

Power, slavery, and spirit possession in East Africa: a few reflections[□]

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Abstract

Spirit possession and its relationship with power aims to offer here a better understanding not only of East African societies, but, most of all, of their historical role in numerous political and military conflicts and also within peace-building processes that represent a continuation of a topic of long-standing concern in East African history. The relationships between religions, local cultures and institutional powers throughout contemporary East African history will be re-read through regional and transnational, as well as international dynamics.

1.1 Swahili Society

The subject of spirit possession is vast and complex, and the focus here is essentially on a few aspects of the *waganga*'s (witch doctors) role within the exercise of power locally and within the relationships with Islam during the colonial period in these two most important and influencing islands – Zanzibar and Pemba – in the history of the Indian Ocean in general, and within Swahili civilization.¹

Accordingly, we wish to stress that anthropological, psychological, and ethnographical sources are functional to a better understanding of the role of charismatic figures such as the *waganga* within the exercise of power, especially during Omani and European presence along the islands and the littorals of Sub-Saharan East Africa.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Indian Ocean became the heart of new political and economic strategies, which attracted Europe with its new emerging National States.² Starting from the second half of the 19th century – 1873-1963 – Imperialism contributed to numerous transformations of Swahili groups in East

[□] Thank you to Dr. Shihan De Silva, Senior Fellow at Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, UK for her editing; when in italics, terms are here reproduced as in consulted sources and texts.

¹ N. Levitzion & R. Pouwels (Eds.), *The History of Islam in Africa*, Athens, Ohio, 2000, Part III, pp. 227-349; J. Erdtsieck, *Encounters with forces of pepo; Shamanism and Healing in East Africa*, “Tanzanet Journal”, vol. 1, 2001, pp. 1-10.

² J.M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*, Cambridge, 2004.

Africa. During German colonial rule, while Swahili often cooperated with local representatives, in rural areas the role of Sufi orders – Qadiriyya and Shadhiliyya – grew among populations. In 1865 the two famous British explorers Richard F. Burton (1821-1890) and John Speke (1827-1864) entered a town claiming to be *waganga*. Though a forbidden city to strangers they managed to get admittance by pretending to be European wizards and *waganga* of peculiar power over the moon, the stars, the wind and the rain. And their testimonies explained the high level of influence of the *waganga* inside a large part of the Swahili society, as well as the great differences between western cultures and the waswahili concepts of the supernatural being a significant part of their life.³ Within this framework, it is well known that Swahili historiography has been for a long time divided between colonial perspectives of the older studies which saw the Swahili as an oriental transportation on the East African littorals and an extreme African political view that identified it as purely African. The interactions that gave life to this kaleidoscopic society reflected also in the evolution of the *waganga* role as well as into the history of Islam in East Africa. After the First World War, when the British took control over Tanganyika, the growth of Islam gradually diminished. And the British Indirect Rule favoured local chiefs rather than the Swahili from the coast, who through their charisma gradually imposed themselves on local populations as intermediaries between God and humans.

The Swahili lived in the islands and along the coasts of East Africa, urban-based merchants who dealt in short as well as long-distance inter-continental trade. They belonged to a sophisticated society formed of a single group that spoke the same, single language, a global society that represented a central rather than some form of peripheral entity. Swahili language, culture, literature and poetry have always represented an important source also for any attempt to understand the history of the coast and islands of East Africa.⁴ As far as relations are concerned between the Swahili families and their settlement models, ethnographical history was described as a society of middlemen, where commercial wealth was synonymous with political power. Most Swahilis of the coast lived in rural villages, in mud and straw huts, where they worked as farmers and fishermen in a state of poverty barely above subsistence level, their hunger appeased with sorghum. The division of labour was rudimentary, as was any stratification of their society, with a counsel of elders overseeing individual villages. This was in marked contrast to the situation in the stone towns of the coasts and islands, with their complex structure, economic differentiation and various professional activities. The towns hosted numerous foreign merchants and life was extremely lively and dynamic, based on importation and exportation, money-lending, shipbuilding and repairs. With regards to the above described role of spirits, another particularity of the island of Pemba was the presence of powerful magicians, witch-doctors and magical spirits. The island was renowned as the seat of numerous individuals with paranormal powers, and tales are still told of

³ R.F. Burton, *Zanzibar, City, Island and Coast*, 2 vols, London, 1872.

⁴ R. Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent. Cultural Change and Traditional Islam in the East African Coast A.D. 800-1900*, Cambridge, 1987.

the existence of an invisible city named *Gining'i*, in the south of the island, believed to be home to the greatest gathering of wizards and magicians.

Many residents of the East African coast as far as the Great Lakes, journeyed to Pemba to receive advice and treatment from these famous wizards and witch doctors (*waganga/wachawi*). In the past, this led to a progressive concentration of the power of these charismatic figures who could provide answers, foretell the future, bring the rains, heal sickness and astonish with their magic rituals, but also cast cursing spells. The victim of such a curse being made by one of Pemba's wizards was called *roga*, a category from which, however, all Asiatic people were excluded. This was due to the fact that, until the revolution of the 1960's, when numerous Asians left the African island, the Indian merchant communities – both Hindu and Muslim – enjoyed not only financial but also magical powers.⁵ This did nothing to harm their pre-eminent position. In fact, some clove plantation owners of Asian descent maintained that they could control their trees from afar thanks to their magic powers. Others, instead, boasted that they could transform themselves into any animal they wished and, thus disguised participate in witchcraft competitions alongside the other groups of merchants present on the island. These competitions were widespread and frequent, and represented important moments of close gathering and social cohesion, apart from offering great amusement. The anthropologist N. Arnold⁶ believed that the Asian wizards were active on Pemba until the 1920's – 30's. From then on, they gradually gave up their magic roles, and the world of the *wachawi gala* saw them only as spectators. Magical practices then passed, or, returned to the Africans.

