

# CONSTRUCTING ISLAM AND SWAHILI IDENTITY

## HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THEORY

Louise Rolinger\*

*. . . there is a different kind of construction, well worth calling social, that occurs when we develop our systematic classifications of and knowledge about people and their behaviour. This has to do with the looping effect . . .*

Ian Hacking<sup>1</sup>

*For there to be an identity, society, culture, or ethnic group, it is not necessary for all parties to agree on what defines this culture; it is sufficient that they are able to establish the terms of identity as a problem about which they can debate or negotiate.*

Jean-Loup Amselle<sup>2</sup>

The people of Coastal East Africa, from Somalia to Mozambique, have long been recognized as the bearers of a unique and fluid culture and language—Kiswahili. That culture and language are the product of trading relationships that encompassed the Indian Ocean and extended from Africa, the Middle East and India to as far east as Indonesia and China. Although “Swahili” language and culture have absorbed many influences from visitors to the East African coast over the centuries, it is predominantly based on varying combinations of African and Arab cultural and linguistic forms and religion—Islam.

Debates about Islam on the Swahili Coast, and the East African mainland, have centered on the “penetration” of Islam into East Africa—how, when and by whom—and orthodox vs. popular praxis. These debates have frequently borne the mark of philosopher Ian Hacking’s looping effect. Hacking argues that the classification of knowledge has a kind of “feedback” effect in which our categorization of certain kinds of knowledge shapes the object of our study, which in turn influences the way we classify that knowledge. Classification and knowledge are continuously folding back on one another.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will discuss some of those loops in the study of Islam in East Africa and then examine some works whose authors have attempted to free themselves from the feedback effect and point the way for future scholarship.

---

\* [Louise Rolinger](#) is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Alberta. She is working on her dissertation, “[In the Zanzibar Household: Domestic Relations, Cultural Mixing and the Making of East African Identities in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.](#)”

Among those scholars who do write primarily about Islam, one of the most frequently cited sources is J. Spencer Trimingham's *Islam in East Africa*. Trimingham falls into the camp of those who have insisted that Swahili culture owes more to Arabia than to Africa. He begins his review of Swahili history with the statement, "The history of Islam in East Africa belongs more to the history of the Indian Ocean than to African history."<sup>4</sup> From his account of the people and their history, it is clear that he sees the syncretic nature of Swahili society and the role Islam plays in it. The second chapter of his book gives a detailed description of the many and varied "contemporary Muslim communities," and speculates on their origins. However, for him Islam as a "revealed religion" is the archetypal reified category. It is universal, unchanging and unbending—"a way of life" imposed from above. He uses the following diagram to illustrate his point:

**Islam → Bantu Culture = creative tension = synthesis in the Swahili Culture<sup>5</sup>**

The arrow from Islam to Bantu Culture is the essence of his argument. For him, African cultures were passive and Islam aggressive. Hence, the "creative tension" was a one-way street. This top-down analysis then leads him to see the spread of Islam into the interior as "penetration" facilitated by the European colonial presence. He identifies a number of possible "agents" -- "guides, interpreters, soldiers and servants" as well as the merchants from the coast—all of who might profitably be investigated in greater depth. However, his "invasion" metaphor leads him to dismiss this line of enquiry by attributing conversion of inland people to "unconscious" processes and a handful of Qur'an teachers.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, Trimingham assumes that Muslim influence outside the coastal cities is something that arises suddenly in the late nineteenth century with the arrival of German and British colonizers. It is very difficult to assess from the literature where this idea originates. There are instances of trading centers that sprang up over short periods in the interior. For example, David Sperling notes the increase in the population of Ujiji, a town located on one of the caravan routes to the interior of present-day Tanzania. Between 1860 and Stanley's visit there in 1872, Ujiji grew from an insignificant town to a trade center whose population, though transient and mostly slaves, numbered seven to eight thousand. According to Stanley, twelve dozen of the residents were "Arab" traders (Afro-Arab Swahili from the coast).<sup>7</sup> Another such center, Tabora, is said to have become "the citadel of Islam in the interior" by 1912.<sup>8</sup> However, Sperling also adds that not all trading centers showed a significant Muslim influence. Those centers that did see an increase in their Muslim populations seem not to have affected the surrounding rural areas until the 1950s and in some cases only in very recent times.<sup>9</sup> A reading of John Illiffe's account of late nineteenth-century changes in Tanganyika seems to indicate that the missionaries, focused on eliminating the slave trade and seeing Islam as their competitor for souls, may have been the "agents" of the notion of a marked increase in Muslim converts.<sup>10</sup> These were hardly unbiased accounts by disinterested observers.

