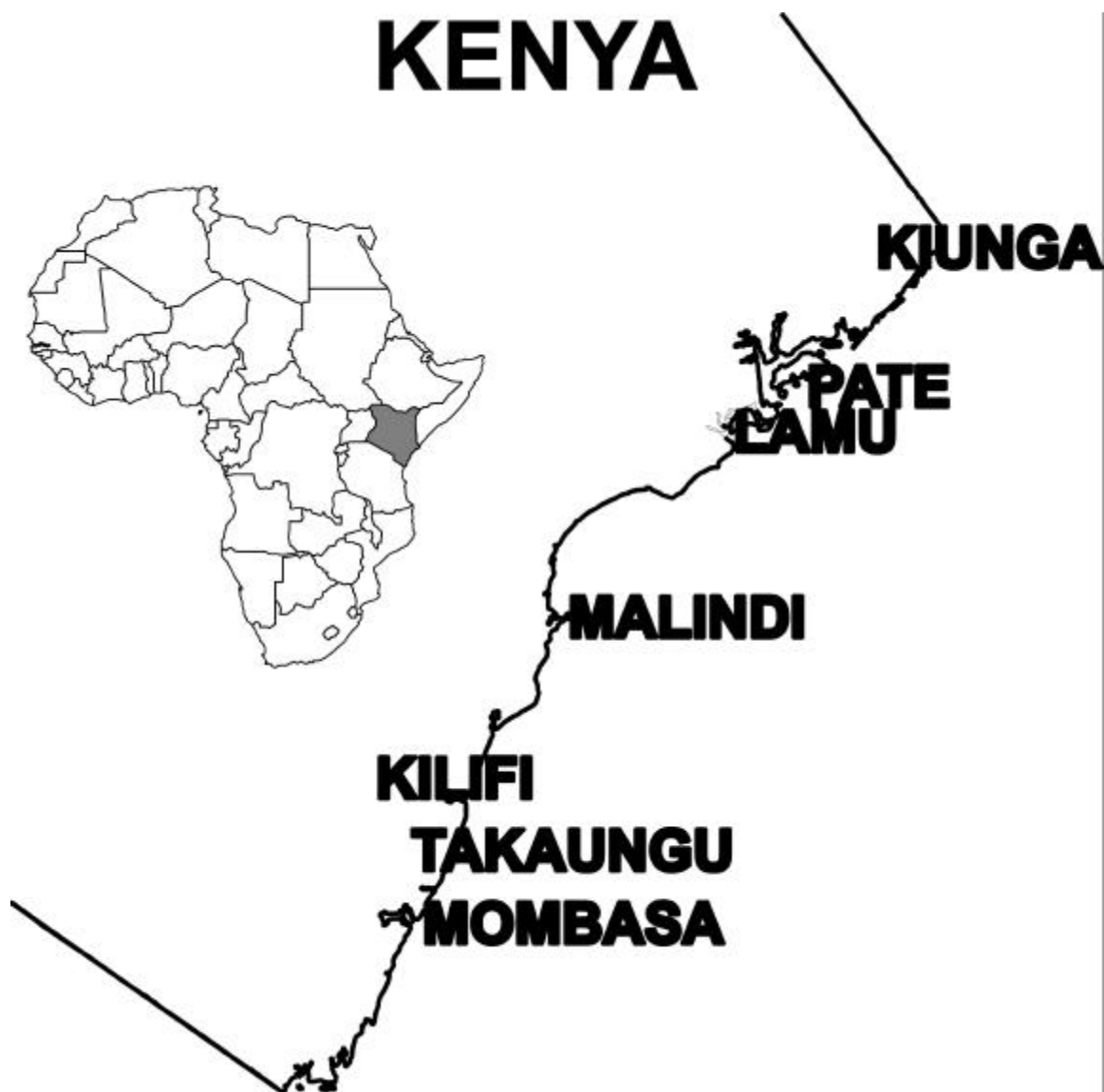


Figure 1. Map of the Kenya coast.



Figure 2. Amina Hamisi & Rebecca Gearhart



Figure 3. University of Dar es Salaam Students & the Paul Taylor Dance Repertoire



Figure 4. Rukia's female relatives make her into a Swahili bride.



Figure 5. Using henna to decorate a bride's hands and feet is an Arabic tradition practiced throughout the Muslim World.



Figure 6. Rukia at the “Showing of the Bride” ceremony, where her adult peers see her as a true Swahili woman for the first time.