All the inhabitants knew of the presence of a sacred fish at Chake Chake; nobody knew the precise species to which it belonged, but they attributed to this fish many occult powers and it was honoured with prayers and gifts. Since this mysterious creature swam in dark and muddy waters, it was believed to be an eel, probably of an aggressive nature, and moody when the gifts, especially boiled eggs, were not to its liking.⁷ Numerous similarities have also been noted between the treatment provided by the African witch doctors and that of the Omani Arabs. These were clearly due to the numerous links with people from the Arabian Peninsula on the East African islands, that witnessed the arrival and departure of twelve Omani Sultans over a period of roughly 133 years.

A mixture of local rituals and Islam was inevitable in the history of the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba, as well as of the history of the East African coast. The religious leaders, mainly Ibadi or Sunni, had different roles to those of the magicians, but were, nevertheless, often influenced by the magical, divining, medical and astrological practices of East Africa. This principally meant, both for the *wachawi*

⁵ The term revolution is under strong debates at recent international conferences such as Oman and East Africa International Symposium, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman, December 2012. J. Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar*, Indiana University Press, 2011.

⁶ Research carried out at Pemba by N. Arnold, Department of Anthropology, University of Indiana, USA; Namaskar-Africana Forum.

⁷ F.D. Omanney, *Isle of Cloves. A view from Zanzibar*, London, 1957, pp. 193-95.

and the *qadi* of the Omani court, shaping reality to their own advantage with the aim of alternately defending or asserting themselves.⁸ Along the East African coast the *jinn* or *pepo*, spirits, illnesses and curses existed for all, and the process of constant osmosis between the different communities was an ongoing one, the only difference being that while the elite of the Arabs wrote down details of their divining skills, the autochthonous peoples continued in the oral tradition of passing on knowledge, the concentration of power, as has been noted, swinging alternately between Zanzibar and Pemba.

1.2. The Slave Trade

In the Indian Ocean religious elements, such as Hinduism in India, Buddhism in the Malaysian-Indonesian Archipelago, and the spread of Islam through short as well as long-distance routes, strongly influenced, and in many cases modified, the concept and use of slavery. According to western simplifying categorizations processes, the social, political and economic functions of slaves were: a) domestic - patriarchal, b) productive - agricultural (bonded labour directed into intensive wet-crop agriculture); c) military - administrative. Within the Islamic world, armies of slave-soldiers came from Central Asia, mainly Turkish peoples from the Caucasus and from the Steppes till their islamization; while domestic and agricultural slaves came chiefly from the coastal strip of Africa.⁹

African slaves were imported in great numbers annually from East Africa to Oman, travelling on Arab dhows (*sanbuq*). In the first half of the 19th century there was an extensive commerce of slaves from Ras Assir “The Cape of Slaves” and Pemba, and many African people were bought with cloth and dates on Zanzibar and Pemba islands, enslaved, and transported to the Arabian Peninsula where they were mainly engaged in pearl fishing in the Persian/Arab Gulf.¹⁰ Slaves also became lords of Asia and Africa, as they were considered by their masters to be more loyal than anybody else within their clans and tribes. We should remember that the Islamic Arab world’s perception of slavery as an economic and power policy was entirely different from that of the Christian West which had undersigned the Holy Alliance and strove for abolition. In Islamic society, unlike many others, slavery was not prohibited. It even finds precise dispositions in its support in the Koran: the equality of all men before God implies clear duties also in regard to slaves, but not the suppression of slavery itself, even though it is severely forbidden to reduce another Muslim to the state of slavery. In terms of rights, no political or religious function may be performed by a slave, but owners may delegate to slaves any responsibility or task related to the exercise of their authority. Thus, the slaves of important individuals enjoyed a

⁸ L. Declich, “I manoscritti arabi dell’Archivio nazionale di Zanzibar: fonti per lo studio dell’Islam popolare nell’isola nel XIX secolo,” *Islam in East Africa: New Sources*, Rome, 2-4 December, 1999.

⁹ O. Prétré-Grenouilleau, *Les Traités Négrières: Essai d’histoire globale*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006.

¹⁰ D. Agius, *Seafaring in the Arabian Gulf and Oman: People of the Dhow*, London, Kegan Paul Limited, 2005.

privileged status and could often attain higher positions of power than free men, the cases of slaves themselves becoming princes not being entirely exceptional, either. In the context of Islam, slavery is a highly-structured concept, regulated down to the smaller detail by the civil and criminal codes. As a result, it is difficult to pass judgement on the moral or physical condition of slaves in the Islamic African world as compared to those in other societies. Conditions obviously varied, and there were certainly those who attempted to escape, but there is no doubt that this institution lay at the very foundation of the entire Islamic society of the cosmopolitan commercial empire founded on the seas by an Omani Sultan: Sayid Sa'id Al Bu Sa'id (1806-1856). Moreover, as we have noted, it was inevitable that there would have to be a clash with the Christian west, as represented by Great Britain, over this question.

From the Islamic point of view of slaves are considered persons, but being subject to their masters they are not fully responsible, and they are at the same time a thing.¹¹

Slavery can originate through birth or through captivity, if a non-Muslim who is protected neither by treaty nor by a safe conduct falls into the hands of the Muslims. Slaves can get married: the male slave may marry up to two female slaves; the female slave may also marry a free man who is not her owner, and the male slave a free woman who is not his owner. The marriage of the slave requires the permission of the owner; he can also give the slave in marriage against his or her will. The permission implies that the master becomes responsible with the person (*ra'aba*) of the slave, for the pecuniary obligations that derives from the marriage, nuptial gifts and maintenance. Minor slaves are not to be separated from their near relatives, and in particular their parents, in sale. The children of a female slave follow the status of their mother, except that the children of the concubine, whom the owner has recognised as his own (*umm walad*), and this was the case of the numerous sons of the Omani Sultans during the 19th century, is free with all the rights of children from a marriage with a free woman. And this rule has had the most profound influence on the development of Islamic society. The Islamic law of slavery is patriarchal and belongs more to the law of family than to the law of property. Apart from domestic slaves, Islamic law takes notice of trading slaves who possess a considerable liberty of action, but hardly of working slaves kept for exploiting agricultural and industrial enterprises.

