Ngoma Memories: How Ritual Music and Dance Shaped the Northern Kenya Coast

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Abstract: This essay integrates ethnographic data collected between Mombasa and the Lamu archipelago in Kenya into the growing body of scholarship on Swahili music and dance (*ngoma*) traditions. The analysis underscores how the Swahili have used ngoma events to stake claims to higher positions on the social ladder, negotiate difference, create socioeconomic security networks, establish and mark group identity, connect to the spirit world, and pass through various stages of the life cycle. Through a rich array of historical accounts by visitors to the coast, whose texts complement oral histories of coastal residents, the importance of ngoma in the Swahili-ization of the East African coast becomes apparent. A comprehensive understanding of the part ngoma organizations have played in the recreation and re-creation of Swahili society is possible only when one factors in the contributions made by residents of the northernmost portion of the "Swahili coast."

Résumé: Cet essai incorpore des données rassemblées entre Mombasa et l'archipel de Lamu au Kenya au corps de la recherche existante sur les traditions de la musique et de la danse (ngoma) swahili. L'analyse souligne la manière dont les Swahili ont utilisé des évènements ngoma en vue de réclamer un réajustement de leurs positions sur l'échelle sociale, négocier leurs différences, créer des réseaux de sécurité socioéconomique, établir et signaliser leur identité de groupe, se connecter au monde spirituel, et effectuer le rite de passage à travers les différentes étapes du cycle de vie. A travers un éventail riche de récits historiques de visiteurs de la côte, dont les textes complémentent les histoires orales des résidents de la côte, l'importance de la tradition ngoma au niveau de l'imprégnation de la côte est africaine par la culture swahili devient apparente. En vue de comprendre de manière globale le rôle que les organisations ngoma ont joué dans le renouveau et

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la renaissance de la société swahili, il faut prendre en compte les contributions apportées par les résidents de la partie la plus au nord de la côte swahili.

Introduction

The interconnectedness of music and dance is represented by a single word that Swahili speakers use to define both simultaneously: *ngoma.* On the Kenya coast, this term also refers to the competitions between neighborhood dance associations that took place regularly in towns and villages from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. The remembering of ngoma group activities is one way that residents of Kenya's northern coast (between Mombasa and the Lamu Archipelago) explain how marginalized individuals became powerful, how local celebrities won and lost their fame, how networks between various echelons of coastal society were established and maintained, and how unrestrained material flamboyance eventually gave way to religious piety. Increasing immigration to the coast by "upcountry" (inland) Kenyans over the past two decades, and the conflicts that have resulted between long-term residents and newcomers over land rights, employment opportunities, and political representation, have created a sociopolitical milieu not unlike earlier periods of coastal history that were also marked by competition and intolerance.

This article discusses the ways in which ngoma's capacity to blur distinctions between categories of people and ideas allows for the periodic assessment of what being "Swahili" means in specific coastal communities at particular moments in time. By examining the role of ngoma in the lives of coastal peoples generally, it provides a larger framework within which to situate ngoma activity on the northern Kenya coast. The ethnographic accounts included throughout are excerpts from interviews conducted with Swahili performance experts in 1995 and 1996. In these endeavors, I was often accompanied by Swahili consultants, two of whom, Omari Shee and Munib Said Abdulrehman, helped translate the interviews from Swahili to English.

The Study of Swahili Ngoma

Terence Ranger's *Dance and Society in East Africa* (1975) first brought African dance associations to the attention of scholars and convinced skeptics that music and dance traditions, and the memories people have of them, hold valuable information about the African past. Since the publication of this book, many Africanist anthropologists and historians have contributed to a corpus of scholarship that sheds light on dance phenomena such as the one that Ranger first identified as *Beni.* Most notably, Gunderson and Barz's *Mashindano! Competitive Music Performance in East Africa* (2000), a volume dedicated entirely to the subject of East African competitive dance, brings together studies of dance associations in Tanzania and Kenya and provides compelling evidence that what people do while they are singing and dancing is crucial to understanding who they are, who they were, and who they hope to be. Ranger's claim that "the music and the dance were merely one part of the activity of Beni members" (1975:5) seems to have inspired scholars such as Margaret Strobel (1979), Marjorie Franken (1986), Linda Giles (1989), Kelly Askew (2002), and Mwenda Ntarangwi (2003) to follow his lead in putting ngoma performance at the center of their studies of Swahili communities.[1]

As illustrated in the historical and ethnographic examples that follow, the stories people tell about the ngoma activities they witnessed or participated in provide a narrative framework for explaining and understanding the most significant changes that have occurred on the "Swahili coast" over the past one hundred and fifty years. One such event was the demise of slave-dependent plantation-scale agricultural production in East Africa, which officially ended in 1897 and 1907 when antislavery decrees were issued on the islands and on the mainland, respectively. The ban against slavery ushered in a period when people who had been brought to the coast from inland Tanzania, Mozambique, and Malawi as slaves sought incorporation into freeborn coastal society, a formidable task for the former slaves as well as for their descendants. While marrying into a freeborn family, converting to Islam, and forging business alliances with the coastal elite became principal strategies for these outsiders, ngoma group involvement also turned out to be an important avenue of integration. In their roles as ngoma group leaders, songwriters, and ritual functionaries, former slaves made significant contributions to the development of Swahili culture in general, and to ngoma in particular. Within this framework of a highly stratified coastal society, non-Swahili peoples touted their artistic talents and/or ritual expertise in order to achieve the recognition necessary to rescue their children and grandchildren from life at the bottom of the Swahili social order, a destiny prescribed by the tenacious term *mtumwa* (slave) associated with their names.

In sharp contrast to those who have struggled fervently to become Swahili are the individuals making up the latest wave of arrivals to the coast, upcountry Kenyans (predominantly Gikuyu and Luo) who have been resettled on land deemed "unoccupied" by the Kenyan government. This population consists of people who have come to the coast willingly and are firmly entrenched in their distinct ways of life. The increasing presence of upcountry "visitors," who constitute a much larger portion of the national population and enjoy much greater political representation than the Swahili do, has undoubtedly had an impact on Swahili identity politics and has extended the debate on land rights well beyond the walls of the stone towns to which the Swahili have laid claim for centuries. Clamping down on the prerequisites for attaining Swahili identity, and revisiting what it means to be Swahili, are defensive responses the Swahili have turned to during such "invasions" in the past. The recurring theme of purification that appears in elders' memories of competitive ngoma suggests that purging coastal society of activities that lead to moral degeneration and social fragmentation is one way that the Swahili have protected themselves against unregulated social change, whether instigated by strangers or by locals.

Structuring Society through Dance

Linda Donley-Reid's (1990) analysis of Swahili stone houses focuses on the function of eighteenth-century dwellings as "structuring structures" that shaped the human and human-object interactions taking place within them. The idea that societies establish and employ many kinds of structuring mechanisms in order to organize social relationships and represent them symbolically is useful in discussing public ngoma performances, because like domestic space, music and dance events can be used to order social life and give it meaning.