Figure 7. “Kangoromo”, a coconut-tapper, and his sons watch excerpts of the Uta dance, performed in Lamu during the annual Maulidi Festival.



Figure 8. Mzee Talo watches an excerpt of the ngoma competition at Riyadhha Mosque during the annual Maulidi celebration in Lamu.



Figure 9. Members of the Mwavinyo ngoma group gather to inspect photographs of the performance.



Figure 10. “Kadzo” Chivila, a Mwavinyo song leader, with a photo of herself at the performance.



Figure 11. Chivila reviews the interview he just completed.



Figure 12. Abubakar Kuchi with two Bajuni cultural experts in Magomeni, a Bajuni refugee settlement.



Figure 13. Coastal residents compete in the annual Maulidi board game competition at the Lamu Fort. This photo was part of the exhibition, "Swahili Praises to the Prophet."



Figure 14. This photograph of the annual donkey race along the Lamu seafront was also included in the Exhibition.



Figure 15. Siyu dancers perform the meditative Goma dance at Riyadhha Mosque during the Maulidi festival in Lamu.



Figure 16. Ngoma la Ndia, a processional dance that features praises to the Prophet. Here it is performed in Faza (Rasini) on Pate Island during the month of Maulidi.



Figure 17. Two young men from Faza perform Kirumbizi, a stick dance typically performed for coastal weddings. Since Maulidi is a time when relatives return to the Islands for celebration, it is a convenient occasion for hosting weddings.



Figure 18. Bajuni drummers sound out the beats for the exciting Kirumbizi dance.



Figure 19. Students at Lamu Girls' Secondary School surround a kinara filled with freshly prepared jasmine flowers. As they recite Maulidi prayers, they burn incense, and sprinkle themselves with mirashi, or holy water (lower right).



Figure 20. Local school children examine the Photo Exhibit, “Swahili Praises to the Prophet” at the Lamu Fort.



Figure 21. After looking at the photographs, children watch a video presentation, which features excerpts of events held during the annual Maulidi festival.



Figure 22. A drummer from Lamu completes the questionnaire after viewing the Exhibition.



Figure 23. Members of the Lamu Community Cultural Center & Video Library Committee (left to right) Ali Fani, Keith Castelino, Dorothy Clark, Omari Shee, Said Abdulrehman El-Mafazy, Alwy Ahmed Badawy, and Zahara Shee Mohammed.



Figure 24. Committee members and friends at the Opening of the Center.



Figure 25. Members of Omari Haji's women's ngoma group in Matondoni perform Lelemama.



Figure 26. Mebaraka Juma's ngoma group performs Lelemama in Takaungu.



Figure 27. Bake Die Shee, of Siyu, holds his zumari.



Figure 28. Bajuni drummers play for the Goma competition at Riyadhha Mosque during the annual Maulidi celebration in Lamu.



Figure 29. Esha Ngoma plays her drum for a wedding dance in Kipungani. She is the most popular female song leader on the Kenya coast.



Figure 30. Omari Haji leads the Matondoni women's ngoma group in Lelemama.



Figure 31. Lali Ahmed Kale leads the Goma dancers from Siyu as they perform at Riyadhha Mosque during the annual dance competition at the Maulidi celebration in Lamu. Mzee Kale is holding a photograph I took of him at the previous year's festival.



Figure 32. Mzee Bakamoro at his home in Lamu.



Figure 33. A Seventeenth-Century Ngoma Kuu displayed in the Fort Jesus Museum in Mombasa.



Figure 34. Coconut tappers (wagema) perform Uta in front of Habib Saleh's House during the Maulidi Festival.



Figure 35. Long-time Uta dancers tie on their leg rattles (misewe) before their performance.



Figure 36. Uta leader Omari Said holds the rhino-skin shield (ngao), which symbolizes his authority over the group of Uta dancers.



Figure 37. Goma dancers in their white robes (kanzus) and hand-embroidered caps (kofias).



Figure 38. A Rama Maulidi ceremony hosted by Abdul Rehman al-Basakut of Lamu. Participants form rows opposite the host and his relatives, the leaders, and the tambourine (matwari) players.



Figure 39. Rama positions include acts of submission to Allah. When combined with verses from the Qur'an, this kind of prostration makes Rama Maulidi a traditional form of Islamic prayer.



Figure 40. Members of the Barani Peoples' Welfare Association meet to discuss returning to their traditional homelands in Kiunga District, on the northern Kenya coast.



Figure 41. Rebecca and the Vave experts wait for the evening feast and then for Vave to begin.