On the Swahili coast slavery was mainly characterised as an open and very much absorptive system, although during the 19th century the majority of slaves from the interior such as Unyanyembe and the Great Lakes region were destined to cultivations, and consequently totally excluded from any chance of paternalistic generosity from their masters.¹² The search for a better life on the Swahili coast was tempted by slaves in many ways: those who were outside the master's household worked in the master's *mashamba* – from the French champ, or field, that is the plantations¹³ – and were expected to take care of their subsistence, cultivating a small

¹¹ J. Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, I ed. Oxford, 1964, II ed. Hong Kong, 1993, p. 127.

¹² S. Rockel, *Labor on the Road in Nineteenth-Century East Africa*, Heinemann, 2006.

plot of the *mashamba*; the more privileged cultivated by themselves a small piece of land, paying an annual or monthly tribute to their master.¹⁴

Vibaruna were hired slaves, mainly in urban centres; they were extremely poor, but in some cases joined Hadrami Arab's caravans and succeeded in modifying their humiliating conditions of life. The trading slaves, *mafundi*, craftsmen, reached a decent level of dignity, but they remained under strict control of their master, and 'illegal' or personal initiatives were severely punished.

In East Africa slaves were thought as less than human and, even when they embraced Islam – Sunni and never Ibadī as only the Arabs of Oman – were thought less than Muslim.

The burning question of slavery went hand in hand with another and no less relevant factor.¹⁵ In the Sub-Saharan East African regions, and in the eastern Mediterranean, there was no local peasant class that could be employed on the new cultivations which European demand had induced rich landowners to introduce and which were proving to be both extremely successful and profitable (sugarcane, rice, copal, vanilla, pepper, cardamom, nutmeg and, especially on Zanzibar, cloves). Consequently, the use of slaves for tilling the land and other heavy labour on the plantations had become a question of routine; in other words, when Great Britain undertook her crusade against slavery, it was this most miserable section of society which constituted the economic foundations of the entire region.

In Sub-Saharan East Africa during the 19th century, it was believed that slavery, if we go beyond the mere capture of human beings, was caused by the tribes of the interior accumulating debts to the slaving merchants of the coast, as well as by the recurrent periods of drought suffered along the Mrima coast, sometimes along that part facing the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba. In alternating phases, therefore, the populations decided to travel to Zanzibar and sell themselves into slavery there.¹⁶

The slave trade practised along the East African shores had certain principal characteristics: the slaves did not come from areas of Swahili cultural influence, and were called *mshenzi* (pl. *washenzi*), that is to say, barbarians, uncivilised. They were not Muslims, as were all free Swahili within the areas under nominal control of the Omani Arabs, and were the property of their owners, slavery being regulated by the principles of Koranic law.

The slaves formed a separate caste. There were *watumwa wajinga*, not yet assimilated into the coastal populations, the *wakulia*, transported as children to Zanzibar, and, in this category, also the *wazalia* (pl. of *mzalia*), those generations born on the coast and fully acculturated into coastal Islamic culture.

¹³ A. Lodhi, *Oriental Influences in Swahili. A Study in Language and Culture Contacts*, Göteborg, 2000, pp. 46-47.

¹⁴ J. Glassman, *Feasts and Riot, Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888*, London, 1995, pp. 79-114.

¹⁵ On the lively debate on the question of slavery, amongst the many, see G. Heuman, *Slavery, The Slave Trade, and Abolition*, in R.W. Winks (Ed.), *Historiography*, The Oxford History of the British Empire, Oxford, vol. V, 1999, pp. 315-326.

¹⁶ K. Pallaver, "Nyamwezi Participation in Nineteenth-century East African Trade: some Evidence from Missionary Sources", *Africa*, Rome, vol. 61, n. 3-4, 2006, pp. 513-531.

Those enjoying more privileged conditions were, naturally, the domestic slaves. Their relationship with their owners was more that of a member of the family than one of submission and they were called *udugu yangu*, my brother, and the women *suria*, concubines of their owners or nannies. As they were often entrusted with manual labour, household slaves thus became *msimamizi*, guardians, *nokoa*, *kadamu*, first or second head slaves in the spice and coconut plantations on Zanzibar and along the East African coasts. Others had the task of leading caravans towards the interior. The slave of the *mashamba* hoed the fields, sieved copal and carried the merchandise to the ports. They could also be assigned a piece of land with which to support themselves, and on which they worked on Thursdays and Fridays, the two days of rest. They were also permitted, on payment of a tax, to get married.¹⁷

The demand for slaves came, primarily, from the various parts of the Arabian Peninsula, where the cultivation of date palms called for a continuous supply of labour, but also from India, where they were employed in local oases and on sugarcane and tea plantations from Central Asia, where cotton was beginning to be grown, as well as from various regions of the Ottoman Empire and from the American continent. African slaves were also used as domestic help or in craftwork in rich families and at the Arab courts. The demand was especially high for young women and girls to serve in the home. Slaves destined for the courts were given special training in entertaining important guests with their singing and dancing.