The importance of taking performance traditions seriously in the study of Swahili social history is underscored by the fact that up until the mid-twentieth century, nearly every household in each coastal town and village had at least one member involved with a music and dance association. Moreover, weekend competitions (usually held on Saturday or Sunday afternoons) brought together ngoma groups from several coastal communities and often attracted thousands of spectators—men and women of all ages and backgrounds. As impressive as the number of people involved in ngoma are the artistic elements that went into the competitions, including original song lyrics featuring the latest gossip and other news; musical production by drummers, clarinet (*zumari*), and trumpet (*tarumbeta*) players; large feasts put on by local patrons; and, with regard to the dances known as *Beni* and *Chama* in particular, extremely elaborate floats, props, and costumes. An excerpt from an interview with a Lamu elder, Athmani Kitoka, describes the competition between Lamu's two rival Beni groups, Kambaa ("Rotten Rope") and Scotch (named for their Scottish military outfits):

> When Scotch [the group affiliated with the Mkomani neighborhood of Lamu] and Kambaa [representing Lamu's Langoni neighborhood] competed against each other, one group would send the other a letter of invitation for the upcoming competition, which always took place on Sunday.... If the invitation was accepted, then the groups began organizing their performances.
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> Kambaa began their procession at Matumbatuni, in Langoni, and Scotch began theirs in Mkomani, and they would meet at the D.C.'s [district commissioner'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 units [or wings] of about twenty people, each wearing different costumes. The dancers formed two rows and proceeded in long, snakelike lines. When they competed, the D.C. was the judge, and at that time the district commissioners were Europeans.
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> The D.C. would come out to observe each group. He began his inspection with the front unit of the group, and when he had finished looking at the beauty of the last unit of that Beni group, he went to inspect the other, from the beginning to the end. And then he would make a decision. He might decide that the Kambaa group performed very well because the performers had the best style, their music was good, but perhaps they didn't have enough lanterns, and so there wasn't sufficient light by which to see them, or their drums were not synchronized. And he would make note of it. Then he would go to the Scotch group, and he might say they had nice costumes, they had good performance style, and their music was good, but they had no spectators. And he made his decision about the winner based on those criteria. Each group was awarded a certain number of points. And because the D.C. couldn't just come out and say which group was the best, he used the points that each group had been awarded to determine the winner.
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> Each week different developments occurred within each group; they added different things and made various changes. During the time when I was participating in Beni, four members of Scotch dressed up like princes. They marched in the front of their group, as the leaders, beside a model man-o'-war ship, which was put on top of a vehicle to make it look like it was floating.[2] It looked exactly like a real man-'o-war ship! That was to be the last Beni competition in Lamu because the Kambaa group was totally destroyed by the Scotch group because of that! On that day, the Scotch dressed up like princes! In fact, one even wore the full regalia of the King. The D.C. was so delighted with the exactness of the costumes that he honored them with as big a salute as if he was in front of the King himself! (Interview, October 4, 1995).[3]

In addition to describing a period of Swahili history characterized by an outpouring of creativity from the most talented poet-songwriters, choreographers, seamstresses and tailors, singers and dancers, carpenters and painters, the stories that Swahili elders such as Athmani Kitoka tell of ngoma competitions suggest that these activities were unlike any others in which coastal people participated. These activities stimulated social interaction between groups normally separated by ethnicity, religion, cultural background, gender, and age and therefore had the potential of reconfiguring a social order that privileged Swahili families with Arab ancestry (including the families of *sharifs*, who trace their lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad) and long-standing claims to property as "founders."

This is not to say that ngoma magically erased social difference; in fact, ngoma members were organized by their own ranking system, which often translated into "real" social status in the world outside of performance.[4]

Jonathon Glassman (1995) demonstrates how members of the coastal elite (often referred to as "patricians" in the literature) became adroit at using ngoma activities to enhance their personal authority and display their wealth or social status, and Strobel (1976) provides evidence that Mombasa's most exclusive *Lelemama* dance associations served as the "who's who" of the coast's upper crust. *Kimbagu*, an ngoma performed on Pate Island in the Lamu archipelago, offers another example. 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 consisted of clan rituals and devotional activities that legitimized the family's political and economic control over much of the coast of East Africa between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. Despite Pate's eventual political and economic decline, Kimbagu still symbolizes the noble ancestry of Pate's royal family, and until recently it remained a tradition known to the Nabhany clan exclusively (interview with Maalim Dini of Siyu, August 7, 1996).[5]

What seems more captivating to present-day scholars than the ways in which ngoma has been used to uphold power structures, however, is the way farmers, casual laborers, and even slaves and their descendants have used ngoma to bring about social transformation. Ethnographic evidence suggests that in the late nineteenth century, dance societies in Pangani provided the framework within which caravan workers climbed the social ladder (Glassman 1995:158–59) and coconut plantation slaves (*wagema*) became part of freeborn Lamu society (Gearhart 1998a, 1998b). In the 1920s and thirties, residents of Ng'ambo (Zanzibar's working-class quarter) used *Taarab* songs (which will be discussed in detail below) to express their discontent with the colonial regime (Fair 2001). In the 1930s, Lelemama associations provided a vehicle for women in Mombasa to rebel against patriarchy (Strobel 1976; 1979:170–73). And in the 1950s, women in Dar es Salaam gained social and financial support for political involvement (Geiger 1997). While ngoma associations modeled Swahili society by retaining hierarchical organizing principles among the membership, the designated ranks were based on a person's songwriting capabilities, talent as a singer, dancer, or drummer, leadership qualities, and loyalty to the group to which they were affiliated, rather than exclusively on social status and wealth. This explains why members of relatively low social standing or "newcomer" status were able to become powerful leaders of important dance societies and why people otherwise on the fringes of a Swahili community found participation in ngoma to be such an important vehicle for social mobility.

An example from the northern Kenya coast demonstrates how ngoma group activity has shaken up the seemingly rigid social stratigraphy that underlies Swahili society. It is based on a story that was narrated to me by three elders from Takaungu named Muhunzi Kibwanga "Tarumbeta," Saidi

Mwamanzi, and Asha, whose Tanzanian ancestors were brought to the coast as slaves and who have, over time, married into Mijikenda clans.[6] They remember a visit by a large group of Nyamwezi migrant workers, who sometime in the 1960s came all the way from Tanzania to perform for the wedding of one of their relatives, a prominent resident of Takaungu named Kayanda.[7] What concerns us about this event is that the competing women's ngoma groups in Takaungu, Jumuiya ("Association") and Sabili ("Righteous Path"), became the mechanism by which the one hundred or so visitors were divided up and housed during their yearlong stay. Because Mashee Nduku, the leader of the Jumuiya ngoma society, was more cunning and ruthless than was Mehamisi wa Jahazi, the leader of Sabili, Mashee Nduku managed to gain more Nyamwezi affiliates than her rival, which ultimately translated into more support from wealthy Takaungu patrons, on whom the dance associations depended for new costumes, instrument repairs, and the extravagant public feasts they hosted. As visitors, the Tanzanians did not constitute long-term competition for local resources and did not seem to be an immediate threat to the Takaungu ruling class. And as oral history has it, Takaungu women of upstanding lineage were particularly taken with the guests, and sometimes traveled out to the farms to observe their dance rehearsals.