Figure 42. After a chapter of Vave, Bajuni farmers circle to perform Randa.



Figure 43. Bajuni farmers from Pate Island load two dhows full of elements they will need for the burning in Vumbe on the mainland. Included are chickens and goats for sacrifice.



Figure 44. Fire bearers run to set fire along the fire-break in order to ignite the other end of the huge tract of brush.



Figure 45. After a change in wind direction, the fire is set so that it will burn into the cut brush and not toward the forest.



Figure 46. Mzee Tarumbeta at his home on the outskirts of Takaungu town.



Figure 47. Sword-donned Chama leader, Ali Madi, gives a military style salute to the spectators.



Figure 48. Ali Madi and the zumari player lead the dancers in the Chama performance. The leader has been well paid in tips of Kenya shilling notes by the delighted audience.



Figure 49. The Chama dancers file out of the performance space as they filed in, by arranging themselves in a snake like procession , which winds slowly past the audience for inspection.



Figure 50. Male coastal residents and their guests from near and far away form a Zefe procession leading from the graveyard along the Lamu seafront. This marks the opening of the four-day Maulidi celebration in Lamu town.



Figure 51. A Zefe procession during Takaungu's annual Maulidi celebration.



Figure 52. The Zefe procession at Kipini, the only other coastal town allowed to celebrate Maulidi contemporaneous with the Lamu Maulidi festival.



Figure 53. Chonyi dancers performing the Mwavinyo dance.



Figure 54. Kadzo Chivila leads the dancers in Mwavinyo songs.

APPENDIX A

Swahili Praises to the Prophet

This exhibit is a visual exploration of the annual Maulidi celebration, which the Swahili people of the Lamu archipelago host in honor of the Prophet Muhammad's birth (peace be upon him). These photographs were taken in August, 1995 during Mfungo Sita, the sixth month of the Islamic calendar year.

The Maulidi celebration in Lamu includes a variety of activities such as a dhow sailing race, a poetry (mashairi) contest, a Qur'anic text memorization competition, a henna painting contest, and many others. Two of the annual events; the donkey race and the board game competition are depicted here. Included here also are the faces of some of the many spectators, who came from near and far to take part in the Lamu festival.

Several different music and dance (ngoma) events are featured during the four-day Maulidi performances held on the grounds of the Riyadhha mosque. Musicians, poets, and dancers from the Lamu archipelago gather to perform *Uta* (coconut tappers' dance), *Kirumbizi* (stick dance), *Maulidi ya Rama* (Swahili praise poems), *Goma la Panga* (sword dance) and *Twari la Njia* (tambourine procession). Highlighted here is *Goma*, a dance performed by the people of Siyu and people from the mainland. Each of these photos illustrates one of the many subtle movements that the Goma dancers make with the traditional wooden canes (bakora) they use in this performance.

From Lamu town, the Maulidi ceremony travels to neighboring villages on the islands and on the mainland. Scenes from the Rasini (Faza) Maulidi celebration offer a glimpse of how other Swahili communities celebrate the Prophet's birthday.

This exhibit is dedicated to all of those who have devoted their time and energy to the preservation and sustenance of traditional Swahili music and dance forms. While many of these women and men still thrive, the importance of maintaining the value of these cultural expressions among the future generations must not be underestimated. For embedded in the song lyrics, poetic phrases, and dance movements performed for Maulidi, lies the history of how various peoples of the Kenya coast collaborated in creating a unique celebration of their culture and religion.

APPENDIX B

GRAND OPENING OF THE MAULIDI PHOTO EXHIBIT

The women of Lamu are invited to the opening of an exhibit featuring
photos of the Lamu Maulidi celebration, 1995.

We will open by reading Maulidi - just for women:

Saturday, June 1st, 4:00 pm At the Lamu Fort.

ALL WOMEN ARE WELCOME!

*****A GRAND OPENING*****

LAMU COMMUNITY CULTURAL CENTER
AND VIDEO LIBRARY

Friday, 8 November, 1996

WOMEN: Nine o'clock - eleven o'clock (9 - 11 am)

MEN: Four o'clock - six o'clock (4 - 6 pm)

Ndongwe Performance! All Are Welcome!

APPENDIX C

Name: Rahma Yusuf Abu Bakar (female) Age: 12 Residence: Mombasa
 Positive Comments: I liked the photos of the stick dance and I learned about all of the ngomas featured in the video.