Michael N. Pearson's review of the literature calls attention to two possibilities here. On the one hand, there are some fragments of information in Portuguese accounts that suggest settlements of Muslim traders already existed in the interior as early or, even before, the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. On the other hand, it may simply be the case that the relative lack of

information for the earlier period creates the impression of a sudden increase in Muslims in the nineteenth century when more Europeans were making their way there and reporting their findings.<sup>11</sup>

More importantly Trimingham seems to have set the agenda for the study of the relationship of Islam to Swahili identity as his one-way penetration of Islam argument appears to dominate historical studies. August Nimtz, another scholar of Islam in East Africa, disagrees with Trimingham's claim that the presence of Europeans facilitated the spread of Islam, but not his assumption that there was a sudden and numerically significant increase in converts. He has a difficult time finding evidence for this new wave of Islam except in a few reports from frightened German administrators and one missionary who complained that the Muslims were impeding his efforts to recruit converts. Nevertheless, he asserts that the cause of this perceived rise in Muslim converts was the result of an ideological vacuum created by the German defeat of the Maji Maji rebellion.<sup>12</sup> He looks for various agents as well and finds that the *turuq*, the Sufi brotherhoods, have stepped in to fill the void.

Nimtz' thesis has led to much speculation about how the *turuq* accomplished their work. A favorite site for examination has been charisma, the personal power of individual Sufi saints to attract followers who swelled the ranks of the brotherhoods. François Constantin, drawing on an ethnography of Lamu society by Egyptian anthropologist Abdul Hamid M. el-Zein,<sup>13</sup> examined the life of one Sufi saint known to his followers as Habib Saleh to find the "seed" of this charisma.<sup>14</sup> Constantin decided that charisma resulted from a combination of personal (personality and power) and religious factors (his perceived link to the Prophet, *baraka*, defined by Constantin as Islamic knowledge, and his reputation as a scholar) with broader social factors (social upheaval). Habib Saleh was the right man in the right place at the right time. It seems that Constantin confirms Nimtz' assertion that Sufism somehow filled a void - in this case a need for stability during a period of political instability caused by European colonization.

Another issue for Trimingham was the contrast between a "pure Islam" and "popular Islam." This as Pearson notes in his *Port Cities* is a recurring theme throughout the history of Islam in Africa and elsewhere. Randall Pouwels takes up this theme in his *Horn and the Crescent* and adds to it the question of how Islam spreads. He talks about the "high Islam" of the Qur'an and the ulama (learned teachers) vs. "popular Islam," and the Islam practiced by ordinary Africans. He locates the greater spread of Islam in a somewhat earlier period. For Pouwels, the arrival of Seyyid Said and his court in Zanzibar in the 1840's is a key factor. He examines at length the changes brought about by the introduction of new "types" of ulama—the administrative types who brought literacy and a "higher" form of Islam and the charismatic types who gave rise to Sufi brotherhoods. In *The Horn and the Crescent*, Pouwels' version of penetration is one of depth rather than breadth. Although he notes that the appeal of these new ulama was for the most part "an elitist phenomenon," he wants to ascribe agency to the charismatic Sufis whom he sees as somehow more "African" than "Arab." Thus, in his recent article in the *History of Islam in Africa*, we find that the *turuq* have become the agents responsible for spreading Islam. At the same time, they are also the agents of a not-so-creative ethnic tension and conflict.<sup>15</sup>

It is not that these lines of enquiry are not interesting, even suggestive. It is more the case that this particular loop is not getting us beyond structural paradigms and debates about theological correctness that say little about the processes

involved and the view that “Islam itself” can explain all. We need to ask different questions or we will never find new answers. A rethinking of the “unconscious process” by which some of Trimmingham’s “agents” reproduced Swahili culture, including Islam, is precisely what I am trying to do here. I am questioning the familiar, as Foucault prescribes, in order to reveal the not so “unconscious” aspects of that process.

When I began my research for this work, I encountered Abdul Hamid M. el-Zein’s, *The Sacred Meadows: A Structural Analysis of Religious Symbolism in an East African Town*. It is a study of the town of Lamu off the coast of Kenya and the social relationships of its Swahili-speaking inhabitants. He was attempting to show how the tensions in Lamu society, especially between masters and slaves, were played out in myth and religious practice as well as everyday practices such as marriage and family. Zein’s goal was to explore the “structure of a religious system and the relations between its constituent parts and everyday life” in order to uncover what he saw as the dynamic nature of religion as a “symbolic system engaged in a dialectic with social reality.” He posited this view in opposition to what he saw as the image of religion, especially Islam, as conservative, tending to maintain some sort of *status quo* in the face of outside forces.