Another speciality was that of the eunuchs, held in particular esteem especially in the Ottoman Empire. These were mutilated without any regard being shown for hygiene, a fact reflected in the survival rate for those transported from Africa of only one in ten. According to Islamic law, mutilation is forbidden inside the *Dār al-Islām*, therefore, only slaves were mutilated, with some exemptions in Central Asia and in Persia. The Eunuchs were highly priced, three times more than a slave, and reached high ranks within Islamic societies. The Eunuchs were guardians, as well as guardians of everything sacre, like Holy Places, such as Mecca. They retained great prestige and richness; black castrated slaves were powerful figures in the Ottoman Empire and eunuchs were highly respected within the whole of *Dār al-Islām* being very close to Muslim sovereigns.¹⁸

Great Britain was the first nation to undertake an international campaign with humanitarian goals. There remained, however, a weighty and complex knot to unravel. How could they combat slavery and, at the same time, ally themselves with

¹⁷ W.G. Clarence-Smith, *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century: An Overview*, in, W.G. Clarence-Smith (Ed.), *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1983; E.B. Martin and T.C.I. Ryan, *A Quantitative Assessment of the Arab Slave Trade of East Africa, 1770-1896*, "Kenya Historical Review", Nairobi, 1977; E.A. Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa*, Berkeley, 1967; E.A. Alpers, *The East African Slave Trade*, "Historical Association of Tanzania", n. 3, Nairobi, 1975; R. Gray and D. Birmingham, *Pre-Colonial African Trade: Essays on Trade in Central and Eastern Africa before 1900*, London, 1970; P. Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental and African Slave Traders*, "African Studies Series", Cambridge, 1990.

¹⁸ G. Vercellin, *Tra veli e turbanti. Rituali sociali e vita privata nei mondi dell'Islam*, Venezia, 2000, pp. 186-191.

the most famous and powerful protectors of the slave traders, such as the Omani Sultan who, in their turn, obtained their greatest profits precisely from this trade in human flesh?

It was around this crucial question that relations during the 19th century between the Omani Arab Sultan, the East India Company and Great Britain revolved, a problem that animated lively political debate also within the various forces in play.

The slave trade, therefore, represented a destabilizing element for British policy, not only on the political but also on a social and economic level. To this was added the imposing humanitarian pressure brought to bear by public opinion in Britain that forced the Government to take decisive action with the specific aim of putting an end to such trade.¹⁹

During the 19th century, the growing effectiveness of British measures aimed at abolition caused a reduction in the availability of East African slaves. This lack was, however, partly compensated for by Asiatic slaves, as shown by the commerce in Asian people from the coast destined to be sold in the squares of Arabia during the first decades of the twentieth century.²⁰ And this was one of the alternative, and little studied, slave routes in the Indian Ocean.

At this point it is useful to indicate another, important factor which played a part in the economic-commercial growth of the East African coast.

And here we come to that delicate and precious material which had been exported throughout the Orient since time immemorial: ivory.²¹ Since the second century B.C., ivory had been exported from East Africa to the Mediterranean. From the 7th century A.D., India and China emerged as the main markets for African ivory. Superior to Asian ivory in quality, consistency and colour, African ivory had followed the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean until the end of the 18th century, departing from Mozambique. New fiscal burdens and taxes, however, imposed by the Portuguese at the start of the 19th century and termed suicidal by A. Sheriff,²² together with the mercantile ascendancy of France and Great Britain in the Indian Ocean, caused a shift in the ivory trade. The ports of Mozambique having been abandoned, the dealing and sale of this precious material would henceforth be conducted on the island of Zanzibar. Starting from the second decade of the 19th century, Europe

¹⁹ See the extensive archival documentation contained in *Thomas Clarkson Papers* and *Liverpool Papers*, The British Library, London; T.C. Mccaskie, *Cultural Encounters: Britain and Africa in the Nineteenth Century*, in A. Porter (Ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 3, Oxford, 1999, pp. 665-689.

²⁰ H.S.A. - A.G.G. Office - Essential Records, Baluchistan Archives, *Complaint about existence of Slavery in Baluchistan, from Capt. P. Cox, Consul and Political Agent, Maskat to Lieut. Col. C. A. Kemball, Agg. Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 17th September, 1901*, Political, 5-2/57. B. Nicolini and R. Redaelli, *Quetta: history and Archives. Note of a Survey of the Archives of Quetta*, "Nuova Rivista Storica", Year LXXVIII, Fasc. II, 1994, pp. 401-414. See the new Balochistan Archival collection online <http://www.balochistanarchives.gob.pk/home>

²¹ B. Nicolini, *The Myth of the Sultans in the Western Indian Ocean during the 19th century: A New Hypothesis*, Migrants and the Making of Indian Ocean Cultures, Indian Ocean: Cultures in Contact, "African & Asian Studies", vol. 8, n. 3, Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden, 2009, pp. 239-287.

²² A. Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices & Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873*, London, 1987, p. 81.