The trouble began when the daughters of the Takaungu elite began participating in the ngoma activities, which over time came to incorporate some of the visitors' spectacular dance techniques, including the use of wooden stilts that elevated dancers high above spectators' heads. While it was socially acceptable for Takaungu women observing purdah to attend dance rehearsals and competitions that included women only, the visitors were not burdened by such restrictions and therefore introduced dances that featured men and women performing together.[8] When Tarumbeta, Saidi, and Asha got to this part of the story, they became very animated and spoke rapidly, each determined to be the one to unravel the next strand of the narrative:

> Because their dance, which the Nyamwezi called *Bati*, became so popular, local people even started to braid their hair in the Bati style. Women and men performed together, and it was in that way that the Nyamwezi interfered with the local culture.... Some of the Nyamwezi men even danced with the local peoples' wives! The girls from Takaungu town began participating in the Nyamwezi ngoma. They just fell in love with the Nyamwezi men! 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. (Interview, April 9, 1996)

This story is insightful because it is told not by Takaungu townspeople, but by farmers who live in the neighboring hinterland on plots their elders worked as plantation slaves. It explains how community leaders in towns like Takaungu tried to preserve a set of social norms—in this case, the limited mobility of unmarried women and the physical separation between those of freeborn lineage, considered "owners of the town" (*waungwana*), and those of slave heritage (*watumwa*) and other outsiders (*wageni*). In particular, this account suggests that the daughters of elite Takaungu families found relief from their sheltered lives in ngoma activities performed by people with whom they were, under ordinary circumstances, prohibited from interacting socially. It is important to note that the ngoma groups led by Mashee Nduku and Mahamisi wa Jahazi were financially supported by wealthy townsfolk (male and female), who attached themselves to these women in spite of the socioeconomic barriers that divided them. The relationships between ngoma leaders and their patrons extended to the hinderland the rivalries between families who lived in town, and vice versa. They also provided networks through which goods and services flowed between the two communities, sustaining a system established during the slave era that fortified their interdependence.

The Role of Ngoma Experts

One of the most glaring contradictions embedded in Swahili society is the relatively low social status ascribed to the experts who are responsible for the production and preservation of Swahili expressive arts.[9] An explanation of this lies in the important role that slaves have played in the development of what is now known as "Swahili culture," and the subsequent perpetuation of low status among the descendants who inherited musical talent, verbal dexterity, and ritual knowledge. The contributions that slaves and other non-Swahili Africans have made to Swahili performance arts have been explored by many scholars, who have discovered that primary historical documents often name the individuals who were called upon by the Swahili elite to officiate at important occasions such as weddings, male circumcision ceremonies, and annual celebrations.[10]

Sir John Gray's account (1955) of the Swahili New Year's Festival (*Nairuzi*) in Makunduchi village on Zanzibar Island identifies two female spirit mediums (*wavyale*) named Vatima binti Madebe and Kazija binti Haji as the ritual experts who officiated at the ceremonies required to appease the nature spirits (*mizimu*) that were (and still are) believed to be particularly malevolent at the New Year.[11] In detailing these events, Gray also mentions that these women had elicited the help of another woman (presumably of higher status) to serve as "liaison officer" between the wavyale and the Town Chief (Gray 1955:8). Gray's analysis suggests that it may have been customary for a member of relatively high social standing to serve as an intermediary between ritual experts of lower class background and local authority figures, especially during public ceremonies.

Gray's rendering of these events also points to the niche that people like Vatima and Kazija carved out for themselves in Swahili society by virtue of their experience in conducting non-Muslim rituals such as those performed at Nairuzi. While Gray notes that "orthodox Muslims frown upon the non-Muslim ceremonies," he goes on to explain that "some of the younger generation of Arabs have sufficient joie de vivre to share in the amusements of their humbler neighbors" (18–19). To clarify this point, Gray shares the story of the extraordinary escape of Princess Salme (aka Emily Ruete) from the clutches of her brother, Seyyid Majid bin Said, Sultan of Zanzibar, by means of a ruse in which she used her supposed participation in the annual Nairuzi festival of 1866 as an opportunity to leave the palace, eventually departing Zanzibar on a British ship waiting to take her to Aden, where she met up with her lover and future husband, a German merchant (19).[12]

Although separated by one hundred years in time and several hundred miles of coastline, the story of the Takaungu town girls falling in love with Nyamwezi men on stilts, and this one, about a Zanzibar princess running off with a white man, seem to highlight the ways in which performance events organized and led by members of the lower echelons of coastal society provided windows of opportunity for the elite (and women in particular) to push the parameters of the Swahili social order. At the same time, marginalized coastal women have also managed to use their participation in ngoma in order to get ahead.

Suleiman (1969), Osaki (1990), and Fargion (1993), for example, draw attention to Siti Binti Saad, the famous Zanzibar singer of slave heritage who became "queen of Taarab" during the second decade of the twentieth century by composing lyrics in Swahili and thereby transforming Taarab from an elite musical form into what many would argue is the most powerful medium of Swahili expression. Likewise Strobel (1979:170–71) introduces us to Shamsa Mohamed Muhashamy, who used Lelemama to publicly defy the constraints of purdah, and Geiger (1997:49–50) calls attention to the life history of the TANU leader Bibi Titi Mohamed, who galvanized her fame as a singer and song composer in the Dar es Salaam–based ngoma group Roho ni Mgeni ("The Soul Is a Guest") to gain popular support for her political career.

My own research explores the lives of ngoma experts from the northern Kenya coast such as Salima Jazaka of Lamu, whose slave ancestry did not prevent her from becoming the leader of an upper class (*kijoho*) ngoma group that performed a dance called *Mwasha* in Lamu, and then introduced the dance to the women of nearby Matondoni (Gearhart 1998a). These accounts suggest that female ngoma leaders, in spite of their marginal status as women and their lack of access to resources as members of the lower classes, have successfully utilized the social networks that are so integral to ngoma associations to marshal support (social, political, and/or economic) for their own agendas, be they personal fame, social mobility, political equality, or enhanced economic security.[13]

Swahili Ngoma in Ritual Context

James de Vere Allen says that "any study of Swahili dances, which are not mere leisure-activities but palimpsests of the whole society, would show that many of them were derived from other African societies" (1993:13); perhaps the best support for this claim comes from the analysis of Swahili ritual performance. The ways in which coastal peoples have integrated inland African and Islamic ritual practices into their daily lives make Swahili ritual ngoma particularly fascinating. By the mid-nineteenth century, the populations of major East African coastal towns included peoples of African, non-African, and mixed descent. Yao, Makua, and Makonde peoples were brought from the interior of East Africa to coastal towns as slaves; trade caravan porters (the Nyamwezi in particular) and other casual laborers from upcountry migrated to trade centers on the coast to find work; the towns also drew hinterland farmers such as the Zigua and the Zaramo of Tanzania and the Mijikenda and the Pokomo of Kenya, Swahili and Arab plantation owners and traders, Indian financiers and shopkeepers, and European colonial officials and missionaries. The prevalence of upcountry slaves and the fact of their integration into coastal society are pertinent to this discussion, because research demonstrates the important influence Africans from the interior and the adjoining hinterland have had on shaping Swahili cosmology and developing the corpus of ritual arts that the Swahili practice today.[14]

