Swahili Networks
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For many years the Swahili-speaking people(s) of the coast of East Africa have been acknowledged as a particularly difficult subject for scholars who prefer classificatory tidiness and discreteness. It can be said truthfully that anyone who attempts to generalize about this culture, no matter how intellectually honest he may try to be, is sure to invite at least demur, if not open hostility, from many directions—much of it disparate and inconsistent, if not idiosyncratic. Thus the editors evince a certain pluck and aplomb in taking on this particular subject in a format (the edited volume) which usually lends itself to analytical incoherence. In her introduction, Le Guennec-Coppens acknowledges these difficulties, pointing out the lack of formal, universal structures along the approximately 3,000 kilometers of the “Swahili” coast, but expresses faith in the discernibility of an “intersection of multiple influences . . . which is established in most of their relations, communications, and transactions which give these populations their particular configuration” (p. 8). These “intersections” exist as multiple informal “networks” (réseaux) from which individuals derive their identities and through which they establish and maintain relations with others in their complex social universe through various forms of exchange. The editor thus sets the analytic framework for the volume’s contributors by averring that the proper identification of these key networks, then, rests on discerning the sundry types of exchange, in terms of marriage, property, information, and knowledge, in which coastal dwellers engage. Needless to say, each contributor conforms to this framework in his/her own way and with varying degrees of success. Not surprisingly, this programme is taken up most overtly (successfully?) by the anthropologists and sociologists, i.e. C. Le Cour Grandmaison, D. Parkin, R. Peake, as well as the editors themselves, and somewhat less so in the contributions of M.-F. Rombi and P. Alexandre (réseaux linguistiques), J. Balda, F. Topan, J. Kagabo, S. Beckerleg, and A. Crozon. Indeed, it appears that Parkin’s stimulating contribution on the Digo reseaux of Mtwapa came to constitute the thematic centerpiece of the volume, if not the conference at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales from which it derived. Parkin largely confines himself to two intersecting reseaux, the Muslims (waislamu) and the fish dealers (wachuizi). The focus of his attention is on the tensions inherent in each and every network which create competing and conflicting “systems significance”. Any form of group identity, he tells us, offers not only a sense of belonging, but contradic-

tory "tendencies, pressures, and tensions" which draw individual members in several directions at once. While this has been dealt with in somewhat different terms in other publications (Prins 1971, Pouwels 1984), Parkin arrives at an important conclusion concerning the dynamic element which these tensions contribute to Swahili societies. Every individual belongs to numerous such networks, thus situating him/herself "at once at the center and at once at the periphery of an ensemble of conflicts, dilemmas, choices, and social implications" (p. 141). The choices individuals make, subject to the competing strength of the demands made upon them, would thus constitute the arc of historical change. These two essential themes are substantiated most convincingly in the papers of Peake, Le Guennec-Coppens, and Le Cour Grandmaison. Peake demonstrates "How One Becomes a Swahili" through the efforts of three Giriama women, Dama (age 15 years), Kadzo (30 years), and Kahe (40 years), to become Muslims (i.e. Swahili) as a way of reorienting their lives to an urban existence and, by the same token, for breaking with their rural past. To him, such African women "embrace two worlds, two social networks," those of the urban Swahili milieu and those emanating from their rural Giriama natal communities. This is done consciously or unconsciously on their part as a strategy to increase social leverage and to improve economic opportunities for themselves. While Parkin and Peake elect to look at the African side to some coastal reseaux, Le Guennec-Coppens and Le Cour Grandmaison concern themselves with the alliances and marriage strategies of East Africa's Arabs. Concentrating a statistical study on 248 individuals from ten Hadrami lineages spread throughout the Comoro Islands, Kenya, and Tanzania, the former seeks to ascertain how their (one time) immigrant status influenced their deployment throughout East Africa and the development of their social structures, particularly as seen through their strategies for choosing marriage partners. She considers diverse forms of endogamous/isogamous and exogamous situations. From this, she makes two broad assertions. First, there was/is a marked tendency towards endogamy, especially among Hadrami women of the African mainland countries. Therefore, Hadramis tend to be "takers" rather than "givers" of women in exogamous alliances. Hadrami men, on the other hand, exhibit a greater freedom in choosing their spouses, which she attributes to the diverse geographic origins and the social heterogeneity that distinguished most southern Arab immigrants to East Africa. (These general conclusions, however, do not seem to hold true for Comoro Island Hadramis, thus revealing there a greater degree of social integration with the host Swahili society.) The principal limitation of this study is acknowledged by Le Guennec-Coppens herself, namely that the data divulges no reasons to account for the remarkably low percentages of marriages with Swahili and Indian groups.