entered the ivory market with its considerable demands. The splendid, shining African ivory, pure white and strong but at the same time easily worked, was increasingly sought after in the west for luxury items such as elegant elements of personal toilette, billiard balls, piano keys, elaborate jewels, fans, cutlery and clothing accessories. In that particular atmosphere of a *fin de siècle* Europe increasingly fascinated by all things Chinese or exotic, ivory was a must. This is made clear by the fact that British imports of ivory rose from 280 tons in 1840 to 800 in 1875. The economy of the East African interior thus witnessed an immense growth in the demand for *pagazi*, free men recruited from among the African tribes allied between each other (mainly Yao and Nyamwezi), and for slave porters.²³ Women with small children were obliged by Arab slave traders and Asian soldiers and bodyguards to abandon their offspring in order to continue transporting elephant tusks. Therefore, a complex exchange network soon developed between the interior and the East African coast, leading to the introduction of rice cultivation in the interior in those areas under Arab dominion such as Tabora, Nungwe, in modern-day northern Congo, and in nearby Kasongo.²⁴ Later, thanks to the entrepreneurial ability of Tippu Tip, the greatest and most powerful slave trader of the 19th century,²⁵ the borders of what had been identified by the British as the Ottoman Empire, pushed further to the north-west into modern-day Rwanda and Burundi. An Asian merchant, Jairam Sewji, also profited greatly from this opening up to western markets. A member of the Topan family, who was the richest and most influential merchant in Zanzibar, personally financed almost all of the caravan traffic, accepting responsibility for all the risks and eventual losses this entailed. Throughout the first half of the 19th century, Jairam Topan represented the financial and political kingpin of all activity occurring on Zanzibar (around the year 1840, for example, he had four hundred slaves in his personal service). As such, it was with him that Europeans and Arabs had to deal. A somewhat singular political-financial phenomenon thus came into being, in the figure of Jairam Topan who concentrated Arab, Asian and European interests in his own hands, conducting as though with a baton the ancient, sophisticated system of commercial currents, connections and links of the Indian Ocean. A further factor, and no less important than ivory, was the extraordinary and revolutionary expansion of clove cultivation on the island of Zanzibar. The creation of a new niche for agricultural exploitation on Zanzibar and Pemba was destined to transform the twin

²³ S. Rockel, 'A Nation of Porters': the Nyamwezi and the Labour Market in Nineteenth-Century Tanzania, "Journal of African History", n. 41, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 173-195.

²⁴ K. Pallaver, "Nyamwezi Participation in Nineteenth-century East African Trade: some Evidence from Missionary Sources", *Africa* (Rome), vol. 61, n. 3-4, 2006, pp. 513-531; F. Bernault, "Witchcraft and the Colonial Life of the Fetish," in B. Meier and A. Steinforth, eds., *Spirits in Politics: Uncertainties of Power and Healing in African Societies*, Frankfurt a.M., Campus Publishers, 2013, pp. 53-74.

²⁵ At the end of the 19th century, Hamed bin Muhammad Al Murjebi, nicknamed Tippu Tip, owned 7 *mashamba* and 10,000 slaves in Africa, a capital worth approximately 50,000 Maria Theresa thalers in total. L. Farrant, *Tippu Tip and the East African Slave Trade*, London, 1975. Tippu Tip's family has not died out, the last descendant of this great 19th century slave and ivory trader was a doctor in Muscat, Oman. Interview kindly granted in Turbat, Makran, Pakistan by Mrs. Sheila Unwin, 18/10/1993.

islands into a true commercial empire. According to available western sources of the time, at the end of the 18th century the introduction of cloves (*Eugenia caryophyllata*, of the Myrtaceae, Myrtle family) altered completely the perceptions of the economic and commercial potential not, take note, in the eyes of the Europeans but in those of the Omani Sultan and his Asian merchants. Since the 2nd century B.C. envoys from Java at the Han court of China had sucked cloves to sweeten their heavy garlic breath during audiences with the emperor. Clove plants, originating in the Moluccas, were first exploited by the Dutch who grasped the commercial value of this precious, perfumed spice that also possessed medicinal properties. Around the year 1770, the French merchant, Pierre Poivre, succeeded in obtaining a few seeds with which to start a cultivation on the Mascarene Islands. It was, therefore, the French who, at the start of the 19th century, introduced cloves onto the island of Zanzibar. These initial attempts proved successful, the environment being perfectly suited to this cultivation that eventually led to Zanzibar being the primary producer of cloves in the world. From British accounts, it appears that the Omani Sultan decided to invest his wealth and energy in a project of this kind. Such a move required both courage and faith, as the plants take from seven to eight years to reach maturity and produce the first blooms, and ten years for the first crop. As budding does not occur at regular periods and the buds themselves must be removed before flowering, harvesting occurs in three phases, between August and December. This requires numerous and skilled labour, especially as the plantations also need to be weeded in continuation.²⁶ The cultivation of cloves was very similar to that of dates practised in Arabia and understood to perfection by the Arabs, who proceeded to acquire land on Zanzibar, mainly by expropriation to the cost of the Swahili. The management of land on Zanzibar was organised in three different categories: *wanda*, natural scrubland; *kiambo*, areas suitable for building upon; *msitu*, rural areas and lands surrounding villages. The legalised expropriation practised by the Arabs often led to Swahili lands effectively being confiscated.

The *mashamba* of the Sultan of Oman and Zanzibar, initially concentrated around Mntoni and Kizimbani, gradually grew to include Bumwini, Bububu and Chiwini. In 1835, the Omani Sultan possessed as many as forty-five *mashamba* on the island.

Clove mania, with its high profit on initial expenditure, produced a real Arab landowning aristocracy, continually financed by the Asian mercantile communities, that gradually replaced the old Swahili aristocracy. This did not, however, cause any kind of rupture, thanks to the dexterity of the Asian exponents who gradually involved the local East African elite by delegating to them certain tasks and responsibilities, thus making them active participants in this major Indian Ocean business.

On the coasts of the continent, on the contrary, society experienced significant changes due to the massive influx of slaves from the interior and of Arabs and Asians

²⁶ The cultivation of cloves on Pemba was less successful than on Zanzibar due to a cyclone that destroyed most of the plants in the first decades of the 19th century. N.R. Bennett, *A History of the Arab State of Zanzibar*, "Studies in East African History", London, 1987, pp. 28-29.

from abroad (Tabora – a key site on the commercial route towards the heart of the continent – practically became an Arab town with a considerable Asian presence). Thus, as stated above, profound differences developed between the cultural identities of the islands, on the one hand, and the continent on the other, where, from the third decade of the 19th century onwards, the opening up of caravan routes wrought deep changes in economic, social and cultural terms. Naturally, hand in hand with the growth of the plantations went an ever-increasing demand for slaves. In 1811, of the 15,000 slaves that arrived on Zanzibar, 7,000 were destined for labour on the *mashamba*.²⁷ By 1822 the plants had grown to a height of roughly four and a half metres.