One of the most intimate points of cultural intersection between upcountry slaves and the freeborn coastal elite took place during the female initiation rituals (*unyago*) supervised by slaves known as *makungwi* or *masomo* (ritual experts who specialize in rites of passage) (Strobel 1979:12).[15] Makungwi were largely responsible for teaching techniques meant to sexually satisfy the young women's future husbands—training that was ostensibly too embarrassing for orthodox Muslim women of elite families to pass on themselves. That slaves were given the authority to turn young, upper-class Swahili maidens into full-fledged women would seem implausible if not for other examples that demonstrate a general dependence on slave labor in Swahili ritual contexts. Mbarak bin Ali Hinawiy (1964) describes how "old family slaves" were given the ritual duty of shaving their masters before their weddings, and explains that slaves also cared for young boys who had recently been circumcised. Patricia Romero (1997) mentions that slaves were responsible for preparing the bodies of their deceased masters and customarily mourned with the family for whom they had worked—even after slavery ended (159–60).[16]

Two of the dances that makungwi used to demonstrate sexual techniques, *Kishuri* and *Chakacha*, remain popular wedding dances that are performed throughout the East African coast today.[17] While over time the role of the makungwi in directing a Swahili girl's journey to adulthood passed out of the hands of women of slave heritage and into the hands of close female friends and aunties, the knowledge associated with Kishuri and Chakacha remains secret. Laura Fair (2000:162–63) has traced the appropriation of unyago rituals by elite Zanzibari women, who at the turn of the twentieth century invented an alternative initiation ceremony called *Mkindo,* and its accompanying dances *Ndege* and *Kunguiya,* in order to sustain the female rites of passage while making them socially acceptable.

The secrecy associated with female sexuality and the sensual skills attributed to Swahili women continue to be highly guarded by the elite, who sustain the respectability of women's wedding celebrations by insisting that they be held indoors (at places such as the Lamu Fort, or Mombasa Women's Association Hall) or within the confines of protected outdoor spaces where the view of would-be male spectators is obstructed (usually by means of large woven floor mats hung up as temporary barricades). Because elevated social status is largely contingent on the purity (virginity) of unmarried girls and the inaccessibility of married women (largely sustained through purdah), both male and female members of upstanding Swahili families have a great stake in upholding the rules of conduct concerning the performance of women's dances.[18]

The Bajuni oral tradition, *Vave,* still sporadically performed in the Lamu archipelago, offers another contemporary example of how coastal peoples have transformed rituals associated with pre-Islamic African traditions to those more in step with Swahili sensibilities.[19] In this case, the Swahili-ization process has been brought to bear on the adaptation of an elaborate oral tradition (Vave), which details the activities necessary for carrying out slash-and-burn agriculture by integrating references to the Qur'an, thereby making it more acceptable to mainstream Muslims. Each "chapter" of Vave opens in the name of Allah, while concurrently invoking ancestral spirits and the shrines devoted to them. One section of verses, which focuses on reciting the names of prophets and angels mentioned in the Qur'an, flows seamlessly into a section that explains how the sacrifice of chickens of a particular color at specific times enhances the fire's success.

The dangerous activities involved in setting the forest afire are reflected in the crucial part played by a ritual expert (generically called *mwalimu,* or "teacher") on whom the farmers depend for appeasing the nature spirits (known as *maruhani, pepo,* or *sawazi*) that are believed to live in large trees, by river banks, or sea streams (areas referred to as *panga*) (interview with Mohamed Ali Baddi of Lamu, July 23, 1988). To satisfy these spirits, the mwalimu associates each chicken with a different natural force, sacrificing only those deemed necessary.[20] Mohammed Bunu, one of the farmers who participated in the Vave ceremony I observed and videotaped in May 1996, summarized the elaborate symbolic scheme by citing specific Vave passages:

> Kuna kuku mweupe na kuna kuku mwehundu 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 chicken and a red chicken, whose feathers resemble crocodile skin and who has a body like a lion. The blood of these chickens is sprinkled over the cut forest before it is set on fire. There is a large white cock with speckles that is sacrificed if the fire is burning well. And there is an ash-colored mature hen that is sacrificed when the burning has been completed.]
>
> 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 sacrifice a red chicken in the early morning. And they continue reciting Vave until they come to the part that mentions sacrificing the speckled cock. And then they mention that when the fire is over, a mature, ash-colored hen is sacrificed to cool down the fire. (Interview, May 1, 1996). [21]

The Vave oral tradition reflects how eloquently coastal peoples have interwoven pre-Islamic and Islamic religious ideas over time. Given the precarious nature of slash-and-burn agriculture, it is not surprising that Bajuni farmers came to value those whose expertise included reading the Qur'an, interpreting the stars, controlling the winds, summoning the help of angels and ancestral spirits, and quelling the malevolence of forest spirits. Vave represents just one of the many ways in which coastal peoples have shaped the coexistence of belief systems that have roots in Africa, Arabia, and the Persian Gulf.[22] Many of the mystical techniques that early Sufi scholars on the coast performed in collaboration with ritual experts trained in indigenous African methods (*waganga*) remain in use today and reflect the sharing of ritual strategies that came to form a uniquely Swahili cosmological system.[23]

While the centrality of Sufism has been increasingly diminished by the rise of Islamic orthodoxy over the past few decades, Swahili performance rituals rooted in Sufi tradition remain popular along the northern Kenya coast. One tradition of this kind is *Maulidi ya Rama*, a ritual ngoma that celebrates the life of the Prophet Muhammad, commemorates local patron saints, and serves to memorialize deceased relatives, in addition to acting as a mode of compensation for received blessings, a practice known as *nadiri* (Gearhart 2000). In contrast to Vave, which is performed by farmers dressed in work clothes, Maulidi ya Rama ("bending maulidi") is a more urbane tradition performed by men dressed in long white robes (*kanzus*) typically worn for ceremonial occasions and for Friday prayers. Rama, as the ritual ngoma is commonly called, is also characterized by the physically exhausting movements participants perform for hours at a time in various kneeling and bending positions in order to enhance the meditative qualities of the ritual and induce spiritual ecstasy. Like Vave, Maulidi ya Rama is an oral tradition incorporating various poetic verses grouped into chapters and expressed through song. Rama, like all praise poems sung to honor the Prophet, combines passages from the Qur'an (sung in Arabic) with Swahili poetry commemorating religious personalities mentioned in the Qur'an and those honored as local saints.

