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Editors

Articulating Islam: Anthropological Approaches to Muslim Worlds

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Chapter 4

On the Skills to Navigate the World, and Religion, for Coastal Muslims in Kenya

Kai Kresse

Introduction

Recently, the point that ‘there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam’ has been pushed by my colleague Samuli Schielke (2010: 2). He argues that an over-emphatic focus on Islam and religious concerns in recent research on the Muslim world has obstructed more and more the view to understand adequately the complete scope of dimensions that shape people’s lives in their specific and complex realities as human beings. Aiming at such a grasp of an overall picture, however, should remain our goal as anthropologists. I share this basic concern. However, I think the problem raised is not inherent in the idea of an ‘anthropology of Islam’ as such (following the take of Asad 1986), leading to a sub-field of anthropology that pursues a legitimate research interest in investigating particularly those forms and aspects of social action that Muslim actors themselves qualify as linked to Islam, as a normative frame of reference that can, and often does, provide orientation (and motivation) for their behaviour. Rather, the problem occurs when researchers do not concern themselves with the contextualization and interrelation of Islam to other possible and applicable frames of reference that also play significant roles in people’s decision-making and conduct in everyday life. This may then result in the neglect of other dimensions of people’s realities that are part of – and often a much larger part of – the complex lives that people live. Anthropology has to be able to reckon with the multi-layered and diverse settings of daily lives that people engage in, and to acknowledge the fact that their conduct and engagement to a large proportion may not be dominated – or even significantly shaped – by reference to religion. Thus the view on religion, and Islam in particular, should not obstruct

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or reduce our perspective on people who happen to be Muslims in their full scope and capacity as human beings. Rather, it should help us tease out a more complex and nuanced perspective on the variety of contexts that they are engaged in.

Along similar lines, Benjamin Soares and others (Otayek and Soares 2007; Soares and Osella 2010) have recently made a case for a revised approach to the anthropological study of Islam – more precisely, the study of politics in Muslim contexts. They suggest the French term *Islam mondaine*, rendered as ‘Islam in the present world’ (2010: 11; following Otayek and Soares 2007: 17), as indicative of such a perspective. The authors elaborate that the term ‘*Islam mondaine* does not privilege Islam over anything else, emphasizing instead *the actual world* in which Muslims find themselves’, and they argue that employing it helps to avoid ‘narrowly instrumentalist analyses of the relation between Islam and politics’ as well as reductionist approaches casting ‘the politics of Muslims to an epiphenomenon of Islam or the micropolitics of ethical self-fashioning’ (Soares and Osella 2010: 12; my emphasis). Now, while I go along with this argument generally, I wonder if ‘Islam in the present world’ is indeed such a useful qualification, both of Islam and of the point made here about studying it, given that the expression refers quite simply to the existence of Islam in the contemporary world (and the contextual multitude of interpretations this entails). Perhaps the ambivalence of *Islam mondaine* is better captured by the English term ‘worldly Islam’, as indicating both the presence of Islam in the contemporary social world as well as a common ‘worldly’ orientation of Muslim actors in their everyday scenarios (as opposed to an ostensibly ‘religious’ or ‘pious’ one). Thus the benefit of using *Islam mondaine* or ‘worldly Islam’ lies in noting a kind of contextual presence of religion in the background of people’s everyday life, one that accompanies the worldly interests and experiences of people who happen to be Muslims. This goes along with anthropology’s ethnographic mission, to capture the specific, complex, and diverse ‘worldly’ contexts in which the people whom we study live – a disciplinary goal also emphasised by Michael Jackson who dwells on this term, ‘worldly’, while advocating a phenomenological approach (1996). It is along these lines of concern for ethnographic adequacy, which is indeed a concern raised by Schielke, Soares and others too, that I will keep this term in play for the purposes of this essay, to be taken up again in the conclusion.

My discussion here, of a few examples of individual Muslims from the Swahili coast during the colonial and postcolonial periods, relates to these considerations and picks up on different connotations of the term ‘world’. The link between my figures for discussion lies in their worldly engagement as Muslims, a practically oriented concern with social and political issues of their respective life-worlds. The illustrations below remain rather brief and sketchy, but they may illustrate the point that Islamic discourse and Muslim practice as performed by engaged individuals in the Swahili context are connected to (and also directed at) the ‘world’ in two significant ways: firstly the more immediate social world around them, and secondly the wider global world to which, on various levels, social connections have existed for a very long time, through networks of trade, kinship, and religion. For the purposes of this article I take it that the social engagement of these Muslims might rightfully be qualified as following such a sense of mundane or indeed ‘worldly

Islam'. This expression emphasises people's concern with worldly matters, stating that Muslims' engagement within their life-worlds and the wider world in mind at the same time, is indeed not *apart* from Islam but *a part* of it.

This resonates with the common Swahili expression *dini na dunia*, religion and the world, which seems to separate and at the same time combine religious and worldly matters as two distinct spheres of social engagement. While the phrase marks the two as different from each other, it also links them up together, and can be used to convey that proper (religiously informed) learning and understanding provides guidance to follow the right way in Islam as well as in social life – as, for instance, in the sub-title of an educational pamphlet discussed further below (Mazrui 1955).

