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## **The Jinn fly on Friday. On spiritual healing practices of the Swahili coastal people in contemporary Tanzania.**

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### **Abstract**

In diesem Artikel werden die traditionellen HeilerInnen der muslimisch geprägten Swahiliküste als Teil eines großteils institutionalisierten, panafrikanischen sowie global-muslimischen Heilernetzwerkes vorgestellt. Dabei sind die Wurzeln des spirituellen Heilwissens, welches Geisterbesessenheitspraktiken umfasst, tief in der monotheistischen Lehre des Islam verankert. Dennoch gilt es die lokale emische Weltanschauung im Rahmen des spezifischen soziokulturellen Hintergrunds der Swahiliküste zu kontextualisieren. Die Dichotomie des arabischen sowie afrikanischen Erbes spielt dabei eine besondere Rolle und wird demzufolge auch in den Besessenheitsritualen wiedergespiegelt. Als Teil eines pluralistischen medizinischen Systems sind die Heilrituale insofern keine Antithese zur Moderne sondern ein Beitrag zur Bewältigung derselben.

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## 1. Introduction

This article is based on a research<sup>1</sup> which I conducted between July and October 2003 as well as on a short restudy period of four weeks in 2004. Data was collected as part of a university excursion titled "Krankheit, Heilung und Religion" under the guidance of Prof. Ute Luig and Dr. Hansjörg Dilger of the 'Institut für Ethnologie' at the 'Freie Universität Berlin'. Conducting fieldwork, I mainly resided in the port-city of Tanga. Additionally, I had the chance to travel to neighbouring villages and the interior regions as well as to Zanzibar Island to collect valuable information on the emic perspective regarding Swahili Islam and spirit possession.

In Tanga, Tanzania's third-largest town and second-largest seaport located in the north-eastern part of the country, as well as along the Swahili coast in general, the existence of spirits is, from an emic point of view, as real as the existence of human beings, animals, trees, cars or the ocean.

Moreover, my Swahili<sup>2</sup> informants did not describe them as some figment of the imagination, but as part of empirical, material reality. In fact, daily life in Tanga and Zanzibar is absolutely imbued with the presence of spirits. Publications by various authors confirm this (Larsen 1995, Caplan 1997, Behrend/Luig 1999, Kim 2001, Lewis 2003). This paper embeds these local beliefs which include notions of spirit possession in the context of a pluralistic medical system and Islamic healing practices. It then lines out their importance for the local population in terms of history, identity, religion, power and healing.

In order to discuss these phenomena, we need to define the subject matter. This has been convincingly done by Boddy:

Spirit possession commonly refers to the hold exerted over a human being by external forces or entities more powerful than she. These forces may be ancestors or divinities, ghosts of foreign origin, or entities both ontologically and ethnically alien. Some societies

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<sup>1</sup> See Mackenrodt (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Here, the term Swahili refers to African Muslim coastal inhabitants who speak Swahili. This definition shall not cover up the fact that scholars argue again and again about an exact definition of what constitutes "really" being Swahili (Giles 1999:145). Widely accepted definitions include those of Pouwels (1987) and Brenner (1993). For a slightly different approach see Kim (2001).



evinced multiple spirit forms. Depending on cultural and etiological contexts such spirits may be exorcised, or lodged in relatively permanent relationship with their host (or medium), occasionally usurping primacy of place in her body (even donning their own clothes and speaking their own languages) during bouts of possession trance. (Boddy 1994:407).

Despite being perceived as being one of the classical research topics of social and cultural anthropology, I am content to announce that spirit possession is a *modern* topic. Recent publications titled "Power & Modernity" (Behrend/Luig 1999) and "Magic & Modernity" (Meyer/Pels 2003) show that spirit possession cults and related practices are modern phenomena and have thus taken possession and ritual healing out of the dusty corner of former old-style religious studies. Moreover, spirit possession cults flourish all over the world and are not limited to indigenous ethnic groups:

One intriguing experience of modernity is that spirit possession cults are proliferating all over the world, not only in African, Asian and Caribbean countries [...], but also in the midst of New York [...], Toronto [...] and various towns in Europe. (Behrend/Luig 1999:xiii).

Evidently then, spirit possession and traditional healing are highly relevant topics in these current times of globalisation and trans-national discourses.