Le Cour Grandmaison's essay on kinship, migration, and alliances among East Africa's Omani Arabs indicates some very important distinctions from their southern Arab brethren. Centering her attention on the al-Harthi tribe (qabila) she poses the question of what elements in the social organization of the Omani has allowed them to preserve their social distinctiveness and self-identity despite their extraordinary social and temporal mobility. The answer she provides is the primacy of the household productive unit, under the direction of the father figure (perce), and the combined traditions of endogamy and two-by-two alliances among the tribal divisions (fractions). When these units gradually
expanded from sedentary Omani villages into the East African socioeconomic domain, particularly between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, she tells the reader, business required the conclusion of secondary marriages between male members of Omani households and the women of influential local African elders and “big men”. Once ensconced in Africa, particularly with the birth of children, tribal and household cohesion was restored and the old values of endogamy and the family-based (maisonnée and fractionnée) production and business was reproduced. In a related essay, entitled “The Arabs of Zanzibar, Hate and Fascination”, Crozon discusses how this sort of “tribal” bonding contributed to the endemic racism that became such a part of Zanzibar society. This has been most apparent in events since the revolution of January 1964. Fuelled by positive and negative stereotyping associated with both (mainland) Africans and Arabs in general, she demonstrates how Zanzibar’s Arabs have suffered phases of overt persecution and benign tolerance. It has been the Omani reseaux themselves which have contributed to their image as persecutors and exploiters of Africans. Zanzibar remains a schizophrenic society caught between competing sources of identity and socioeconomic ties that link Zanzibar’s many ethnicities both to Arabia and to Africa.

Fitting generally within the discussion of reseaux is Beckerleg’s essay on boat building in Mtwapa by a local artisan, simply called by her Mfundi (“artisan”). Though more descriptive than analytical, Beckerleg presents a clear exposition of the connexions that exist and exchanges that take place between the worlds of the living and the dead (ancestors), and within the former, among the client, the builder, the apprentice, the boat-builders’ fraternity, and the community at large. Her essay reveals a process that is not at all a simple technological achievement, executed by one or two individuals working in solitude. Rather, it continues to function even in a fast-changing world as one that is highly protracted and heavily circumscribed by rules and observances meant to appease the spirits and to ward off the jealousy of any and all known to the artisan and his client who might bear ill-will.

Three contributors discuss the several aspects of the religious associations and networks that exist on the coast. Balda’s discussion of Swahili Islamic literature points out the evolving nature of the Swahili Islamic heritage over the past half-century, most manifest in the ideologies of Shaykh al-Amin ben Ali Mazrui, Shaykh Abdallah Salih Farsy, and Shaykh Saidi Musa. The change has gone from the frankly bigoted effusions of Mazrui, who saw Arabic and madrasa construction as ideological refuges from Westernization the upcountry “black peril” of his times, to Saidi Musa’s abandonment of the Arab model of literate, “orthodox” Islam for a religious order on the Iranian model capable of application as a moral anchor for solving all the social, economic, and political difficulties of contemporary Africa. Topan attempts to delineate three religious reseaux, those of the ulama, the tariqas, and “African culture”. Though he is vague and analytically weak as to what constitutes the last of these categories, he clearly presents a convincing historical review of the progress of orthodoxy

1. The inclusion of waganga, traditional medicine men, would have to be an error since they remain outside the realm of Islam, properly speaking. More likely, he would mean the walimu and wanavyuoni wa katikati, who combine a mixture of both traditional African and exogenous Islamic forms of divination and healing.
and how it has impinged on creating an elitist network of literate, mostly foreign educated, shaykhs over the past century. As a secondary phenomenon, he discusses the appearance of the *tariqas* as another form of religious charisma and as an alternate network for those to whom, for whatever reasons, religious training by orthodox shaykhs remains closed. He concludes that Islamic authority in East Africa remains diffuse and non-centralized, with considerable overlap in the roles and types of religious leadership. Kagabo's essay provides little information that is not available elsewhere (Farsy 1989, Pouwels 1987), except his observation of the fairly obvious fact that the "high" *ulama* are largely interrelated and are extensively recruited from among the immigrant Arab clans.

Ethnolinguistic data is an obvious source of clues for evidence of interrelatedness of various social groups, if not of socioeconomic networks themselves. In this particular volume, unfortunately, Rombi and Alexandre dish up only generalized remarks regarding "the réseaux linguistiques" which go little beyond observing that there has to be a distinction made between Swahili as an ethnonym, largely known and used by outsiders, and Swahili as a language used at least as a second language by most East Africans and many in Central Africa (e.g. Zaire) as well. As a language that evolved originally as the principal means of spoken communication between coastal *waungwana*, it largely came to incorporate the coastal urban ideal. Now, they point out, the Kisanifu dialect has developed as the *koiné* of East Africa, the most potent tool of national unification and identity in a modern, changing Tanzania, which, it is to be hoped, eventually will perform a similar role as other East and Central African nation-states adopt it as their national language. Ethnolinguistics as a powerful tool for understanding the interconnectedness of coastal and East African peoples has been capably researched for Swahili—and Eastern Bantu-speakers in recent years by Nurse (1983, Nurse & Spear 1985) and Hinnebusch, among others. It's a pity that Rombi and Alexandre could not have at least drawn the reader's attention to this important work, if not having actually used it themselves.

In conclusion, *Les Swahili entre Afrique et Arabie* is a useful volume for specialists in Swahili studies as well as for students of African studies and Islamic studies in general. As an edited work, the quality of the contributions naturally is variable. However, the editors have provided a particularly cogent and appropriate thematic framework (the reseau) about which the essays generally are written and arranged. My personal bias as a historian naturally leads me to wish there might have been a greater effort to include analytic essays by historians, yet fairness requires that every work be judged more on the merits of what it does say, rather than for what it does not.

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