Name: Zuleikha (female) Age: 20 Residence: Mombasa
 Positive Comments: I liked the scenes of Kirumbizi, Zefe, and the Maulidi. I learned how the tambourines are played and how the dancers hold the canes.
 Suggestions: The video presentation should have been shown for men and women separately.

Name: Mau (male) Age: 44 Residence: Lamu
 Positive Comments: The scenes of all of the traditional dances are wonderful. It reminds us of our past.
 Suggestions: The exhibit should also feature events which women and children participate in.

Name: Haus H. Isler (male) Age: 50s Residence: Switzerland
 Positive Comments: I am coming from Switzerland without knowing about the Maulidi celebrations and I am positively impressed to see how deeply rooted the religious customs in this part of the world are.

Name: Isdi (male) Age: 17 Residence: Lamu
 Positive Comments: I liked watching the Muslim dance competition (zamuni). I learned from all that I saw in the video.
 Suggestions: You should have included photos and video clips of the dhow competition.

Name: Sirieem (female) Age: 16 Residence: Malindi
 Positive Comments: I liked seeing examples of traditional culture that used to be so common.
 Suggestions: Its fine the way it is.

Name: Begum (male) Age: 21 Residence: Mombasa
 Positive Comments: I liked the scenes of the Zefe procession and the donkey race. The photos taught me about the various positions that the cane is held by the dancers.
 Suggestions: We should have been served juice while we were watching the video.

Name: Ali Mansour (male) Age: 32 Residence: Mombasa
 Positive Comments: I liked everything. I learned about the Zamuni competition.
 Suggestions: I would have liked to see more of the donkey race.

Name: Suhaak (male) Age: 10 Residence: Mombasa
 Positive Comments: I liked watching the Maulidi, Kirumbizi, Zamuni, and the scenes of the donkey race. I am very happy that when I return to Mombasa I will be able to tell them all about what I have learned here.
 Suggestions: It would be nice to have chips, soda, cakes, chicken, eggs, and chocolates.

Name: Sofia Abdalla (female) Age: 23 Residence: Qubaa, U.A.E.
 Positive Comments: I liked the scenes of the Kirumbizi and Zamuni. I am happy to learn how the dancers use the canes.
 Suggestions: It would have been nice to have some juice while watching the video.

Name: Abu Bakar Khalifa (male) Age: 21 Residence: Lamu
 Positive Comments: I enjoyed watching Goma la panga. I enjoy the month of Mfungu Sita. This is definitely the greatest Muslim month.

Name: Rukia Mohammed (female) Age: 18 Residence: Mombasa
 Positive Comments: I liked watching Kirumbizi, Zumuni, the tambourines (Rama maulidi), and the donkey race. I am very pleased with the exhibit and when I go back home, I will praise it highly.
 Suggestions: I would have liked to have been served juice and cake.

Name: Mohammed Musa (male) Age: 50s Residence: Siyu
 Positive Comments: I liked the scenes of the Goma la bakora. I am very pleased with the exhibit because you included photos and video clips of my ngoma group performing here.
 Suggestions: To have a Goma performance at the Fort.

Name: Bwana Ahmadi Maka (male) Age: 42 Residence: Siyu
 Positive Comments: I enjoyed the photos and videos of the Goma la Siyu. I have learned about the Lamu ngomas and other events shown here.
 Suggestions: I would have liked to see scenes of Mwaribe ngoma.

Name: Ali Omar (male) Age: 15 Residence: Shanga Ishakani
 Positive Comments: I loved the scenes of the donkey race. I learned a lot from the scenes of the ngoma.
 Suggestions: The TV should be larger.

Name: [Ayasha](#) (female) Age: 19 Residence: Dubai
 Positive Comments: I enjoyed the scenes of the Kirumbizi and Zamuni. I am very pleased with the exhibit and I hope I can have similar performances at my wedding.
 Suggestions: Everything is fine. Thank you for entertaining us.

Name: Aisha Ali Hamis (female) Age: 47 Residence: Mombasa
 Positive Comments: I enjoyed the Goma performed with the bakora. I learned a lot about things I've never seen before.
 Suggestions: Your TV is so small, people cannot see clearly.

APPENDIX D

Officers:

Ali Mohammed Fani: (chairman) Cultural expert and employee of the Lamu Museum. Particularly interested in Bajuni cultural traditions.

Dorothy (Dotty) Clark: (secretary) Lamu resident of British descent. Dedicated to the cultural preservation and architectural renovation of the east African coast.

Zahara Shee Mohammed: (treasurer) Lamu representative of Maendeleo ya Wanawake (Women's Development) organization, and community activist.