Relating Swahili practices to contemporary manifestations of Islam, this paper intends to outline some aspects of the indigenous Swahili world-view<sup>3</sup> and the way it is manifested in the spirit world, in the biographies of traditional healers, and in their rituals. Notions of African traditional healing (in particular spirit possession practices), range all the way from total disbelief or ignorance, to sceptical interest, and romantic transfigurations. This article does not intend to judge Swahili beliefs in any of these ways. For Lewis reminds us:

The anthropologist's task is to discover what people believe in, and to relate their beliefs operationally to other aspects of their culture and society. He has neither the skills nor the

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<sup>3</sup> World-view: Neither scholars nor native speakers agree upon the spelling of this term. While both 'world view' and 'worldview' is found in anthropological literature, I use 'world-view' in accordance with the dictionary ([www.dict.leo.org](http://www.dict.leo.org), Access on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006).



authority to pronounce upon the absolute 'truth' of ecstatic manifestations in different cultures. (Lewis 2003:24).

## 2. Swahili spirit possession rituals on the East African coast

Having emphasised this as a prerequisite for my paper, we should be fairly well equipped to turn our focus to the Swahili context. Swahili spirit possession rituals on the East African coast have developed in relation to a vibrant history, with its "historical predicament of the seaside towns as heavily immigrant communities which stood on the frontiers of continental African and trans-oceanic cultures" (Pouwels 1987:2)<sup>4</sup>. In this context, scholars have been controversially debating as to how far Swahili culture has been primarily inspired by black African or by Arab heritage, and arguments for both sides have been proposed (Pouwels 1987:ix and Kim 2001:21-31). The dichotomy between Arab and African heritage is not merely a category created by western scholars, but derives from the emic perspective<sup>5</sup>. The question of heritage is a very delicate one, if one keeps the slave-trade in mind, where Arab Muslims were initially amongst the major agents and Africans the major victims<sup>6</sup>. Pouwels emphasizes the equilibrium of African and Arab heritage to avoid "perpetuating the old fallacy that non-Africans have been the most important actors on the stage of coastal history," for he considers such a presentation "yet another 'colonialist' view of African history" (Pouwels 1987:ix). At the same time, he points out that recent efforts to highlight the African

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<sup>4</sup> For details on the trans-oceanic history see Grube (2007).

<sup>5</sup> The emic dichotomy becomes very obvious in spirit possession rituals (Mackenrodt 2006).

<sup>6</sup> While slavery has been practised in Africa throughout recorded history, its greatest expansion in East Africa occurred with the rise of Islam, which prohibits the enslavement of Muslims (although "being Muslim" is not a fixed status but can become subject to negotiation in this particular context). Moreover, demands of European plantation holders on the islands of Mauritius and Réunion also contributed significantly to the trade. While slaves were initially taken from the coastal regions and shipped to Arabia, Persia and the Indian Ocean Islands, the slave traders made their way further inland as demand increased. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, slaves were taken from as far inland as Congo. Those slaves who were not shipped to the Middle East were to work on clove plantations in the Zanzibar Archipelago itself (Fitzpatrick 2002:146). As time passed, many of the slaves who had remained in the coastal area were assimilated into Swahili society (Giles 1999:146). This paper does not dwell on the colonial period; yet this shall not downplay the atrocities that have occurred.



heritage of Swahili culture tend to deny the imported non-African features - thus being "as extreme a position as the old one" (ibid. 1987:2).

One important feature that unites members of diverse Swahili communities is the overarching monotheism of Islam. About 30% of the Tanzanian population are Muslims, who have mainly settled along the coast and on the islands Zanzibar and Pemba.

Dealing with spirit possession in a Muslim society, the question as to how far the notion of spirits is based on – or antithetic with – Islamic theology is frequently raised. To discuss this question, the primary written sources of Islam (Koran and Hadith) must be brought into consideration. Both the Koran and the Hadith refer to the existence of *jinn*<sup>7</sup>. It is therefore very likely that notions of an entire spirit world, which includes several kinds of celestial entities, has been in place since the early days of Islam and even in pre-Islamic societies. This indicates a duality of the living world: a human world and a *jinn* world. *Jinn* appear to behave and act similarly to human beings in many ways and are attributed with characteristics quite close to those of humans: They can be male or female, Muslim, Christian, Jewish or pagan, evil or benign; they can be of low or high status, willing or not willing to marry, hungry or thirsty, ugly or attractive, greedy or satisfied (Hentschel 1997:44-64). The human and the *jinn* world can even intermingle to the extent that a person is considered to be in a sexual relationship or marriage with a *jini*. Most Muslims also know very well where *jinn* prefer to live or wander about, e.g. near caves, trees or by the water. References to spirits and to humans are frequently made in one and the same Sura, as the following example shows:

Und die Dschinn und die Welt der Menschen habe ich nur dazu erschaffen, daß sie mir dienen. (Koran, Sura 51 as quoted in Hentschel 1997:9).