The continuity with which coastal peoples have been performing the distinctive repertoire of devotional activities that emerged from the combination of pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions is apparent in the account of the famous North African traveler Ibn Battuta, who visited the Swahili coast in the early fourteenth century. During his stay with the Sultan of Mogadishu in 1331, Ibn Battuta participated in a graveside prayer ritual followed by a musical procession known among Sufis as *zafa* (or *zefe* among the Swahili) (Hamdun & King 1994). Ibn Battuta's account of the procession is strikingly similar to the modern-day zefe parade that leads hundreds of men and boys, grouped by *madrasa* (Islamic school), along the Lamu seafront from the graveyard on the final day of the annual Maulidi festival that celebrates the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.[24] Like the procession Ibn Battuta describes, Lamu's zefe parade includes the chanting of verses from the Qur'an, Swahili praise poems in honor of the Prophet and the saints, and the beating of small drums (*vigoma*) and tambourines (*matwari*). The flutes and trumpets that Ibn Battuta saw are now reserved for other rituals held at different times throughout the Maulidi festival, and the colored silk canopies that were held over the heads of the well-dressed Mogadishu officials of Ibn Battuta's time have been replaced by colorful banners inscribed with Qur'anic verses—and also with political messages.[25]

Politics and Patron Saints

Indeed, in the past decade, the annual zefe ceremony has been used as a forum within which coastal residents express their discontent with the Kenya government over a number of issues: lack of security against Somali bandits on the Malindi-Lamu road, lack of development in impoverished regions of Coast Province, land grabbing by developers buying up important ritual sites, an influx of upcountry peoples who have been resettled at the coast, and the general marginalization of Muslim citizens of Kenya, who see themselves as an oppressed minority.[26] Many of these grievances bubbled to the surface during August and September 1995, when the Swahili were celebrating *Mfungo Sita* (*Rabbi-al-Awwal* in Arabic), the sixth month of the Muslim lunar calendar, on the twelfth day of which the Prophet Muhammad was born. The phenomenon of thousands of Muslims convening in coastal towns for various Maulidi celebrations typically unnerves the Kenya government, but 1995 was a particularly volatile year.

The leader of the unregistered (and therefore illegal) Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK), Sheikh Khalid Balala, had been run out of the country by opponents, and his supporters on the coast were in a particularly antagonistic mood.[27] Even those who did not support Balala's radical platform were caught up in what felt to some optimistic coastal residents like the beginning of a political revolution that would finally put Coast Province on the government's radar. To prevent the annual zefe procession in Mombasa from turning into an antigovernment demonstration or a pro-IPK rally, antiriot police barricaded the Sakina Mosque, where the parade was meant to begin.[28] In Lamu, young zefe participants were arrested for carrying banners condemning drugs and homosexuality, which were confiscated as Islamic fundamentalist propaganda.[29]

While most of the songs that zefe participants chanted during the celebrations of 1995 retained their focus on the Prophet, the political fervor fueling the festivities was palpable. In light of increasing alienation from national and local government officials, young Swahili men in Lamu felt particularly determined to articulate what they believed to be the main problems with contemporary Swahili society: unquestioned authority of Muslim leaders, the rise in drug use and drug traffic on the coast, and the suppression of allegations of sexual abuse—especially the abuse of young boys by adult males, some of whom were respected community leaders and revered Islamic teachers. As an event attended by twenty thousand visitors, including religious leaders and political dignitaries from Muslim communities throughout East Africa, as well as journalists from national and international media organizations, the zefe celebration was strategically transformed by Lamu youth into a political forum, a test of the power of public performance to express the concerns of a new generation of Swahili citizens.

One of the personalities whose memory rouses the critical introspection that often occurs at the annual Maulidi festival in Lamu is the town's patron saint, Seyyid Saleh bin Alwy bin Abdallah Jamal al-Layl (1844–1935), known popularly as "Habib Saleh" ("Beloved Saleh"). Habib Saleh incorporated coconut plantation slaves into Lamu's freeborn society, and is memorialized by the Swahili as the torchbearer of social justice. Notable was Habib Saleh's fascination with the coconut tappers' (*wagema*) rain-making dance, called *Uta*, which like Maulidi ya Rama is a ritual ngoma that was performed by two competing residential groups, in this case the Lamu neighborhoods of Makafuni and Maziwani. Today, Habib Saleh's descendants, the leaders of the Riyadha mosque in Lamu, come to the annual Maulidi celebration dressed in clean white kanzus and pay their respects to the Uta dancers by tucking crisp Kenya shilling notes into the pockets of their shabby work clothes and weathered *kofias* (caps) as they perform in front of the wattle-and-daub house in which Habib Saleh once lived. Through this spectacle, observed by thousands of pilgrims each year, the disparities between the wealthy and the poor, the educated elite and the underprivileged members of Swahili society, are captured in motion for everyone to see and to contemplate. Indeed, coastal history is reenacted in the songs and movements of these slave descendants; in the interactions between the dancers, their patrons, and the spectators; and in the retelling of the stories that name the characters and events that are depicted in this dance-drama.

The Decline of Competitive Ngoma on the Swahili Coast

Coastal elders have two main theories about, on one hand, the decline of regularly scheduled dance competitions like those of Beni, and on the other, the resilience of ngoma such as Maulidi ya Rama and Uta, which are performed exclusively within ritual contexts.[30] One explanation suggests that ngoma competitions simply became too extravagant to be sustained on a regular basis, and the other focuses on the negative impact the excesses had on the moral integrity of coastal Muslims. In particular, Beni and Chama are remembered for the participants' increasing emphasis on designing costumes that replicated European (Beni) or Arab (Chama) military uniforms and royal regalia, composing highly provocative song lyrics that alluded to the latest gossip, choreographing elaborate processions that sometimes featured large parade floats, and slaughtering many head of cattle for the ostentatious feasts held after the winners of the ngoma competition had been declared.

Women from the Lamu archipelago remember the competitive spirit that seemed to intoxicate ngoma participants during Beni's heyday in the 1950s.[31] Their narratives focus on the exorbitant feasting that followed the dancing and provide additional clues as to why regular ngoma competition finally came to an end. Maulidi Sabina, a female ngoma leader in Lamu town, remembers Beni this way:

> We women performed Beni in skirts and black veils (*buibuis*), and sometimes without covering ourselves up as usual. 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. We tied on the heads and tails of the cows and danced, singing, "Lelelelelelelele. Ah asoweko mwambie. Ah asoweko mwambie." ["Tell anyone who is not here."] We used to compete along the seafront. (Interview, July 27, 1996)

Kadi binti Mohamed, a female ngoma leader from Matondoni village on Lamu Island, recalls:

> A long time ago there were very successful ngoma groups, but it's as if they

> were bewitched. Back then, there was a large shed in Matondoni so full of cows that if you saw it you would think that it belonged to a cattle keeper. There were forty cows here and eighty cows there, all of which were slaughtered 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. (Interview, November 3, 1995)

The stories these women tell of the lavish feasting that followed ngoma competitions are corroborated by Muhunzi Kibwanga "Tarumbeta," Abu Bakr Ahmed Mbwana, and Saidi Mwamanzi, three Mijikenda men who live in the Takaungu hinterland. Their memories of Beni competition between Chokaa ("Limestone") and Magongo ("Bludgeons") support Ranger's hypothesis that Beni's decline coincided with the changing attitudes of the "next generation of young men," who saw Beni as an expensive waste of time (Ranger 1975:148–49, 152). When asked, "How long did the ngoma competitions between Chokaa and Magongo last?" they provided the following extended response:

> *Saidi:* They could even last for a whole week.
>
> *Tarumbeta:* If there was a competition in Takungu this week, then the next week it would be someplace else—like in Mombasa. If there were special celebrations, people would perform for seven days straight. They would eat so much because there was so much food—all for free! People would leave everything, just to go and eat.... If one group slaughtered a cow last Friday, and another wanted to slaughter two on the next, but didn't have enough money, then an ngoma leader might use his coconut trees as collateral to buy two cows. Just to outdo his opponent from the week before.
>
> *Abu Bakr:* There were some people who lost their farms as a result!
>
> *Tarumbeta:* Some even lost their houses!
>
> *Abu Bakr:* That's why the present generation thought it was so stupid, so they stopped doing it.
>
> *Tarumbeta:* Yes, they stopped doing it.
>
> *Abu Bakr:* For example, let's say that I just learned that my father sold his land or his house because of ngoma. I would say that that was ridiculous. That's why those things have disappeared.... You have to understand that soon after Independence, the young generation decided that elders were engaged in worthless activities. My own father lost his farm because of ngoma. (Interview, May 13, 1996)

The second reason coastal residents give for the fall of competitive ngoma such as Beni is that secular ngoma activity ultimately compromised the moral integrity of those who participated in it. This explanation clarifies why ngoma performed in ritual contexts continues to thrive, at least on the northern Kenya coast. An excerpt from an interview with Hauna Mwalim, a former ngoma enthusiast from Siyu town on Pate Island, makes this point quite clear:

> 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 ngoma clubhouse into a mosque, where we celebrate Maulidi and worship. And the other group has done the same. We're all united now. (Interview, October 23, 1996)

In light of the current sociopolitical climate of the northern Kenya coast, the retrospections of coastal elders such as Hauna Mwalim, who remembers the termination of competitive ngoma as a corrective for errant behavior (not following the dress code outlined by purdah, killing animals for pride rather than sustenance, squandering family resources) and those such as Athmani Kitoka, who refers nostalgically to ngoma competition as a benchmark of artistic enterprise, are equally understandable. To some residents, ngoma competition fostered a level of rivalry between neighbors that was simply too destructive for a tightly knit society to withstand. This assessment is particularly salient today, as coastal communities struggle to mobilize a unified stand against real and perceived threats by newcomers. The glory days of grand-scale competitive ngoma are remembered quite differently by those who are committed to sustaining a strong sense of Swahili identity in the wake of competing cultural forces. The first interpretation of ngoma's decline highlights the Swahili people's propensity for self-correction and reconstitution. The second pays tribute to some of the most dazzling of Swahili cultural traditions, many of which are unappreciated by Swahili youth and largely unknown to the non-Swahili who have recently taken up coastal residence.

Ngoma's Future

There are several dance organizations that illustrate ngoma's potential for facilitating community-based development initiatives, fostering self-reliance, and sustaining distinct cultural identity among the peoples of the northern Kenya coast. Some of the best examples of these kinds of activities are those associated with the most popular Swahili performance tradition of all—*Taarab,* a musical genre rhythmically rooted in coastal East African ngoma traditions and engraved with distinctive Middle Eastern and Indian melodic signatures that reflect the international character of the port towns: Lamu, Mombasa, Tanga, and Zanzibar, in which Taarab first emerged in the late nineteenth century.[32]

Taarab's significance in Swahili social history has been well documented by T. L. Osaki (1990), Janet Topp Fargion (1993), and Laura Fair (2001) and is the topic of recently published book-length analyses by Kelly Askew (2002) and Mwenda Ntarangwi (2003). Taarab song texts, which had became a quintessential "Swahili" art form by 1920, are widely used by scholars as historical documents that assist in taking the pulse of coastal communities at particular moments in time. The poetic lyrics of Swahili songs are often linguistically imaginative, featuring double and sometimes triple entendre to express different levels of meaning to different listeners. Ntarangwi (2000) focuses on the famous rivalry between the Mombasa-based Taarab singers "Bhalo" (Mohammed Juma Bhalo) and "Maulidi" (Maulidi Juma Iha), who broadcast their personal disputes by using their songs as a form of *matukano* (defamation of character), underscoring the use of Taarab lyrics for public squabbling. In contrast, the Taarab song themes compiled by Jan Knappert (1977) underscore the genre's emphasis on the joy and heartbreak associated with romantic love, and analyses by Laura Fair (2001) and Kelly Askew (2002) explore the genre's capacity for social critique and political mobilization. Taarab's longevity is directly related to the creative ways in which Taarab composers, singers, and fans have made it versatile enough to be relevant in multiple social contexts over time. One song composer I interviewed explained the value of Taarab this way: "Taarab is important because it gives people advice [*mawaidha*]. You can be sitting there, and I can sing a song for you that will offer you advice. And if you follow the advice, the song can help you with a variety of issues you are dealing with" (Ali Madi of Matondoni, interview, October 17, 1995).

Along the northern Kenya coast, Taarab clubs resembled other ngoma groups in the way they precipitated and dissolved according to the strategies employed by charismatic leaders vying to attract the most talented songwriters and musicians and the wealthiest and most influential patrons, while staving off the internal and external rivalries that emerged in the process. Competition took various forms during different periods, sometimes focusing on the technical aspects of artistic production (musical style, song composition, costume design), while other times concentrating on addressing personal rivalries between group leaders and members. In Matondoni, a totally different form of competition emerged in the 1980s, when what might be identified as "competitive altruism" became ngoma's modus operandi.

Ali Madi's account of how Taraab competition evolved in Matondoni suggests that the rivalry between the village's first two Taraab clubs (Chumvi ["Salt"] and Kiungulia ["Heartburn"], established c. 1970), which centered on buying the latest electronic sound equipment, developed into a more civic-minded contest between the subsequent permutations of the groups, Yote Huwa ("Eventually All Gets Accomplished") and Wakati ("Time") in the 1980s. Ali Madi explains that these new groups emphasized their role in providing emergency relief to their respective members in times of need—even purchasing an airplane ticket if someone had to go to a funeral in Mombasa, or covering a family member's medical expenses at the Lamu Hospital (interview with Ali Madi of Matondoni, October 17, 1995). Distancing themselves from the wasteful expenditure that characterized Beni and Chama competition in Matondoni in earlier times, this new generation of ngoma leaders turned their ngoma groups into mutual aid societies.

The extent to which coastal dance clubs acted as welfare associations in the past, or the likelihood that they can be motivated to do so again, has been obscured by the fierce competition that often characterizes the relationships between and within ngoma groups. Because of this, ngoma activity on the East African coast has been implicated in exaggerating factionalism, rather than providing essential community support networks. While in some cases dance groups have been eclipsed by more effective self-help societies, especially for communities experiencing hard times (Ranger 1975:98–105), there are examples suggesting that ngoma groups such as Yote Huwa and Wakati have indeed been adapted to help members overcome various kinds of adversity.