Members at large:

Said Abdulrehman El-Mafazy: Owner of "Lamu Craft," devoted to preserving traditional Swahili woodworking. Also the founder of "Lamu Usafi" (Clean Lamu), a grassroots development organization concerned with enhancing water management and waste disposal in Lamu town.

Alwi Ahmed Badawy: Architect interested in traditional coastal building design. He donated the site for the Center, and helped in its establishment.

Omar Said Shee: Teacher at Shela primary school. Interested in coastal history and integrating cultural traditions into the classroom curriculum.

Khatwab Khalifa Abubakar: Teacher at the Riyadhha Mosque College in Lamu.

Keith Castelino: Chief accountant at GTZ-GASP German Development Organization, an NGO that organizes local development projects in east Africa and around the world.

APPENDIX E

To: Committee Members of the Lamu Community Cultural Center & Video Library
 From: Rebecca Gearhart
 Date: November 13, 1996

I. Objectives of the Lamu Community Cultural Center & Video Library

This Center was opened on November 8, 1996 to provide a facility for the Lamu community and their guests to view the video cassettes I recorded between 1993 and 1996. I am an American anthropology student at the University of Florida. I have conducted my Ph.D. research under a Fulbright Scholarship in 1995 - 1996 on the history of coastal music and dance performance (ngoma). I have done so under a Pupil's Pass with proper research clearance from the Office of the President, Kenya. The video collection features interviews with coastal elders and live ngoma performances that were video taped in several towns along the Kenya coast and throughout the Lamu archipelago.

In addition to providing a site for public viewing of the videos, the Center will also be a place where people can learn how to conduct their own interviews and shoot their own live ngoma performances. A video camera will be made available to Lamu residents who demonstrate sincere interest in contributing to the Center's video collection. Anyone interested in borrowing the video camera will write a proposal describing the event they wish to video tape, the time and place it will be held, and why they think it would enhance the video collection. Each proposal will be evaluated by the Center staff (Omari) before the camera is issued to any resident. Members of the community are also encouraged to borrow the camera to conduct video taped interviews with community elders, who are knowledgeable about coastal cultural traditions.

Each borrower will be trained properly to use the video camera by a member of the Center staff. The camera will be borrowed on a daily basis only and will not be taken outside of Lamu town for any reason. All video recordings made by Lamu residents will become part of the Center's collection and will be available for public viewing at the Center.

None of the video cassettes, audio cassettes or translations of the interviews will be duplicated at any time. Except for the video camera, none of the video or audio cassettes, or any of the other equipment at the Center will ever leave the Center's premises for any reason. Any violation of this rule will be considered theft and legal action will be taken accordingly.

All video cassettes, audio cassettes, translations, and equipment are the property of the Center and will be handled by Center staff only. Visitors will choose their video selection by using the video cassette index and a staff member will find the desired cassette, insert it into the machine, adjust sound accordingly and eject the cassette and put it away after the viewer has finished watching it. This will reduce damage to the equipment and insure proper usage.

All visitors to the Center are requested to sign the Visitor's Book and provide a detailed description of the materials used at the Center during their visit. This will enable the Center to improve its facilities to better serve its users in the future.

II. Center Finances:

Because I have limited funds with which to keep the Center operating, I propose to deposit \$250 into a Center bank account so that Omari Shee, the Center staff person, will be able to collect a monthly salary of 2000 Ksh for the next five months. The balance will be used to pay the monthly electricity bill and cover any other maintenance expenses. Because this is a very limited amount of money, the Lamu Community will be responsible for all additional money needed to keep the Center in operation.

A. The Center's assets are as follows:

The building itself is owned by Mwenye Baba, Alwy Ahmed Badawy's father, who originally founded it as the Najaa Islamic Center. Because it has been graciously donated to the Center, no rent will be paid by the Center to use the space. The Center was renovated for Center use for approximately \$400.

Center equipment is valued by their cost at the time they were purchased in July, 1995 in the U.S.A. Receipts for all of these items will be kept on file at the Center.

Symphonic TV/VCR	\$330.00
JVC VCR	250.00
Panasonic PVIQ205 Video Camera	670.00
Batteries	75.00
Compact VHS video cassettes	100.00
VHS video cassettes	100.00
Sanxin converter and voltage regulator	<u>100.00</u>
Total value of Center equipment	\$1,625.00

III. The Center's hours of operation will be as follows:

Women: Monday, Wednesday & Friday 4 - 6 pm.