1.3 Spirit possession and Islam

In Zanzibar and Pemba (*Unguja*), the role of Islam certainly represented a background setting of a scenario where mercantile interests of numerous people involved, and their rules, imposed themselves and, during certain period of time, prevailed.²⁸ Moreover, the proximity of the two islands to the East African mainland provided with an ideal strategic position for trade between the East African interior and the Indian Ocean²⁹; in this regard, we agree with S. Reese, when he presented and developed the challenging studies of Islam in Sub-Saharan East Africa, and their multiple characteristics and different issues³⁰. Consequently, the methodological approach to the subject of the role of the *waganga* within local Muslim societies of Zanzibar and Pemba during colonial times will try to focus on the attempt towards the use of the available anthropological sources, combined as much as possible with the historical material. At the same time, we are aware of the inextricable nets that are still bounding many studies on Sub-Saharan East Africa. The *waganga* (sing. *mganga*), from the verb *kuganga* means to heal, are doctors, healers. As already stated above, the *waganga*'s role within Swahili society occupy an important place, since for a long time Zanzibar and Pemba islands have been singled out as the proverbial abode of witchcraft. Although, throughout colonial period, witchcraft featured in racist and imperialist constructions of alterity and inferiority as projected onto members of East African societies. Therefore, it was very easy associating the *waganga* role with the lower strata of Swahili society, such as people of subordinate status, often explained as compensation for frustration and alternative means of achieving social status and power. But it remains a fact that along the Swahili coast, magic cults and spirit possession rituals did cross ethnic, social, and religious boundaries.

²⁷ M.R. Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: Roots of British Domination*, London, 1992, p. 128.

²⁸ B. Nicolini, *The First Sultan of Zanzibar. Scrambling for Power and Trade in the Nineteenth Century Indian Ocean*, M. Wiener, Princeton, 2012.

²⁹ J.C. Wilkinson, *Imamate Tradition of Oman*, Cambridge, 1987, p. 57.

³⁰ S.S. Reese (Ed.), *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa*, Leiden, 2004, pp. 1-14.

With regards to magical practices in general, according to H. Holland, traditional East Africa trusted in the inherent good of worldly existence, destiny was linked to actions; misfortune was not a matter of chance but was associated with the ire of the ancestors' spirits or the evils of witchcraft.³¹

Ritual specialists, known as *waganga* are mainly divided in: 1) *waganga* of the book; 2) *waganga pepo* or *sheitani*, of the spirit; 3) *waganga* of the head; 4) *waganga* who use plants as medicines.³² On Zanzibar and Pemba islands these types frequently changed these different characteristics. The *juju* world was centred around the doctor or *waganga*. Generally *waganga* were old men, in East Africa usually in traditional Arab dress, who were known, either by claim or reputation, to command the power of the spirits. People from many different areas of East Africa visited the *waganga* from time to time to seek a cure to a mental or physical ailment. And the close links between the so-called East African traditional religions and Islam, did constitute a major issue within Swahili history in an often contradictory relationship.

In the Islamic tradition, male adepts were members of the order of the *waganga*, and often served as spiritual leaders of their villages. Women were forbidden from holding such a position of influence and power: they had their own order, the *kibuki*. The lore of both these orders was identical, the lore of Kilwa, and knowledge was transferred by oral tradition. Spells were normally cast using a fetish such as the *nkisi*, a doll; though some sorcerers like the *kibuki* performed rituals and spells into dance as an aid to casting. More powerful adepts of the orders were also trained in the *Sabean Lore*, transferred by oral tradition. The medicine of the *waganga* was closely tied to *nkisi* bundles, typically dolls made from sticks or straw. Larger *nkisi nkonde*, figures of wood, were used for oath taking on the village level. Nails and similar pointed objects were driven into the figure to seal a pact between two or more individuals. In addition, the diviners commonly used hallucinogenic drugs to facilitate their communication with the spirit world. *Waganga* could be asked to call up good and bad spells. Good medicine was needed for the cure of an ailment, depression, loneliness, unhappiness or bad luck.

The darker side surrounded requested for bad medicine, which often demanded the *waganga* to cast a spell to extract revenge or to send bad fortune in order to seek repayment for cheating or to placate a jealousy. Stories abounded of bad luck befalling East African families: children falling down stairs, fishing boats being lost at sea, sickness plaguing a household year after year and the ghosts of long dead Arab merchants being seen still wandering around their houses at night. The reason for this bad fortune was that the household had been cursed and the Arab tradition of leaving sacrifices for the spirits on the roof of their house had been neglected. When the tradition was reinstated: great dishes of chicken's blood and fruit were left in special rooms on the roof of each building, the spirits would become quiet once more. They might even protect the house from ill-fortune if they were suitably propitiated. Another method employed to fend off evil spirits from a house was to hire *kibuki* dancers. These were all women groups, led typically by a wizened old woman, who

³¹ H. Holland, *African Magic Traditional ideas that heal a continent*, London, 2003, pp. 7-on.

³² I. Hasani, *The Medicine Man: Swifu ya Nguvumali*. P. Lienhardt, ed. and trans. Oxford, 1968.

was approached and invited to visit the house on a particular day. When the day arrived, the women came to lunch and were then traditionally given imported liquor before being invited to dance. The women, who become increasingly intoxicated with liquor and perhaps also with strong nutmeg preparations, started the dance, wielding their spears, singing and clapping with increasing speed and aggression until they could dance no more, ensuring with their energy that the spirits had been repulsed. It is clear how these rituals were in open conflict with the Koran and, as such, considered illegal by Islamic authorities.