Zein’s fellow anthropologists recognized *Sacred Meadows* as an original and important contribution to anthropological theory at the time. However, historians have been more critical, citing his lack of attribution of sources (i.e., his informants) and a-historicity as his major failings.<sup>16</sup> Patricia Romero believed that Zein, because he was an Egyptian and a Muslim, should have been in a better position than non-Muslim, Western scholars, to get the story right.<sup>17</sup> However, according to her informants, Zein got it wrong, especially with regard to the story of Lamu’s Sufi saint, Habib Saleh. He was not, as Zein postulated, a friend to slaves and an enemy of the Lamu Swahili elites. As a *sharif*, a descendant of the Prophet, he may have been charitable in his attitude toward slaves, but only to the extent that Islamic law and custom decreed. Her recent book is an attempt to counter what she sees as a “hopelessly ahistorical” and “confusing” work by giving a descriptive chronology of Lamu society from its origins (as far as they are known) to the late 1990s.

Randall Pouwels subsequently reviewed Romero’s *Lamu*.<sup>18</sup> He commended her analysis of colonial figures, which he felt was sufficiently skeptical of their motives in setting colonial policy, but he noted that she appeared to be blind to the motives of her Swahili informants on Lamu. More important, Romero’s attempts to discuss the history of Islam and her “accounts of Shi’a, the Hadrami shurafa and the Alawiyya” were full of errors.<sup>19</sup> He asserts that because her knowledge of Islam is superficial, she “underutilizes or mishandles available published sources” such as his translation of Shaykh Abdallah S. Farsy’s *The Shafi’i Ulama of East Africa, 1820-1970*.<sup>20</sup> It is apparent from Romero’s comments, however, that her informant, Sheikh Ahmed Jahadhmy, who “read drafts of every chapter and corrected factual errors”, heavily influenced her representation of Islam.<sup>21</sup>

Zein could not respond to the criticisms and debate carried on by Romero and Pouwels because he died in 1979.<sup>22</sup> From the forward to his book written by his advisor Lloyd Fallers, it seems that like Romero, Jahadhmy and Pouwels, he had been enmeshed in a debate about the right or wrong nature of various versions of Islam, or more properly, Islamic practice from the first day he arrived on Lamu. Fallers points out the difficulties that Zein and his family faced in Lamu, contrary to Romero’s assumption, precisely *because* they were Muslims:

. . . if their background gave them an initial intellectual advantage, it also imposed burdens that non-Muslims would not have faced. Like members of Muslim communities elsewhere, the Lamuans naturally assume that their reception of Islam is the correct one, and so they first regarded the Zeins [Zein's wife Laila and son Hani accompanied him to Lamu] as ignorant, if not positively heretical. The demands made upon them to correct their errant ways were sometimes quite uncomfortable.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps because of this experience or because he was a Muslim, an Egyptian *and* a scholar in the West,<sup>24</sup> Zein was concerned with finding a way to move beyond similar debates in anthropology—to escape from his own loop. In the last article he published before his death, Zein examined works by some of the major anthropological and Islamicist theorists of his day and their arguments about anthropology and Islamic theology as tools for understanding the interplay between religion and social behavior. The anthropologists included Clifford Geertz (Islam as a historically constituted ideology), Vincent Crapanzano (a Freudian interpretation of Moroccan myths), and D.F. Eickelman (a Weberian interpretation of Maraboutism in Morocco). The Islamicists were Abdallah S. Bujra (religious politics) and Michael Gilson (Sufism and charisma).<sup>25</sup> Zein argued that neither the ideological assumptions of anthropologists nor the theological assumptions of Bujra and Gilson could account for the everyday experience of a given society because all of these approaches require some kind of universal and fixed notion about the nature of “man, God, history, consciousness, and meaning.” They all portray Islam as a closed cultural system. Further, they all assume that religion, economy and history are things—bounded entities—that exist outside or above the societies in which people construct relationships with others and with their environment on a daily basis.