Men: Tuesday & Thursday 4 - 6 pm.

Women: Saturday 10 am. – 12 pm. and Sunday 4 – 6 pm.

Men: Saturday 4 – 6 pm. and Sunday 10 am. – 12 pm.

IV. Center staff:

Omari Shee, who has been my research assistant and translator for over one year, will be responsible for keeping the Center operating during its daily schedule. Because all of the equipment and videos will be kept in a locked storage space, Omari will set up the equipment a few minutes before the Center opens and put all of the equipment away after the Center is closed. He alone will be responsible for handling all of the video cassettes and the equipment in the Center.

Omari will also make sure that people follow the Center's rules for visitors. Visitors are not permitted to eat, drink, smoke, or chew miraa in the Center under any circumstances. All children must be accompanied by an adult. Omari will decide when the facility is being overused by certain visitors, who are not providing an opportunity for others to watch their selection.

If there is a special request by a group of at least 8 people, who want to come and watch a video in the morning or in the evening when the Center is usually closed, it will be up to Omari to decide if he can accommodate them. This kind of arrangement might be made by a teacher-led group of students, members of an ngoma group, or a group of foreign visitors or students who can't use the Center during its regular hours of operation. Of course, all such visitors will comply with the regular Center rules that are mentioned above and will not use the Center for more than two hours.

V. The Center Committee:

The Committee members' responsibility will be to see that the Lamu community is aware of the Center and its resources. The Committee will meet once a month to assess how the Community is utilizing the Center and how it might serve the Community better. The Committee will oversee Omari Shee's work and share the responsibility of the Center and its equipment with him. The Committee will read all proposals submitted for use of the Center's video camera and decide if the camera will be borrowed out or not. The Committee will inspect the visitor's book and send me a monthly report on how many visitors the Center has received and a description of the program that they watched. The Committee will also send me copies of any proposals that are submitted to use the video camera and a short report on the success or failure of the proposed video project. The Committee will also be responsible for alerting me to any equipment failure, theft, or damage to the Center or its property as soon as the situation arises.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rebecca Gearhart was born in Anoka, Minnesota in 1966. After graduating from Anoka Sr. High in 1985, she spent a semester studying at the American College in Paris, France, before entering Mount Holyoke College in February, 1986. During her junior year, Gearhart studied in Kenya and Tanzania with the School for International Training. She double majored in history and African studies, and took full advantage of the five-college consortium (Mount Holyoke, Smith, Amherst, Hampshire, U.Mass.), which provided her with a well-rounded Liberal Arts education. In 1988, Gearhart received a summer research award that allowed her to travel back to the east African coast, where she focused on Swahili wedding ceremonies. She received first prize for her ethnographic film *Women of Lamu: Reflections on a Swahili Wedding* in the annual Phi Beta Kappa Senior Thesis Competition, and received her B.A., Cum Laude with honors from Mount Holyoke College in 1989.

Gearhart entered the graduate program in history at the University of Florida in 1990. She conducted research in east Africa for her Masters degree in history, which she received in 1993. Her thesis, "John Streeter and the runaway slaves: A history of the Kenya coast in the 1870s and 80s" describes the role that a CMS missionary played in harboring runaway plantation slaves.

In 1993-94, Gearhart studied at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) in Tanzania. She studied African history, African performance, Swahili, and ethnomusicology while conducting ethnographic research on various ngoma groups that

performed on Zanzibar Island. While at UDSM, Gearhart taught modern American dance to theatre arts majors, who later combined western dance techniques with African dance movement. When the Paul Taylor dance repertoire visited UDSM to conduct a workshop, Gearhart's students performed a dance that she choreographed. This and performing herself in a professional dance group called "The Lighters" were highlights of Gearhart's year in Tanzania.

Gearhart returned to the University of Florida in 1994 and entered the graduate program in anthropology, where she focused on visual anthropology. In 1995, Gearhart passed her qualifying exams and became a Ph.D. candidate in the department of anthropology. She received a Fulbright research grant to conduct ethnographic research on the history of ngoma groups on the Kenya coast, which she did in 1995-96. While in Kenya, Gearhart exhibited some of her photographs and films of the annual Maulidi festival at the Lamu Fort. To provide further access to her visual materials, Gearhart established The Lamu Community Cultural Center and Video Library, which is operated by a committee of local residents.

Gearhart completed her research in east Africa at the end of 1996, and finished her dissertation in 1998. Gearhart passed her dissertation defense on November 23rd, 1998, and received her Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Florida on December 19th, 1998.