The Swahili people were able to seamlessly blend numerous foreign influences into their bloodline, their language, their music and their culture, so the people did blend their adoption of the Islamic faith with their traditional belief. Obviously, the ‘blending’ process was not always peaceful, and not without sometimes heavy consequences on the political and institutional history of the two islands.³³

On the east coast of *Unguja* there was a secret sect known as the *wachawi*, who had the power to evoke strong and powerful *juju* and who were feared and respected throughout the islands. The *wachawi* met at night, out in the bush, where they danced. They were able to take on the form of any animal or bird, which they did to aid their cover. The greatest of the *wachawi* powers was the ability to bring people back from the dead – a skill that requested huge sums of money – and accounts were commonplace of families burying their dead and then being contacted by the *wachawi* years later to be told that the deceased should have been returned for a sum, and of midnight meetings and relatives returning, pale, shocked and speechless, having seen the walking dead.

Juju is African black magic³⁴. A belief in a powerful spirit world. A tradition of worship, sacrifice, spells, medicines and cures, the strength of which is drawn from the intensity of the belief and fear of its subjects.

Regarding *jinn*, among the Swahili, spirits were called by several different names, among them: *sheitani*, *pepo*, *jini*.³⁵ The use of these terms is obviously problematic. Some use the terms interchangeably, but others distinguish them as separate types. They were simultaneously general terms and specific types, one can refer to any spirit as *jini* or to a specific type of spirit, a *jini* proper. Part of the problem is that the terms *jini* and *sheitani* derive from Arabic terms. Thus their local interpretation is affected by Islamic and Middle Eastern concepts, which have been adopted to various degrees by the Swahili, depending on their literacy, Islamic training, or religious tolerance of the spirit world. *Sheitani* comes from the Arabic word for *Satan*, devil, whereas *jini* comes from the Arabic word that refers to invisible beings, either helpful or harmful. *Pepo* on the other hand is the non-Arabic term for spirits, which also means wind. In local usage, it is often erroneous to

³³ F. Becker, *Islamic Reform and Historical Change in the Care of the Dead: Conflicts Over Funerary Practice Among Tanzanian Muslims*, “Africa”, 79, 2009, pp. 416-434.

³⁴ J. Middleton, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Curing*, Austin, 1977.

³⁵ L. Mackenrodt, *Swahili Spirit Possession and Islamic Healing in Contemporary Tanzania. The Jinn fly on Friday*, Hamburg, Verlag, 2011.

translate *sheitani* as devil or demon since there need not be any evil nature implied. The majority of local people used *sheitani* and *pepo* interchangeably, but some tended to use *pepo* more for those spirits which were given *ngoma*: dances/celebrations with drumming.³⁶ *Majini* were more likely to be distinguished as a separate type than the other two terms, although it might also be used as a general term for spirit. A *jini* proper was often described as a term for an Arab or Middle Eastern in ethnicity and often as living in the sea. Unlike *pepo* or *masheitani*, they had a religion (*wana dini*), either Islam or Christianity, although there were pagan *jini*. There was a general notion that *jini* were much more powerful than other types of spirits. They were often noted as living in the sky/heavens, above other types of spirits. The upper/lower distinction had moral implications as the most powerful *jini* were said to be (*ma*)*ruhani*, a very religious type of spirit that lived high in the heavens. They often had *masheitani/pepo* as servants. The power of *jini* however was not always seen in religious terms. *Majini* were often distinguished from other types of spirits in that *wanafugwa*, they were kept/bred by people like domestic animals, for private gain that bordered on witchcraft. Many people conceived of such *jini* as a special type, *majini*. And the multiple connections with the Horn of Africa and the Persian/Arab Gulf were very noticeable, since such *jini* were kept in special rooms, chests, or bottles, and could bring their owners special wealth and fortune.³⁷ However, they were also very dangerous. They requested blood sacrifices and if not forthcoming, they could drink the blood of family members, causing illness or death. There was the idea that the most powerful *jini* demanded human blood and thus their owner had to make a human sacrifice. A spirit could be inherited, it could simply be a person and want them as their associate, it may possess anyone who passed its haunts (large trees, rocks, caves, seashore, etc.), or it might be sent through witchcraft to harm someone. And the deep involvement of these spiritual presences in Swahili society represented one of the strongest elements that crossed and influenced different cultures and religions.³⁸

Obviously, a visit to a *waganga* was a very serious experience. These men had a great influence on people, they had the power to call up the spirits of the dead and to bring their wrath down upon whom they chose.

³⁶ The use of drums was prohibited during the 19th century by Islamic rulers along the East African coast; the sound of the drums was linked to slavery but also to freedom and revenge against institutional powers.

³⁷ In numerous desert and rural areas of the Indian Ocean littorals and regions the presence of a *jinn* is marked with small piles of stones along the main streets, so that people travelling can be aware of their locations. This habit is repeated also on the European Dolomites, but with different meanings. Obviously the *jinn* follow Swahili people all over the world, they are part of the global diaspora integration processes as described by L. Mackenrodt.

³⁸ L. Giles, *Sociocultural Change and Spirit Possession on the Swahili Coast of East Africa*, "Anthropological Quarterly", vol. 68, no. 2, pp. 89-106; Ibid., *The Dialectic of Spirit Production: A Cross-Cultural Dialogue*, "Mankind Quarterly", XXIX (a), 1989, pp. 245-262; Ibid., *Possession Cults on the Swahili Coast: A Re-Examination of Theories of Marginality*, "Africa", vol. 57, (2), 1987, pp. 234-258; Ibid., *Spirit Possession and the Symbolic Construction of Swahili Society*, in, H. Behrend, U. Luig (Eds.), *Spirit Possession Modernity and Power in Africa*, Madison, 1999, pp. 142-164.