Kim notes that "almost the same stories of jinn are discovered throughout Muslim societies, although the cultural features related to the belief in jinn differ from society to society." (Kim 1999:103). All scholars at hand who have analyzed the usage of *jinn* in the Koran have pointed out that "it can be noted that the Qur'anic meaning of the word *jinn* is rather negative"

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<sup>7</sup> In English I will use "jini" as the singular form, and "jinns" as the plural form.



(Kim 1999:104. Also see Conrad (2002), Hentschel (1997)). Therefore, many Muslims are united by a general fear of the unpredictable powers of *jinn*<sup>8</sup>.

It can be summarized that no matter how the belief in *jinn* may have originated or how it may have been adapted to local contexts, it is apparent that the existence of spirits is a reality for the great majority of Muslim people (Kim 2001:102). This is true even for those who believe that rituals performed to get in touch with these entities are *sihr* (magic), and therefore against the principles of orthodox Islam (Hentschel 1997:69). The fact that a minority of scholars have interpreted Islamic texts relating to spirits and the possibility of spirit possession symbolically – as the hidden forces or evil capacities in man – have therefore not had further consequences on religious practices. Symbolic interpretations of the *jinn* phenomenon are generally rejected by the great majority of Muslims as well as by most orthodox Sunni scholars (Kim 2001:113).

In addition to the belief in Koranic *jinn*, Muslim societies also share the knowledge of traditional Islamic medicine. This form of medicine, which is used in complementary with western biomedicine, has its intellectual center at Al-Azhar-University in Cairo (see Conrad 2002:44f) and involves spirit possession rituals, exorcism, and healing with Koranic water.

As a result, Swahili traditional healers and their spirit cults are far from being an isolated phenomenon, for, as Giles notes, "Swahili spirit beliefs and practices show many similarities to those found in other African, and particularly sub-Saharan Islamic, societies" (1995:90). Yet Swahili spirits - albeit their obvious parallels to Koranic spirits - need to be analysed in the context of Swahili world-view. A key aspect in understanding Swahili cosmology is the fact that most spirits are not divided into clearly opposed groups of either "good" or "evil." Rather, Swahili spirits are perceived to being highly ambivalent beings that may appear - to varying degrees - both beneficial and malevolent and Swahili practitioners stress their positive as well as negative sides (Giles 1995:95). Since in Swahili culture, spiritual healing and

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<sup>8</sup> The generally negative connotation of *jinn* is the main reason why many Muslims are scared to talk about their experiences with spirits after dusk. Entering a conversation about spirits, some use the Arabic "Basmala" ("bi-smillahi r-rahmani r-rahim", also see Hentschel 1997:45) for protection.



physical well-being are regarded as two sides of the same coin, it is the traditional healer who offers patients her expertise concerning spirit matters.

As Kleinman emphasizes, patients and healers are in the center of complex and specific configurations of cultural meanings and social relationships. It is therefore of prime importance to study the practices of traditional healers in order to understand local health care systems (Kleinman 1980:24ff).

In Tanga, the healers are addressed by the Swahili term *waganga*, *waganga kienyeji*<sup>9</sup> or labelled as "witchdoctors"<sup>10</sup> in the colloquial sense. *Waganga* play an important role in Tanzanian society and treat people from all social backgrounds; not only in the village context but also in urban centers such as Dar es Salaam. There is hardly a family in Tanzania that does not know of at least one person amongst the extended kin group who has some kind of expert knowledge or another in treating the ill. Although there are dispensaries and hospitals that offer biomedical treatment, it is by far not unusual to consult one of those experts when suffering from all sorts of pains, skin diseases, indigestion, nightmares, cramps, melancholy, insomnia or infertility (Siege 1993: 92 and Conrad 2002: 44). *Waganga* are also helpful in soothing other troubles: a young woman who wants to get married but has not yet found her future husband or a man whose business appears to be in decline, may also seek the help of a *mganga*.

### 3. Traditional healers

Traditional healers are far from being a homogenous group in Tanzania. Their importance across the country can nevertheless be generalized (Gessler et al. 1995:145).

To handle the large number of Tanzanian healers, *CHAWATIATA*, the *chama cha waganga na wakunga wa tiba asilia Tanzania*, in English called TATHEPA, Tanzanian Traditional Health

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<sup>9</sup> *Kienyeji*: adverb, traditional → *Waganga kienyeji*: traditional healers. The term *mganga* is - with slight adaptations - current throughout the extensive Bantu area of closely related languages, which includes the Swahili coast and large parts of central and southern Africa (Geschiere 2003:164).

<sup>10</sup> This does not necessarily include a pejorative notion, although colonial influences are likely. Geschiere affirms the frequent use of the term (Geschiere 2003:163f).