Today, such ideas are commonplace, though sometimes contested, among anthropologists, sociologists, cultural studies scholars and historians. The reified category is under attack from all sides.<sup>26</sup> Examining the daily practices of ordinary people, as Zein advocated both in *Sacred Meadows* and in his later article, is evident in much current scholarship, especially the influential work by Michele de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.<sup>27</sup> Some postmodernist and postcolonial scholars now bemoan the lack of historicity in theoretical and philosophical approaches to various fields of study in the humanities and social sciences. The quintessential postmodern scholar Fredric Jameson, looking for a way out of the “vicious circle” created by the “hegemony of theories of textuality and textualization,” offers “historicism” as an alternative. He asserts that in order to “play the game” scholars and critics are trapped by their need to agree with “basic presuppositions of [their] general problem field” which “traditional positions . . . refuse to advance.” Historical analysis and an assertion of the “real” offer a way out.<sup>28</sup> “Postcolonial” anthropologists such as Lila Abu-Lughod for example, attempt to historicize and contextualize the study of religion, tying their observations to a past as well as the present in order to appreciate their subjects more fully.<sup>29</sup> This may seem flattering to us as historians, but the example of the history of Islam in East Africa demonstrates that “history” is not an answer in itself. “Loops” and “vicious circles,” plague historians as well as literary critics and anthropologists.

As an ideal, focusing on change over time and the mundane details of the everyday are laudable goals, especially for one who aspires to write social or cultural

history. Such a focus would indeed expand our picture of the lives of ordinary people past and present. However, while Jameson and Abu-Lughod have to deal with selecting from an overabundance of information, the situation for the historian of Africa is different.<sup>30</sup> The evidence we work with is often at best uneven and in many cases almost nonexistent. We sometimes have to work from fragments or from very one-sided materials—both written and oral. More often than not, we have to approach our subject matter obliquely “writing against the grain.” In an effort to bridge gaps, writing history in the African context, especially the history of subalterns, can sometimes become a search for theory.

But, which theory or theories should we choose? Abu-Lughod, inspired by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, notes, “In popular and much scholarly thinking in the West, Islam is perceived as all-determining. This view corresponds to that of many Muslims who believe that they should indeed be guided by the ideals of Islamic faith and practice.” As someone who is as she says “between” both worlds, she is concerned to demonstrate “that not all events . . . can be explained by reference to Islam.”<sup>31</sup>

For many scholars, the problem is not so much one of explaining events without reference to Islam, but of weaving between polar opposites. How can we talk about Islam and identity without assuming Islam explains everything? How can we talk about Islam and identity without assuming Islam explains nothing? Here, I believe, anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle’s notions of “originary syncretism” and negotiation are important. In his 1998 book, *Mestizo Logics*, Amselle calls for an abandonment of “ethnological reason” that “extracts, refines, and classifies with the intention of isolating types.” Against this search for types, he offers a “continuist approach that would emphasize an originary syncretism or lack of distinctness.” On close examination, he says, every culture “dissolves into a series of conflictual or peaceful practices used by its actors to continually renegotiate their identity.”<sup>32</sup> They are important because they point to a process always underway and to relationships between individuals as well as groups.

Take for example works that examine Islam and slavery in East Africa. I have been struck by the fact that while everyone talks about how masters converted their slaves to Islam, few seriously consider the slaves to be “agents” or even significant in either the spread or construction of Islam in East Africa.<sup>33</sup> Slaves are portrayed as passive recipients of a deficient form of Islam or if not entirely passive then perpetual outsiders with no claim to a place in Muslim and “Swahili” identity.

Trimingham talked about porters and *askaris* (soldiers) as “agents,” but he forgot to tell us that many were slaves or ex-slaves. Frederick Cooper tells us in *Plantation Slavery* that nearly 140,000 slaves were imported into Zanzibar at the height of the plantation economy—1850 to 1875.<sup>34</sup> Many died and some escaped, but the number who stayed were significant and the process was more visible (to Westerners) for a longer period than was the case with people in the interior.

At about the same time that Zein was writing his critique of Clifford Geertz, Cooper published an article on Islam as hegemonic ideology in the Swahili culture of the nineteenth century. He wrote it in the wake of Edward Said’s influential, but highly controversial book *Orientalism*. *Orientalism*, originally published in 1978, was a critique of the representation of Islam as the “other” or binary opposite of the West from the Greeks to the present. Referring to Western power, Said cited Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as the means by which dominant classes or groups manufacture consent to their rule among the dominated.<sup>35</sup> Cooper, an economic and social historian, gave Said’s work a mere

footnote, but in his article he attempted to find a relationship between Islam and slavery without resorting to “orientalist” stereotypes used by Islamicist scholars.<sup>36</sup> He asserted that while no such entity as “Islamic slavery” existed, there was a connection between religion and slavery in the way masters characterized their relationship to their slaves. He drew on Clifford Geertz’ concept of religion as an ideology grounded in specific historical circumstances (similar to the discussion advocated by Zein) and linked it to an interpretation of Gramsci similar to Said’s.