Shani Women's Group is a Takaungu-based self-help association directly affiliated with a women's ngoma group, both of which are chaired by Mebaraka Juma, who in 1996 proudly reported that she and the members of her group had opened a bank account, used some of the money they had pooled to put in a water tap, and built a maize-grinding mill (interview with Mebaraka Juma of Takaungu, April 15, 1996). It is ironic that while NGOs typically commission women's ngoma groups such as Mebaraka's to perform at opening ceremonies for newly constructed schools and dispensaries and at welcome parties for new project managers, they rarely recognize ngoma leaders as potential advisors, or ngoma group members as community liaisons. Likewise, local politicians often hire ngoma experts to write and perform songs promoting their candidacies, rather than consulting them for advice on local issues. As readily mobilized committees of men and women, who already possess a proclivity toward collective agency and cooperation, ngoma associations (or their remnants) may be the most underutilized human resource the coast has to offer.

Conclusion

The ubiquity of ngoma and its capacity to incorporate members of every echelon of Swahili society makes performance activities an intriguing focal point around which to construct theories of Swahili identity formation. The variety of voices articulated in this essay demonstrates the breadth of ngoma participation, from the most elite members of coastal society to those eager to discard their slave heritage. Some of the stories shared here provide clues to how the Swahili have manipulated opportunities afforded by ngoma activities to their personal advantage, as ngoma has frequently provided a special context that has enabled women and men, the young and elderly, the poor and privileged, to make strides unattainable under ordinary conditions. As a lubricant for sliding up the social ladder, as a medium of public expression for the marginalized (women constrained by purdah, former slaves stigmatized by their inherited status, Muslim youth alienated by the government), as an outlet for artistic talent, as a forum for legitimizing authority, and as a marker of unique cultural identity, ngoma is indelibly connected to the experience of becoming and being Swahili.

Other narratives presented here shed light on the particular ways in which ngoma has been used as a gauge for assessing the status of Swahili society as a whole. Because ngoma encompasses so many aspects of coastal life, discussions that revolve around music and dance yield fascinating information about socioeconomic and political transformations that Swahili communities have experienced over time, and continue to experience. Yet a comprehensive understanding of the crucial role that ngoma organizations have played in the continuous re-creation of Swahili society is only possible when one factors in the contributions made by residents of the northernmost portion of the "Swahili coast." With the inclusion of their ngoma memories in the corpus of ethnographic and historical data on Swahili performance, we can begin to appreciate the cultural congruity (temporal and spatial) of Swahili civilization, as well as the ingenuity that characterizes artistic production in individual coastal communities.

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Notes

1. The name "Swahili" is derived from *suahil,* the Arabic word for "coast"; over time it came to signify the peoples who inhabit the coastal strip of East Africa and the Bantu language they speak. As Swahili-speaking peoples from the coast became known throughout East Africa as important middle men who negotiated the terms of exchange for goods from inland Africa and those imported by way of the Indian Ocean, the word "Swahili" took on new meaning depending on when, where, and by whom it was used.

   For example, a treatise on what constituted Swahili society in the late nineteenth century, *Desturi za Waswahili* (The Customs of the Swahili People, [1903] 1981), is purported to have been written by "pure Swahili persons" (viii), yet is largely the work of Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari, who is introduced in the preface as a Muslim of Zaramo heritage (ix). The American traveler May French-Sheldon (aka "Bebe Bwana") further obfuscates the issue in this statement: "Swahili porters, collectively called Zanzibaris, [are] natives of almost every different African province ..." (1892:121). See Johann Krapf ([1860] 1968) and "Report of the Education Commission of the East African Protectorate, 1919" in Mungeam (1978:263) for other examples of inconsistent usage of "Swahili."

   While historical accounts suggest that the Swahili have been fairly difficult to pin down, at least by Westerners, they shed little light on if, when, and where coastal residents have identified themselves as Swahili. This point, as Erik Gilbert (2004) addresses, brings the usage of the term—both in the past and the present—into question in some East African communities. Since a large segment of the population of the northern Kenya coast regularly uses "Swahili" for purposes of self-identification, this is the term I use here and in my scholarship generally.
2. For a rare photograph of such a float in Tanga, c.1958, see Askew (2002:74).
3. The lengths to which Beni participants went to impress colonial officials was also described by the Lamu elder Mohammed "Bakamoro" Mzee: "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... and saw that

there was a cross stitched under the armpit.... Even the D.C. himself noticed it. He was so surprised that we had seen that detail of the robe and replicated it" (interview, July 23, 1996).

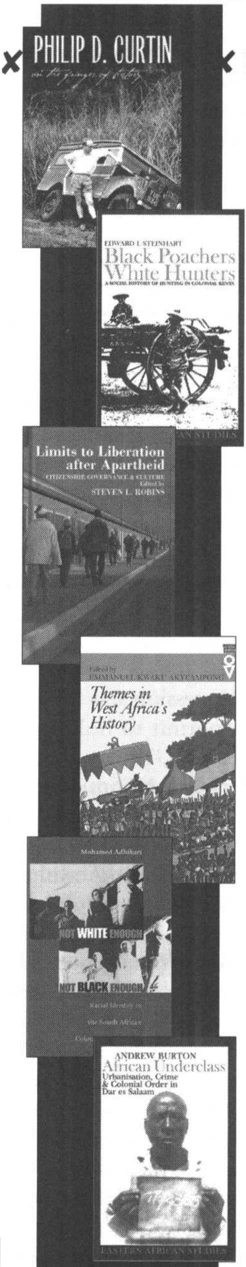
4. As Susan Geiger (1997:49) explains of women's *Lelemama* dance associations in Dar es Salaam, "Although the member-performers in these ngoma groups were women, men held "titles" to ensure community acceptance of the organizations and to secure financial and other forms of sponsorship from the "titled" men, who were often prominent in the community." For other examples of titles held by ngoma group members, see Ranger (1975:52–53; 64–65); Strobel (1979:163–64); and Glassman (1995:158–61).
5. The *Kimbagu* royal ngoma had not been performed publicly until very recently, when Maalim Dini, a member of the Nabhany clan, was asked by the leaders of Riyadha mosque in Lamu to perform the dance at the one hundredth anniversary of the annual Maulidi festival in Lamu (interview with Maalim Dini of Siyu, August 7, 1996).
6. "Mijikenda" refers to nine coastal hinterland peoples who have a common place of origin known as Shungwaya. Although there is conflicting evidence about exactly which coastal peoples constitute the Mijikenda (Willis 1993:32–35), James de Vere Allen (1993:chap. 2) offers a thorough analysis of the Shunguwaya "phenomenon" and affirms Derek Nurse and Thomas Spear's (1985) historical linguistic analysis that the Mijikenda comprise the Chonyi, Digo, Duruma, Giriama, Jibana, Kambe, Kauma, Rabai, and Ribe peoples.
7. While the presence of such a large group of Tanzanians might seem far-fetched, Hanan Sabea (personal communication) suggests that it is very likely that the group consisted of migrant laborers who had come to work on the Vipingo sisal estate located just a few miles south of Takaungu. From 1939, when the Vipingo estate became part of the Tanzania-based Amboni Estates, it was not uncommon for workers on the various Amboni-owned estates to be transferred between them, thus providing a logical explanation for the workers' "visit."
8. Purdah is the Islamic code of modesty that requires women to wear modest clothing, which the Swahili interpret as a full-length, body-covering veil called a *buibui*, and to confine themselves to indoor spaces (or private outdoor spaces) occupied only by other women and immediate male kin.
9. It is important to note that Swahili poets seem to be an exception to this rule, primarily because of the status associated with well-educated individuals who have a gift for using the Swahili language creatively and with verbal dexterity.
10. For examples of slaves' contribution to Swahili culture, see Strobel (1979; 1983); Douglas (Tew) (1950); Hinawiy (1964); Mulokozi (1975); Romero (1984); and Campbell and Eastman (1984). For examples in coastal Somalia, see Declich (1995).
11. For more information on *mizimu* and the Swahili spirit world, see Bakari ([1903] 1981); Skene (1917); Gomm (1975); Alpers (1984); Franken (1986); Giles (1989, 1999); Parkin (1994); and McIntosh (2004).
12. Also see Ruete ([1888], 1989).
13. See Kelly Askew's (1999) nuanced analysis of the historical decline of Swahili women's access to political authority in the late nineteenth century.
14. Fred Morton (1990:1) puts the number of slaves on the coast between Tanga and the Lamu archipelago in 1887 at over four thousand (out of an estimated