Practitioners' Association was founded in December 1995 by the ministry of home affairs in Dar es Salaam. This is the umbrella organization that unites all certified traditional healers in Tanzania. *CHAWATIATA* is a sub-group of a global community of traditional healers who have first joined together in 1971 when the non governmental organization PROMETRA<sup>11</sup> – PROMotion de la MEDicine TRAditionelle – was founded in Dakar, Senegal. In 2003, the Tanga branch counted 626 registered members, 2/3 of them male. There was a Christian minority of less than 100 members, proving the dominance of Muslim healers in Swahili society. 420 were herbalists, 522 used *tunguri*<sup>12</sup> and 126 *kitabū*<sup>13</sup>. 215 *waganga* also worked as traditional birth attendants (*wakunga*)<sup>14</sup>. Many healers use multiple techniques: a *kitabū*-expert is likely to also work with *tunguri*, for example<sup>15</sup>.

Until someone can present himself at the institutional level of Tanga's Municipality and become an authorized healer with a certificate from *CHAWATIATA*, he has to pass through several stages of suffering and learning. Looking at the family histories of healers, it is standard to find one or several *waganga* in the grandparents' generation. Further, it is a widespread phenomenon that a future *mganga* already differs from his siblings during pregnancy. In these cases, it is always the mother of the baby who feels very early that her

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<sup>11</sup> PROMETRA is dedicated to the “preservation and restoration of African traditional medicine and indigenous science.” Its first objective was “to separate true healers from charlatans.” PROMETRA “advocates for the legalization of traditional medicine” and fights biopiracy by demanding “the intellectual property rights protection of indigenous knowledge.” Moreover, PROMETRA intends to “build bridges between Africa and the black diaspora” spread throughout the world by organizing cultural exchanges and study tours. They also offer workshops for the interested western student or academic by sending representatives to conferences such as the annual ETHNOMED conference in Munich, Germany. In addition to its headquarter in Dakar, PROMETRA has become an international organization which has 22 officially registered chapter organizations throughout Africa and the world. Quotations and information are taken from <[www.prometra.org](http://www.prometra.org)> (Access on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> *Tunguri* is a kind of gourd used by healers to keep medicine and spirits. A herbalist (*mtalamu wa mitishamaba*) not involved with spirit possession also uses *tunguri* to store smashed plants.

<sup>13</sup> *Kitabu* (Swahili: book) refers to healers whose methods involve the use of the Koran.

<sup>14</sup> My gratitude to Andrea Schultz for this personal communication, February 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the numbers do not add up to a total of 626 members.





child will be special. Yet the most common initial manifestation of one or several embodied spirit(s) is indicated when a person (female or male) suffers from an array of physical problems to what seems to be a mental illness. During this period, they do not act accordingly to the general code of their society's conduct. This state of illness, often described as being "crazy," can only be overcome if one accepts the fact that one has been chosen by the spirits to become a *mganga*. It can take years for the "crazy" or possessed person to give in to the spirits' wishes. The more the chosen one fights the spirits, the more fiercely they threaten her with death or horrible and eternal possessed states. The pressure can be increased when other family members or healer colleagues support the wishes of the spirits, thus intensifying the personal psychological pressure of the possessed individual. Therefore, being chosen to become a professional spiritual medium is not only a blessing or a gift, but also a painful experience to be endured (Vitebsky 2001:56f, Caplan 1997:189-192, Giles 1987:246).

In a nutshell, a healer's biography could be defined along the following lines: in the beginning, the road to the role of healer passes through more or less continuous and bravely endured afflictions. After an extended period of dreams, visions and learning, this road eventually leads to spiritual strength and grace, sometimes even combined with fame and fortune. Lewis has shown how the individual adept passes through three Van Gennepian phases in order to reach mastery of the spirits (Lewis 2003:60f). The first phase begins with involuntary and uncontrolled spirit possession, followed by a process of domestication. In the third phase, the healer has eventually mastered control over the spirits and has attained voluntary communication with them. During these phases, the individual is transformed from *patient* to *healer* (see figures in Lewis 1996:118f).

Obviously, a Swahili healer – as opposed to many western shamans of esoteric movements – does not voluntarily choose to become a medium but obeys the wishes of his possessive spirits.

In this context, it has often been criticised that western stereotypes describe "the African" as a human being constantly confronted and in touch with spirits, magic, sorcery, or simply, "supernatural" powers. Therefore, I would like to point out that although the great majority of Swahili people I know frequently consult spiritual healers, quite a few individuals avoid contact with healers or are critical or suspicious towards them for a variety of reasons. Yet even those people usually acknowledge the power of both the healers and the spirits, and their



avoidance of the rituals actually proves the latter, for they fear of becoming possessed in such an atmosphere (Giles 1995:93). It is evident that all Swahili have either personal experiences to share, or know of someone in their close or extended kinship who has had encounters – be they good or evil – with spirits or related phenomena. It seems that some white, western, educated, post-enlightenment academics or anti-racism activists who want to defend indigenous cultures and describe them as "not so different from us after all" do that by diminishing the meaning of spirits in these indigenous societies. While their intentions are good, I tend to believe that these people are labouring under a misapprehension. For what seems to be at first a passionate defence against racist notions actually admits that they still have not overcome the generalized notion that the idea of a spirit world which influences people as directly as in spirit possession phenomena is way beyond the means of rational thinking and logical western world-view.