The nineteenth century was a turbulent one for the Omanis and the Swahili elites. Zanzibar and all of East Africa was being drawn ever more tightly into the expanding capitalist world of the Europeans at the same moment they began their experiment with large-scale agriculture. The British attack on the slave trade gradually became more effective over the nineteenth century. Declining markets in slaves meant merchants had to look for alternatives. They found it, if briefly, in the production of cloves on Zanzibar and grains on the coast.<sup>37</sup> Control over the “means of production,” the slaves, was never complete and often fragile. Slaves could and did run away or rebel.<sup>38</sup> While some masters might use physical discipline to keep production on schedule, it was generally more profitable and less difficult to resort to older relationships of reciprocity like giving slaves their own land, allowing some to accumulate wealth through various means and even to purchase their own slaves in some cases. However, in Zanzibar to some extent, but especially on the coastal plantations where grains were the major crop, the demands of production sometimes meant a change in this unspoken agreement—longer hours and fewer benefits. Thus, Cooper argued that the masters had to find ways to convince slaves to accept these changes and that way was through the “hegemonic ideology” of Islam.

One of Zein’s chief criticisms of Geertz was that while Geertz acknowledged the historical specificity of Islam in particular places-- Morocco and Indonesia--he nevertheless, continued to insist on a universal, bounded Islam that floats above all societies in which it is the predominant religion. In both societies, the ulama, the more learned members, represent this universal Islam by separating “themselves from local interpretations or the specifications of a particular history.”<sup>39</sup> Cooper, following Geertz, assumes the universal concept of Islam rather than the historically particular by insisting that the ulama and especially the leaders of the Sufi brotherhoods were the East African equivalent of Gramsci’s “intellectuals”—the individuals whose task it is to convince the masses that the ideology of the ruling class should be the ideology of all. Although he argues against an “Islamic slavery” on the grounds that to do so “puts more of a burden on the significance of religion than it can possibly bear,” he later insists on its universality. He argues that “the particular importance of Islam . . . lies in the fixity and evocative power of the written word” and the “aura of permanence” that it conveys.<sup>40</sup>

Talal Asad, the renown anthropologist has indirectly taken up Zein’s cause also calling Geertz’ theories of religion and ideology into question. Although he grounds his analysis in the historical development of Christianity, his arguments with Geertz are much the same as Zein’s. In contrast to Geertz’ focus on meaning, symbols and ideology, Asad proposes a constructivist approach, one that sees religion not as something already there, but as something created out of power relations between people and groups of people in specific historical and societal contexts. Adopting this approach, Asad reminded us that orthodoxy in Muslim communities and states has always been subject to competing discourses, especially

in “conditions of change and contest.”<sup>41</sup> Asad draws loosely on Foucault’s concept of the relationship between power and knowledge. Individuals and groups in a given society assert power through discourses about rights, but other individuals and groups may contest those discourses in order to assert their own place in that society.<sup>42</sup> By taking such an approach, we can then look at Islam and Swahili identity as ongoing construction projects couched in competing discourses between masters and slaves—discourses that, as Foucault insists, have real effects in the world. Thinking about the process in terms of discourse rather than ideology allows a more fluid and nuanced analysis than the concept of an *a priori* universal religion. It also allows multiple discourses to be in play at the same time.

Much of Cooper’s argument draws directly from *Sacred Meadows*, especially the celebration of the *Maulidi ya Kiswabili*.<sup>43</sup> *Maulidi*, the celebration of the Prophet’s birth, in Zein’s work and in many studies of East and other parts of Africa, has been a favorite site for examining social relations in societies where Islam is the predominant religion. It has been analyzed as a ritual in which the power of the elite is displayed for the masses (Combs-Schilling), a sign appropriated by ex-slaves on Zanzibar to signify poetry (Fair), an example of resistance on the part of slaves (Glassman) and a ritual that maintains Arab hegemony on Pemba today (Goldman).<sup>44</sup> For Zein, as a major social and religious event on Lamu, it provided an insight into the social arrangements there.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Lamu society had become highly stratified. At the top were the *wangwana* (people of the town)<sup>45</sup> who called themselves the *Wa Yumbili*. This group was divided into three. At the top were the *Wa Yumbili Pembe* followed by the *Wa Yumbili Ngombe*. At the bottom rung of the *wangwana* were the *Wa Yumbili Ponde*. Beneath these groups were the Comoros Islanders who were permanent outsiders and the slaves who were insiders, but without status. The manner in which each group celebrated the *Maulidi* signified their position in Lamu society. The *Wa Yumbili Pembe* and *Wa Yumbili Ngombe* celebrated the *Maulidi Barzanji*, a private and quiet ceremony performed in the mosque only by persons licensed to do so. The *Wa Yumbili Ponde*, the Comoros Islanders and the children of *souriyas* (concubines) celebrated their own *Maulidi*, the *Maulidi ya Rama*, in public with musical accompaniment and dancing.<sup>46</sup>