168,000 people, or nearly 24% of the population), and Laura Fair (2000:144) figures that slaves made up 75 percent of Zanzibar's population during the nineteenth century.

15. Strobel (1975:287) writes of *unyago* as a coastwide phenomenon by citing references to the ritual by Carl Velten in Bagamoyo in the 1890s and Captain Stigand in Lamu in 1913. Also see Romero (1984). For thick description of Zaramo unyago practices, see Swantz (1995).
16. The importance of the patron-client relationships forged between masters and slaves is commemorated in Lamu through the persistence of obligatory attendance at funerals and weddings by former slaves and their descendants and by former masters and their descendants, up to the present.
17. See Minou Fuglesang's description of wedding dances in Lamu (1994:230–44).
18. See John Middleton's discussion of Swahili notions of purity (1992:191–98).
19. The Bajuni are a people of complicated ancestry, as James de Vere Allen (1993) rigorously explores. Because of their close affiliation with other Swahili peoples on the coast, the Bajuni are usually discussed as a subgroup of the Swahili, although their oral traditions and distinct cultural practices reflect their unique identity. As far as language is concerned, contemporary Bajuni speak a dialect of Swahili, although Bajuni elders explained to me that remnants of an ancient Bajuni language known as T'ik'uu are still found in the Vave oral tradition (interviews with Tora Abushiri of Kiwayuu, November 11, 1995; Abubakar Mohammed Baharo "Kuchi" of Kilifi, February 29, 1996; Chief Tora of Kiunga, October 22, 1995). See Nurse (1980) for more information on Bajuni linguistics.
20. Robert Bunger (1973:95) describes food sacrifices that the Pokomo, who live along the Tana River and are neighbors of the Swahili of the northern Kenya coast, leave in the forest and along the riverbank to appease nature spirits they call *nkoma* before they begin planting.
21. This Vave performance took place the night before the burning of precut forest on a plot of land located in Vumbe, on the mainland directly opposite Pate Island.
22. A further example is found in divination techniques known as *ramli* (often performed in the sand), which as Randall Pouwels (1987:121) explains was imported by Omani Arabs, who also popularized the "magico-religious" science called Ilm al-falak (or "*falaki*" in Swahili), known to bolster the careers of famous coastal leaders, such as the patron saint of Lamu, Habib Saleh. For further information on the Islamization process among the Mijikenda, see Parkin (1970, 1989, 1994). For information on the impact of Islam among the Upper Pokomo, see Bunger (1973).
23. "Sufism" refers to the mystical tradition of Islam. Sufis generally consider mystical experience a primary component of Islamic worship. For more information on the establishment of Sufi brotherhoods on the East African coast, see Martin (1969, 1971, 1976); Pouwels (1987, 1989); Constantin (1988); Ahmed (1989); Samatar (1992); and Abdulaziz (1995).

    Several nineteenth-century accounts offer evidence that coastal people were generally receptive to the potential benefits of ritual syncretism, which promised an ever-expanding repertoire of medicines, health-care strategies, and soothsaying techniques that appealed to an increasingly diverse population. For example, in 1838, the English merchant John Studdy Leigh wrote an entry in his Zanzibar diary describing his meetings with several African "fortune tellers" who used sand configurations known as *ramli* to predict the arrival of a ship that he was expecting (Kirkman 1980). Likewise, Johann Krapf's mission diaries from the mid-nineteenth century contain compelling evidence that coastal Muslims and non-Muslims had a major impact on each others' ritual practices, regularly collaborating in the development of new forms of worship based on shared cosmological beliefs. Also see Sperling (1995).

24. For more information on the annual Maulidi ceremony in Lamu, see Lienhardt (1959); el Zein (1974); Boyd (1981); and Gearhart (1998a, 1998b).
25. Arabic flutes (*nai*) are played during the annual *Zamuni* dance competition between Islamic schools (*madrasas*) at Swafaa Mosque in Lamu during the Maulidi festival. Trumpets have been replaced by a double reed clarinet called a *zumari*, which accompanies several male ngomas. These include *Goma*, a meditative dance performed with walking canes; *Kirumbizi*, a competitive stick fight; and *Twari la Ndia*, a processional dance.
26. For example, Swahili protestors demonstrated outside of the six-hundred-year-old Kongo Mosque in Kwale, demanding that the Kenya government revoke the purchase of the land by a developer who planned to destroy it (*Daily Nation*, Sept. 22, 1995). See also Ali Mazrui's article in the *Daily Nation*, August, 27, 1995.
27. For more information on the IPK and Muslim politics in Kenya, see Oded (2000).
28. Police explained that the procession was blocked because the Muslim Association had not applied for a permit to hold the event. See "Maulidi Ban Riles Leaders," *Daily Nation*, August 10, 1995.
29. "Police Arrest Demo Youth," *East African Standard*, August 28, 1995.
30. While regular ngoma competitions declined in the 1970s, the Scotchi Beni club from Mombasa continued to perform in coastal towns in the 1980s at soccer games and political rallies (Munib Abdulrehman of Lamu, personal communication). Linda Giles observed the Mombasa Scotchi club in Wasin in 1982 and again in Mombasa in the early 1990s. Giles also recalls that Vanga was divided between two Beni-like ngoma groups, Santana ("High Rubber Boots") and Staff Moyo ("Staff Members with Heart"), which competed into the 1980s and perhaps longer (personal communication).
31. Terence Ranger (1975:144–47) links the Beni renaissance in Lamu in the 1950s to the boom in the cattle trade with Somalia, which seems to explain the plethora of cattle described by those with whom I spoke about the feasts. It is important to note that Richard Skene's (1917) account of Chama suggests that competitive cattle killing was characteristic of ngoma feasts in Matondoni well before the glut of cattle on Lamu Island in the 1950s. As Skene explains, "Formerly, the dance was accompanied by a feast, and still is in the Lamu District, where the factions vie with each other as to the number of cattle they can afford to kill. In 1912, one faction at the village of Mkunumbi (Witu Sultanate) was known to kill thirty head of cattle to cap the twenty-five head, which another faction had killed a few days previously" (415).
32. See Askew (2002) for a comprehensive history of Taarab.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