Walking into the *waganga*'s village was a memorable and frightening event, and only after wives and helpers had welcomed and the consultant sat down he or she began to feel more confident.³⁹

When the *waganga* arrived, a shudder went down the spine. The *mganga* was often an old Swahili, in a long white robe (white, red and black are the colours of the waswahili rituals) and skullcap, his bloodshot eyes and ragged grey beard standing out from his wrinkled face. He asked why did you come and listened to your speak, nodding his head and scratching his beard in understanding. The *waganga* took out a piece of burning charcoal from the fire and placed it in a *chetezo* cup, along with some herbs and soon the room was filled with a pungent, smoky odour. He was then covered with sheet by his helper. Soon, the sheet started to shake and the *waganga* spoke in a mysterious language. His words and his movements become faster and faster, until suddenly he sat bolt upright, the sheet falling to one side to reveal a tortured face, bloodshot eyes wide, beads of sweat on his brow and face contorted into a silent scream. Then he felt down.

After a period of recovery, the *waganga* pulled out a book – his magic manual. The corners were thumbed and yellowed. After flicking through for a minute, he paused and pointed to a page, passed on it with a wizened finger. He told to wait in another room. In the last shaft of light before he slammed the door closed, one could see an altar with a human skull at the centre, with a small bottle in its mouth. By the time his wife re-opened the door, the *waganga* had mixed a medicine on a silver plate. He divided this into two small piles, one of which he wrapped in a cloth and gave it to you to wear around your neck. He then got up and told to be followed.

Out through the forest at the back of his *shamba* he walked, until he halted at a lone baobab tree. The tree had hundreds of nails hammered into its trunk and hundreds of shreds of cloth hanging from its branches. He indicated to lie up against the trunk and take off the dresses, as he produced a razor blade. He slashed across both sides of the chest and collected the first trickles of blood on the silver tray. Mixing the blood and medicine together with his fingers, he pushed the red herbs across the open wounds, making them sting and burn. On the journey back the fear of the experience was compensated by the confidence in the good effects of the cure. This is a clear explanation of the numerous influences and cultures within Swahili contemporary society.

³⁹ www.allaboutzanzibar.com/indepth/culture/1-juju.htm.

Conclusions

Along the East African coast where slavery, colonial powers and Islam crossed local cultures, history and supernatural powers, Pemba Island, as already stated, was identified as the homeland of the most powerful spirits and witches. The human body became a vehicle for the spirit, and manifestation occurred through illness, bad luck, or other misfortunes. The origin of the spirit was both religious and geographical. Treatment required the local specialist: the *mganga*. Spirits were representative of the numerous socio-cultural elements composing Swahili society, where the boundaries were extremely permeable. Islam and European presence in East Africa did fight against magical practices in Zanzibar and Pemba both during the 19th and the 20th centuries. Although there were common elements between the developing of local Islam and African traditions, often the result of Islamic and British influence in colonial times was that many African people no longer believed in magic.⁴⁰ One of the reasons was that the financial and personal involvement could become too heavy, together with the modernization processes that brought into some sectors of the traditional East African societies western values and capitalist economy. Nevertheless, during the first half of the 20th century there was a majority of male possession in Zanzibar, although the majority of clients were females, a clear sign of social and economic as well as cultural discriminations. The New Year ceremonies, that have close links to Persian religious traditions (*Nauruzi - Mwaka kogwa*) in Pemba were an event also for spirit purifications. Like in many other areas of East Africa, Ethiopia, Sudan, political authorities banned the ceremonies into towns and villages and prohibited the use of alcohol and music, fully aware of the population's consent and aggregation power.⁴¹

Besides spirit presence on the islands and on the coast, there were numerous connections also with the East African interior. And one of the obvious reasons was the southern slave trade route that spread possession cults among many tribes such as Yao, Makonde and Makua.

The presence of the *waganga* – a traditional mean of power within local East African society – and their relationships with Islam have been closely interlinked through centuries. Colonial experiences often exasperated this figure in an open conflict with the political local authorities.

The creation and the development of the Swahili civilization, a kaleidoscopic society, gradually led to a highly stratified organisation where, at different times,

⁴⁰ “My *mganga* is my job now” interview with an informant, Zanzibar, 2005.

⁴¹ B. Nicolini, *Some Thoughts on the Magical Practice of the Zār along the Red Sea in the Sudan*, in J. Starkey (Ed.), *People of the Red Sea*, Oxford, BAR, 2005, pp. 157-161; “Zār”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2013; L. Giles, “Spirit Possession: Sub-Saharan Africa, Introduction”, *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*. General Editor Suad Joseph. Brill Online, 2013; S.T. Mallery, *Zar possession as psychiatric diagnosis: Problems and possibilities*, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Psychology, 1998; A. Arieli, and S. Aychen, “Mental disease related to belief in being possessed by the “Zar” spirit”, *Harefuah*, 126, no. 11, 1994, pp. 636-42.

Arab *kiarabu* prevailed on African *kipemba*, and vice-versa. The progressive decline of the use of *waganga* for spirit possessions from East African people was due to numerous causes, among the many, the high costs of the practices and the ongoing process of modernization which led to a growing presence of Islam and western values in Swahili society and a decisive weakness of the past strength of the *waganga* and of their spirits. No doubt interdisciplinary research is still open on these issues, as apparently we are experiencing a ten year gap in recent studies and theories. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that the East African coast, today is traditionally preserving its magical practices and its strong energies together with their innumerable contradictions.

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Abbreviations

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A.G.G. : Agent to the Governor-General

B.A. : Balochistan Archives, Quetta, Pakistan

C.O.Q.D.A. : Commissioner of Quetta Archives, Pakistan

H.S.A. : Home Secretariat Archives, Quetta, Pakistan

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