Despite exclusion by the *wangwana* from religious education and hence from the “traditional” celebration of the *Maulidi*, the slaves formed two competitive groups led by ex-slaves Mwalim Jum’ani and Bajuri and created their own ritual. This particular *Maulidi* was performed in Swahili and was given the name *Maulidi ya Kiswabili*. Performed in the elite and exclusive Langoni area of Lamu town, the two factions acquired backers from among its *wangwana* residents. *Wangwana* masters had often used their slaves in competitions against each other. In the *Maulidi ya Kiswabili*, however, the slaves and ex-slaves were free to chose the group to which they would belong. That created a reordering of old loyalties and identities.

Initially, the *wangwana* used the competition between Bajuri and Jum’ani’s followers to their advantage. They became mediators between, as well as backers of, the competing ex-slave groups. When the competition became too heated, the masters would step in temporarily reasserting their power. However, over time, the role of competitor eclipsed that of mediator. Controlling the followers of Bajuri and Jum’ani became less important than vying for greater status within their own group to such an extent that they began to sell their land to pay for increasingly lavish celebrations.<sup>47</sup> The masters then declared the *Maulidi ya Kiswabili* to be unorthodox, a secular event more to do with competition than religion. The title of Mwalim

which in an earlier context had been used to signify a religious leader became synonymous with *fundi*, a secular term emphasizing the mechanics of competition and dramatic effect. In their eyes, celebrations of the *Maulidi ya Kiswahili* were “no longer rituals for the sake of God’s blessings, but performances which mainly sought to attract other people’s attention.”<sup>48</sup> At that point, the *wangwana* still had sufficient power to have the last word.

Cooper has resolutely argued against a Foucauldian approach to the analysis of power on the grounds that to embrace it would be to deny the very real power imbalances that now exist between the neo-colonial powers of the West (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) and African nation states. He rejects Foucault’s notion of power as “capillary” (presumably referring to the concept of biopower Foucault developed in his *History of Sexuality*) because for him current relations between Africa and the West are most emphatically “arterial” and one-way.<sup>49</sup> In the East African context, Cooper sees power is a negative, injurious force rather than Foucault’s more nuanced view that sees power as positive and generative as well as destructive.

In his work on slavery in East Africa and especially his article on ideology and cultural hegemony, however, Cooper weaves carefully between a view of Islam as cultural hegemony and a view that would allow some agency (counter-hegemony) for the slaves—something he wants very much to do. His is a delicate balancing act that is not always taken up by those who have followed.<sup>50</sup> In the section of his article where he discusses the slaves, he comes very close to Asad’s notion of a constructed Islam, were it not for the fact that he was looking instead for the development of a separate and unique “slave culture” as a counter-hegemonic *force*. He talks about the ways in which people began to think of themselves as both Muslims and connected to non-Muslim Africans through dances and initiation rituals that combined elements of Islam with practices brought from the mainland. What these slaves were making *was* Islam and in the process, Swahili identity.

I am arguing here for an approach that explores the connections between Islam and Swahili identity; one that does more than reverse the flow of Trimmingham’s model from African to Arab— a methodology that can help us to escape from loops created by debates about “penetration” and “charisma”. I want to find a way to weave between the universal qualities of Islam and its practice on the ground without becoming enmeshed in debates about orthodoxy.<sup>51</sup> I want to begin to think in terms of a process of originary syncretism that denies essentialisms and simultaneously allows for both conflict and negotiation in the generation of Islam and identity. It is a process that operates on many levels through time and space, one that begins to approximate the complexity of religious practice and identity formation in East Africa.

Taking Talal Asad’s proposition that Islam (and identity) is a project continually under construction rather than an essence or reified category is a first step toward creating richness and complexity from small bits and pieces of the relics we call evidence. In the performance of a ritual like the *Maulidi ya Kiswahili* we can read both agency and domination. By including Foucault’s notion that power can be both generative and destructive and is embedded in and created by both discourse and practice, we can make space for agency on the part of subalterns. Then reading such an analysis of power into the construction of Islam and identity, we can begin to investigate, in specific historical contexts, the ways in which power was negotiated and produced at

“multiple sites.” People in East Africa struggled to define what it meant to be a Muslim and what it meant to be Swahili.