Yet, if we look at belief systems all over the world, it is actually only a minority of people who do not share the world-view and body concepts necessary for the phenomenon of embodying spirits. Erika Bourguignon's widely quoted statistical findings suggest that the world-view of the great majority of the global population includes notions of spirit possession: Bourguignon found out that 74 percent of 488 societies have one or more forms of possession belief (Bourguignon quoted in Larsen 1995:17).

#### **4. How do Swahili people experience spirit possession and when does it take place?**

But how do Swahili people actually experience spirit possession and when does it take place?

First of all, a possessed individual is initiated into a specific cult group. In Swahili, the cults are called *kilinge*. For the Swahili setting, it is of special interest that the cults are composed by a strikingly heterogeneous range of people. My observations confirm those of Basu<sup>16</sup> and Giles:

I found all social categories in the cult, including those from highly respected, well-educated or economically well-off families. I also found representatives from various

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<sup>16</sup> Personal communication with Prof. Helene Basu, fall 2005.



racial and ethnic backgrounds, running the full continuum from "Arab" to "African", as well as from various age groups (including several young people who had travelled and studied in Europe). This was true at both the level of *waganga* and that of regular cult members. (Giles 1987:242).

Many of these cult relationships, in fact, are expressed in the idiom of kinship (Giles 1987:248). As a result, a healer has two families: First, there is one family which is formed by a healer's *biological* kin. Secondly, there is the other family which is one of *constructed* kinship. These two families do not necessarily overlap, though in reality it happened frequently amongst my informants in Tanga. Although this certainly holds room for conflicts<sup>17</sup>, the *uganga*-family can be defined as a form of *communitas* in the sense of Turner (see Turner 2000) or as a form of "group therapy" in the sense of Lewis (2003:80) or Crapanzano (1981:252). Regarding the urban Swahili setting, Giles has referred to the supportive social effect of the cult activities:

I also found that the cult plays an important service by providing members with a close-knit kin group or "family" for support in a heterogeneous and complex social setting, especially in urban areas [...]. In addition to their interaction during cult ceremonies, a number of cult members can at times also be found visiting together at the *manga's* house. [...] Cult members often visit one another's homes, attend the major public functions of one another's families (marriages, funerals, etc.) and otherwise support each other. (Giles 1987:247f).

As I said earlier, most scholars point out that being possessed or called by one's spirits can be a rather unpleasant experience: "Possession does bring real affliction. Possession is expensive, time-consuming, embarrassing, and physically painful" (Lambek 1981:53). Yet in addition, it is evident that spirit possession, through its formation of cult groups, also involves entertainment, amusement, jokes and laughter. Once spirit and host are permanently associated in a respective cult group, rituals offer *furaha* (joy), for both the spirits and their respective human hosts (Lambek 1981:46, Larsen 1995:289).

There are several reasons for the constructed healer family to meet. Most commonly, healers and patients meet to perform healing séances which include a calling of the spirit(s). These

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<sup>17</sup> For details see Mackenrodt 2006.



so-called "dances for the spirits" can take anything from a few hours to several days. In Tanga, cult groups would usually gather at a healer's house, share a simple, communal lunch<sup>18</sup>, and engage in rituals until the evening.

During the ritual, "the spirits involved represent both the cause and the cure of the illness and/or suffering" (Larsen 1995:17). Concerning spirit possession on the Swahili coast, it is very important to emphasize that the majority of rituals do not involve exorcism – a fact which makes them stand out<sup>19</sup>. As a result, spirits are not chased away during the healing séance. On the contrary, the spirits are appeased and pleased in order to establish a peaceful relationship between them and their seat (*kiti*)<sup>20</sup>. This way of domesticating spirits is labelled "adorcism" by De Heusch and Lewis (Lewis 1996:xii, Boddy 1994:409, Kim 2001:246). Spirit possession rituals are usually called *ngoma ya majini/mashetani*<sup>21</sup>. Literally, *ngoma* means dance or drum and most rituals involve the use of both. While some healers exclusively meet to perform *ngoma*, Koranic healers (*waganga ya kitabu*), begin their meetings with an ecstatic ritual performance called *dhikri*. *Dhikri* is "a ritual characteristic of Sufi brotherhoods, which focuses on the repetitive rhythmic chanting of certain words or

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<sup>18</sup> Except for the leading *mganga*, who eats separately, all participants (men and women) share their meal while sitting together in a group.