---

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ian Hacking, “Symposium Papers, Comments and an Abstract: The Sociology of Knowledge About Child Abuse,” *Noûs* 22, no. 1 (1988): 57.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Loup Amselle, *Mestizo Logics: Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere*, trans. Claudia Royal (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 34

<sup>4</sup> J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Islam in East Africa: The Report of a Survey Undertaken in 1961, Research Pamphlets; No. 9* (London: Published for the World Council of Churches Commission on World Mission and Evangelism by Edinburgh House Press, 1962), 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 53 – 56.

<sup>7</sup> David Sperling, “The Coastal Hinterland and Interior of East Africa,” in *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. N. Levtzion and R. L. Pouwels (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 289.

<sup>8</sup> Becker quoted in *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 77 – 87.

<sup>11</sup> Michael N. Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders: The Swahili Coast, India and Portugal in the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 86 – 100.

<sup>12</sup> August H. Nimtz, *Islam and Politics in East Africa: The Sufi Order in Tanzania* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 13.

<sup>13</sup> See below.

<sup>14</sup> Francois Constantin, “Charisma and the Crisis of Power in East Africa,” in *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam*, ed. Donald B. Cruise O’Brien and C. Coulon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 69.

<sup>15</sup> Randall L. Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800-1900*, *African Studies Series; 53* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and Randall L. Pouwels, “The East African Coast, C. 780 to 1900 C.E.,” in *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. N. Levtzion and R.L. Pouwels (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 265.

<sup>16</sup> T. O. Ranger, “Review,” *The Journal of Religion in Africa* Vol. III (1975), Patricia Romero, “The Sacred Meadows: A Case Study of “Anthropologyland” Vs. “Historyland,”” *History in Africa* 9(1982) and Patricia Romero, *Lamu: History, Society and Family in an East African Port City* (Princeton: Marcus Wiener, 1997), ix.

<sup>17</sup> Romero seems quite oblivious to the complicated position Zein really occupied. See below.

<sup>18</sup> Randall L. Pouwels, “Review,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 32, no. 1 (1999).

<sup>19</sup> These are different sects of Islam.

<sup>20</sup> It would have been useful to have some examples of how Romero “mishandles” the sources, but Pouwels leaves us in suspense in this regard.

<sup>21</sup> Romero, *Lamu: History, Society and Family in an East African Port City*, vii.

<sup>22</sup> Zein died of a heart attack, but rumour has it that he was killed in a car accident at the moment a curse was being pronounced on him by some of those he had offended on Lamu. Scott Reese, E-mail, Tue, 05 Jun 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Fallers quoted in Abdul Hamid Mohamed el Zein, *The Sacred Meadows: A Structural Analysis of Religious Symbolism in an East African Town* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974), xvi.

<sup>24</sup> For a description of the position of the scholar who bridges the East/West divide, my discussion of Lila Abu Lughod below.

<sup>25</sup> Zein reviews nearly the whole of the body of Geertz’s work to that time including his 1964 essay, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” reprinted in Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). For Crapanzano he references Vincent Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). For Eickelman, Dale F. Eickelman, *Moroccan Islam: Tradition and Society in a Pilgrimage Center* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976). Works by Bujra and Gilsenan are Abdalla S. Bujra, *The Politics of Stratification, a Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) and Michael Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973). Gilsenan is one of Constantin’s interlocutors in the debates about Sufism and charisma.

<sup>26</sup> For an excellent review of the culture wars see Robert Brightman, “Forget Culture: Replacement, Transcendence, Relexification,” *Cultural Anthropology* 10, no. 4 (1995): 509 – 546.

<sup>27</sup> Michele de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984)

<sup>28</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 94. Jameson uses the terms history and historicism to refer not only to the contextualization of events in a diachronic narrative. He is also referring to what he sees as the demise of the Marxist sense of history as dialectic. He has long held that Marxism is the point at which theory and history find common ground. See his comments in the preface to Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 13-14. I am well aware that Jameson is a controversial figure among post-colonial theorists particularly for his characterization of “third world literature” as non-canonical. As Aijaz Ahmad points out, Jameson takes his Hegel seriously viewing societies outside the West as societies without history and therefore outside “Civilization.” Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature* (London: Verso, 1992), 95 – 122. However, as an important actor in the debates on postmodernism, his views on history are pertinent here.

<sup>29</sup> Lila Abu Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 6 – 14.

<sup>30</sup> See my reference to Pearson above.

<sup>31</sup> Abu Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Amselle, *Mestizo Logics: Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere*, 2. I am indebted to Peter Mark for generously sharing his ideas and sources on cultural mixing, especially the work of Amselle. See Peter Mark, *“Portuguese” Style and Luso-African Identity: Precolonial Senegambia, Sixteenth-Nineteenth Centuries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Many scholars who insist that the Swahili are Africans prefer not to discuss how that identity is related to slavery.