<sup>19</sup> Most *jinn* possession rituals in Arabic/Middle Eastern countries involve exorcism (also see Hentschel (1997)). Exorcism is also prevalent in India. (Personal communication with Prof. Basu, fall 2005). As my informants have pointed out, exorcism does take place in Swahili society, but these cases are comparatively rare (also see Giles 1987: 240 or 1995: 90) and therefore not emphasized in this paper.

<sup>20</sup> In most shamanic societies, the possessed individual is metaphorically described as a seat, ship, bottle, vehicle, temple, tabernacle, receptacle etc. for his/her spirit(s) (Lewis 1996: 113). Also see Vitebsky (2001).

<sup>21</sup> *Majini* and *Mashetani* are categories of Swahili spirits (see, e.g., Mackenrodt 2006). Note the Arabic roots and similarities to Koranic vocabulary. It needs to be emphasized, though, that Swahili vocabulary has neither the exact Koranic nor the literal, quotidian Swahili connotation when used as *terminus technicus* in local contexts of possession (Bruchhausen 2004:246). The prime example for this is the troublesome term *shetani* which is still misleadingly interpreted by western Swahili speakers (including Kim 2001:288) – in accordance to dictionaries and monotheistic concepts – as "devil" or "demon." Although *shetani* is sometimes used in the sense of the latter, this translation is "erroneous" (Giles 1987:252) when transferred to the spirit category described here, "since there need not be any evil nature implied" (Giles 1987:252).



formulas in praise of God" (Giles 1987:253). The spirit possession *dhikri*, which is similar to the Sufi ritual of the same name, involves a special kind of breathing technique that leads to hyperventilation and thus to trance. This ecstatic aspect is also confirmed by Giles who states that *dhikri* "involves rhythmic breathing and bodily movements, often leading to trance" (1987: 253)<sup>22</sup>. *Dhikri* performances follow a strict structural framework which includes the recital of *surat-il yassin* and *surat-il fatiha*, several *dua*<sup>23</sup> and *takbira* (prayers) and a calling of the spirits through songs. The texts of these songs include references to locations in Zanzibar and the Middle East. This song (below), which was recorded during a *dhikri* on August 29, 2003, was for a *jini mahaba*<sup>24</sup>. The song is often sung for women who are pregnant but continue having menstrual bleedings. The song is written out of the possessed person's perspective and indicates that the possessed woman has problems in accepting her fate and to please her *jini*, yet has no other choice. Here, the *jini* is metaphorically referred to as *mwana*, child.

Nimepewa mwana<sup>25</sup>

(I was given a child)

Nimepewa mwana kulea

(I was given a child to raise)

Nura siwezi kataa kulea mwana

(I can't refuse to raise the child)

na ulezi wangu wanielelea (x 2)

(and my childraising overwhelms me)

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<sup>22</sup> On trance, see e.g. Lambek (1981:53f).

<sup>23</sup> On the distinction between *salat* and *dua*, and the importance of Arabic prayer terms, see Parkin (2000).

<sup>24</sup> *Jini mahaba*: love spirit. Love spirits interfere with romantic relationships or establish themselves in a cross-sexual relationship with their host. In general, they are associated with sexual desire, jealousy, marriage, fertility and pregnancy.

<sup>25</sup> My gratitude goes to Nele Momber and Mohamed Said Khamis for their valuable assistance with the translations of songs.



Nishatwaa mwana nikapata safari

(I took the child and went on a journey)

Nilipofika shamu mwana kamtuua

(When I arrived in Cham [Damascus] I put the child down)

Sina chakumpa huyo

(I don't have anything to give to him)

Hayo ni mawazo yananisumbua

(These are thoughts that disturb me)

Evidently, *dhikri* represents the Arabic roots and Middle Eastern influences of Swahili culture. This leads us, once again, to the dichotomy Swahili make between "Arabic" and "African". It can therefore be summarized that while *dhikri*, through its ceremonial style (*dhikri*-technique), instrumentation (none, or tambourine), language (Swahili with Zanzibari pronunciation, Arabic), and spirit types (*kiarabu*) represents the Islamic sphere of Swahili society, *ngoma* can be interpreted as its "ceremonial opposition" (Giles 1999: 149): *Ngoma*'s ceremonial style (African music and dance), instrumentation (drums, rattles), language (Swahili and many other non-Arabic) and spirit types (*bara*, *kipemba*, non-Muslim coastal) represent the African heritage of Swahili society (Giles 1999: 149). Giles interprets the fact that the *dhikri* always precedes the *ngoma* as the "symbolic recognition" of the "ideological superiority of the Islamic/Middle Eastern/upper-class element in Swahili culture" (ibid. 1999:150). She continues:

Nonetheless, the *ngoma* clearly does not assume secondary importance in cult practice. In fact, much more time is usually devoted to the *ngoma* than the *dhikri* and the non-Islamic *ngoma* [...] shows a very high degree of elaboration. (Giles 1999:150).