<sup>34</sup> This is not an unproblematic number. Richard Burton wrote that in 1859 estimates of the total population of Zanzibar ranged from 100,000 to 1,000,000. When he asked Seyyid Said how many “subjects” he had on the island, the Sultan replied, “How can I know when I cannot tell you how many there are in my own house?” He finally settled on 300,000 as a compromise and estimated the slave population at between two thirds and three quarters. Richard Francis Burton, *Zanzibar: City, Island and Coast*, 1st reprint ed. (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1872; reprint, 1967), 312. Abdul Sheriff has proposed that the numbers of slaves in any given area— island or coast—fluctuated widely as the export demand for cloves, grains and oils rose and fell throughout the nineteenth century. Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770 - 1873* (London: James Currey, 1987). Nevertheless, slaves remained a significant portion of the population along the coast even after slavery was officially abolished by Seyyid Said’s grandson, Seyyid Hamoud bin Mohamed bin Said in 1897.

<sup>35</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 5-6. For Said the dominant group was the West, i.e. Europe and the United States.

<sup>36</sup> Including Said’s arch nemesis Bernard Lewis for whom Islam was (and is) always the “determining factor” of analysis. Cooper was particularly critical of Lewis for talking about “Islam’s attitude” toward racism. Islam he noted does not have attitudes, people do. Frederick Cooper, “Islam and Cultural Hegemony,” in *The Ideology of Slavery in Africa*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981), 273.

<sup>37</sup> Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar*, 49.

<sup>38</sup> See for example Fred Morton, *Children of Ham: Freed Slaves and Fugitive Slaves on the Kenya Coast, 1873 to 1907* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

<sup>39</sup> Abdul Hamid Mohamed el Zein, “Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977): 241.

<sup>40</sup> Cooper, “Islam and Cultural Hegemony,” 273 & 97. Some new work on the intellectual history of Zanzibar and East Africa may add some credibility to Cooper’s argument on the influence of the ‘ulama but it is very early days yet. I am aware of several people working in the field, one book on the topic that has been published, Anne K. Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860-1925, Indian Ocean Series* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003) and a Ph.D. dissertation, Amal N. Ghazal, “Islam and Arabism in Zanzibar: The Omani Elite, the Arab World and the Making of an Identity, 1880s-1030s” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Alberta, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 210.

<sup>42</sup> Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 82 – 83.

<sup>43</sup> Cooper's reading of *Sacred Meadows* in the 1980 article is noticeably less skeptical than his earlier discussion of it in *Plantation Slavery*. In that work, though he found Zein's analysis interesting and suggestive, like Romero later, he criticized the lack of a clear historical context for the study. As far as I know, Cooper has never discussed this change of mind.

<sup>44</sup> M.E. Combs-Shilling, *Sacred Performances: Islam, Sexuality, and Sacrifice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Laura Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-Abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890-1945* (Oxford: J. Currey, 2001). Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995). Helle Goldman, "A Comparative Study of Swahili in Two Rural Communities in Pemba, Zanzibar, Tanzania" (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1996).

<sup>45</sup> *Wanguwana* has had several meanings over time. In recent times, both Western scholars and their informants have translated it to mean "freeborn." However, as Jonathon Glassman notes, in earlier times it was translated as roughly equivalent to the English word "gentleman." Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*, 62. In his 1994 novel, *Paradise*, Zanzibari writer Abdulrazak Gurnah, translates the word to mean "a man of honour" Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Paradise* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 100.

<sup>46</sup> Abdul Hamid Mohamed el Zein, *The Sacred Meadows: A Structural Analysis of Religious Symbolism in an East African Town* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 19 & 41.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 109 - 15.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>49</sup> Frederick Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1533.

<sup>50</sup> Ann McDougall in her article on the life of a Moroccan slave, Fatma Barka, treats hegemony as Cooper seems to have intended it. She looks at Fatma's life as a concubine and Islam becomes the context in which Fatma negotiates and creates her identity. E. Ann McDougall, "A Sense of Self: The Life of Fatma Barka," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 32, no. 2 (1998). In other hands, (Jonathan Glassman and Helle Goldman) "hegemonic ideology" and "hegemony" look rather like raw power, which can then be resisted, or explanations in themselves for social differences. Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*, Goldman, "A Comparative Study of Swahili in Two Rural Communities in Pemba, Zanzibar, Tanzania".

<sup>51</sup> I believe questions of orthodoxy are more properly left to religious scholars or read as competing discourses to be used as 'evidence' by historians or anthropologists.