As we have seen, it depends on the spirit type which of the two rituals needs to be conducted. In the following, therefore, I will give a brief description of two very different types of spirits: *Ruhani* (a spirit who requires *dhikri*) and *kimasai* (who requires *ngoma*).



## 5. The two different types of spirits: *Ruhani* and *kimasai*.

In the spirit hierarchy, *ruhani* spirits are the highest, most powerful, and most honourable spirits of the *kiarabu/kiislamu* (Arabic/Muslim) category. The symbolic world of the latter is associated with Islam, Koran, the Middle East (and sometimes North East Africa), urban, coastal and cosmopolitan characteristics (as opposed to rural village culture), the Arabic language, and, in many cases, with the sea (the Indian Ocean).

*Ruhani* "demand that their human partners lead an exemplary Muslim life" (Giles 1987:245). A *mganga* in Tanga specified that it would be best to work with *ruhani* from Thursday midnight until Friday at 2 p.m. – the peak time of weekly Muslim pious devotion. In fact, many Swahili believe that "too many *majini* are flying around at this time" and I was even told to stay insight during the time of Friday prayer in order to lower the risk of becoming possessed.

Being the color of ritual purity and physical cleanliness (two issues *ruhani* are very concerned about), white symbolizes possession through *ruhani* and other Arabic spirits. Despite of the sophistication and purity which has been ascribed to them, *ruhani*, like other spirits, call attendance by mercilessly inflicting their hosts and causing illness and misfortune whenever they feel displeased or neglected (Giles 1987:245).

Imported<sup>26</sup> offerings for these Muslim spirits in Tanga mainly consist of sweet-smelling products such as *udi*, rosewood-incense-sticks, whose smoke is inhaled by the possessed individual, or *marashi*, rose-water, which is either drunk or poured over the head, and sprinkled over clothing and the ritual area. Moreover, *ruhani* frequently desire golden rings and animal sacrifices in the form of chickens or goats<sup>27</sup>. Some *ruhani* are bedouins and wish to eat in a tent, wear a turban and ride a horse (Larsen 1995:132).

The Maasai spirit type belongs to the "symbolic world of the *bara* or 'up-country'" (Giles 1995:98). In general, the *bara* world is "portrayed as pagan, wild, and uncivilized, [and thus] the conceptual opposite of the coastal *kiarabu* spirit realm" (Giles 1995:98).

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<sup>26</sup> Incense for example, is imported from Karachi, Pakistan.

<sup>27</sup> On the dietary habits of spirits, see Lambek (1981:36-40).



In accordance with Giles, I found *kimasai* to be amongst the most important spirit types in Tanga, sometimes equalling or even replacing *kiarabu* spirits in significance (Giles 1995: 98). People possessed by Maasai spirits suffer from signs of flue, facial skin rashes and other unpleasant symptoms. Some flee their home and are found eating grass. Such behaviour indicates possession by *kimasai*. During the times of the slave trade, Arab and Swahili traders "established direct caravan routes through Maasai territory into Central Africa," thereby gaining increased contact with the ethnic groups of the interior (Giles 1999:146). Giles' interpretation of the Maasai spirits' "continued prominence" draws the "lasting impression that the Maasai people made on Swahili consciousness throughout history as independent pastoralists and formidable warriors controlling the gateway to the interior." (1995:98). Despite the fact that the Maasai people are one of the few ethnic groups in Tanzania who continue to live traditionally as far as it is possible in modern post-colonial times – impressively manifested through their widely known fashion and unique jewellery –, Muslim Swahili healers do not categorize Maasai spirits as "primitive" or in other pejorative terms. Rather, pointing to their strength, aggression and suitability as protective guardians, Maasai spirits in Tanga are presented in a positive manner, while at the same time, their *bara* origin is acknowledged: *Mganga* Mariamu, for instance, characterized the Maasai spirit type as "*mchafu lakini mzuri*," (dirty<sup>28</sup> but good), and *mganga* Hassany emphasized that they are "very serious," "have big power," "cannot apologize" and "need more care [than other types]."

This exemplifies again, that from the emic perspective the *bara* spirits – which are associated with the "wild" interior – are not necessarily seen as negative or primitive entities. Furthermore, these examples have shown that spirit types share many characteristics with their correlating *human* ethnic group. From the etic perspective, it becomes clear which character traits, culinary specialities, fragrance and music – preferences, or material items are considered to be representative for certain groups of people. Regarding this "pars pro toto" – form of ritual representation (e.g. a spear for *kimasai*), it has been suggested that "each

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<sup>28</sup> Dirt is associated with the wild and natural world of the interior. By categorizing *bara* spirits as polluting, a symbolic opposition to Arab/Swahili cultural traits is built (Giles 1999:152).





'reference culture' is split up into several synecdochical fields" (Krings 1999:64), which usually concern mother tongue, consumption and character.

Notably, all Swahili (including Koranic) healers master both Muslim/Arabic spirits (e.g. *ruhani*) and spirits associated with distinctively non-Islamic attributes (e.g. *kimasai*). Since in order to stay healthy, they have to please these spirits periodically with rituals involving "pagan" and "polluting" practices, they regularly engage in activities which are diametrically opposed to their quotidian urban Muslim lifestyle as well as to the ceremonies conducted to please Muslim spirits. Evidently then, the phenomenon of spirit possession opens both a framework for a strict application of Islamic law, as well as a challenge thereof. It would therefore be a misinterpretation to analyse possession as nothing but a functional way to convert people to Islam. Rather, spirit possession with non-Muslim spirits displays a subversive means to periodically "escape" from or (ironically) reflect upon religious orthodoxy as well as to criticize the hegemonic dominance of Islam; in other cases, where Muslim spirits are involved, possession can serve as a tool to help people in becoming "better Muslims," strengthening their self-esteem and identity as integral members of the urban Swahili community. Besides this rather functional aspect, my interpretation concentrates on theories of "embodiment of otherness" and implies that a space for self-reflection and self-interpretation – via the other – is inherent to possession, both on the macro-level of Swahili history as well as on the micro-level of personal identities. For the possessed cult members as well as for the audience, embodiment and the mimetic<sup>29</sup> aspect involved in the performances, offer a "reflexive awareness of being in the world" (Larsen 1995:292).

## 6. Summary

Based on the emic opposition of African and Arab heritage, possession practices indicate that both cultural resources are equally acknowledged, and that healers and patients shift their oscillating identities periodically, according to the spirits' demands. Possession then, inherently involves comedy and parody of human life. It integrates healing-, empowering-, and some restrictive effects. As sometimes subversive and counter-hegemonic meta-

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<sup>29</sup> On Mimesis, see Kramer 1987 and Boddy 1994.



commentaries on history, morality and life experience in general, possession rituals and the respective spirit pantheon further reveal and criticize gender conceptions, religious life, generally established power structures and issues that are otherwise concealed in daily life.

Swahili healing rituals and the fact that the *jinn* continue to fly on Friday are yet another proof that the "disenchantment of the modern world and the disappearance of spirits, as foretold by Westerners, has not taken place" (Behrend/Luig 1999:xiii).

As a complex healing practice, established by a society that has been exposed to multiple and contradictory influences throughout recorded history, Swahili spirit possession rituals should not be interpreted as archaic survivals of the past which are an "antithesis of modernity" (Pels 2003:4), "deemed to be either a kind of preliminary stage, preceding science and even religion; [or] seen as basically different from [...] more 'civilized' modes of thought" (Geschiere 2003:160). They should not be thought of as rural phenomena either, for in fact, there is a "contemporary urban trend" (Giles 1995:93) regarding cult activities. Instead of searching the phenomena for "the ultimate proof of Africa's 'Primitivism'" (Geschiere 2003:160) I suggest, in accordance with most of the scholars mentioned, that one might as well argue the other way around and interpret spirit possession as a "Beitrag zur Bewältigung der Modernisierung, wobei dieser vergleichsweise deutlich auf Verständigung und Kooperation ausgelegt ist" (Bruchhausen 2004:245). Due to its systematic recognition and treatment of psychosocial and cultural features of illness, traditional Swahili healers actually form part of a holistic health care system many western subcultures as well as academics (Kleinman 1980:363) are calling for<sup>30</sup>. In my opinion, a cultural mainstreaming, as it becomes evident in both orthodox religious tendencies (which occasionally impose bans on ritual practices) as well as attempts to establish a biomedical hegemony seem, therefore, antithetical to the ethnic diversity, religious syncretism, urban cultural hybridity and the medical pluralism typical for the Swahili setting in the past and present.

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<sup>30</sup> The cases presented from the Swahili coast confirm Kleinman's suggestion, without me wanting to naively underestimate the blessings of biomedical expertise, which is more often than not unavailable in Tanzania. For details see Mackenrodt (2006).



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