Below I argue that the particular pool of knowledge, experience and skill from which individual Swahili Muslims can draw as a resource for their actions is shaped and accentuated through their (somewhat disadvantaged) positionality on the margins of *umma* and state. Yet this exposure to the long-ongoing experience of dominance from external forces that set the parameters for the political and religious community from the outside, can lead to patience and endurance – instead of just inactivity and frustration (a sense of which is prominent within the community) – as sources of know-how, resilience and strength that can be drawn from in order to tackle the practical obstacles and pressures that Muslims are facing as individuals and as community in a wider framework. However, we should also keep in mind that those people who manage to develop and cultivate such qualities as creative resources under adverse circumstances are exceptional in comparison to ordinary coastal Muslims on the whole. Their knowledge, resilience and social engagement is only representative for the Swahili Muslim context insofar as a particular set of social and historical constellations provides individuals the opportunity to develop themselves as such personalities who then take it upon themselves to speak up for the coastal Muslim community, or address and mediate certain matters on their behalf. Thus they illustrate a certain potential of social engagement and handling of affairs that is specific to the region and the (awkward) positionality of coastal Muslims within it and within a wider socio-historical context, at different historical points of time.

The emphasis and direction of what is illustrated below also differs in each case: the first example of Sheikh al-Amin Mazrui (d. 1947), a distinguished Islamic scholar, social reformer, and community leader, illustrates a strong self-critical perspective on the community that points to a disciplinary and educational path providing a possible way out of social difficulties. The second example, sketching out the pathway of the biography and career of another prominent Swahili Muslim intellectual, Sayyid Omar Abdalla (d. 1988), as teacher, administrator and mediator in the services of the colonial government, illustrates elements of flexibility, open-mindedness, adaptability and the ability to mediate between (specific and diverse) colonial, regional Muslim and personal interests. And the third example, of two younger men hosting a radio programme on a recently established Islamic radio station, illustrates how engaged and (self-)educated laymen of the younger generation can, through effort, discipline, and effective communication, become central to the ways that arguments and discussions within the coastal Muslim community are shaped.

Within the Muslim world and beyond, we can observe, in different regional and religious contexts, specific patterns and ways in which people, in their performances of everyday life, respond to the variety of social pressures and constraints that they are exposed to. These dynamics affect their self-perception, self-presentation and conduct, in public as well as in private. The Swahili coast is a long established part of the Muslim world and yet still seen, in different respects by local and external Muslims, as being on the ‘periphery’ of it. At the same time it has constituted the social centre and the point of reference and origin for an expanding and internally diverse regional East African Muslim community. Here, I am trying to explore, through historical and contemporary case studies, how the relations to external pressures and expectations affect and shape social and individual behaviour of Kenyan coastal Muslims within the community. What I am concerned with here is the positionality of coastal Muslims in Kenya, and particularly the ways in which being situated on the margins of both the Muslim world and the (post-)colonial state informs and underpins self-perception and social action. This challenge leads people to social engagement in response, picking up on skills that themselves are shaped by this positionality on-the-margins and involving a remarkable extent of knowledge and awareness about ‘the wider world’ to which the Swahili coast is connected. These skills, signifying a well-informed and open-minded attitude – if you want, a ‘cosmopolitan’ one – are brought into play when addressing issues of social and political concern for coastal Kenyan Muslims as they negotiate their status as religious and political actors in internal discussions. Below, I discuss three examples to illustrate these points: two Islamic scholars (one under British colonial rule, one experiencing both the colonial and postcolonial era) and a couple of engaged young makers of an Islamic radio programme for the local Muslim community. As a common leit-motif across these examples we can see how ‘having the wider world in mind’ informs and orients processes of discussion and decision-making among coastal Muslims on the Swahili coast. I will first specify the setting in more concrete terms before presenting the selected examples.

‘Kenyan’ and ‘Muslim’ on the Swahili Coast

Among Kenyan coastal Muslims, there is a strong sense of ambivalence on matters of belonging to the wider social world in religious as well as political terms. As Muslim citizens, they have encountered discrimination and suspicion by the state and its authorities, long before the efforts of an American-led ‘war on terror’ that Kenya participated in pronounced these aspects even more (see Seesemann 2007; Nassir 2008). This makes many of them feel regarded as outsiders or second-class citizens by the Kenyan state and the demographic majority of upcountry Christians who have dominated government since Independence from Britain in 1963. As African Muslims, or Muslims born and bred in Africa (of diverse ethnic backgrounds: South Asian, Persian, and Arab, next to African), they are particularly sensitive to instances of discrimination and belittlement as ‘lesser’ Muslims by their

Middle Eastern peers who, they feel, commonly regard themselves as culturally superior and better educated. Thus in the two relevant larger-scale social communities within which Kenyan Muslims are embedded, they experience a sense of tension. This places them on the margin of both larger groups of which they are members by definition, the *umma* and the state. In consequence, this creates an awkward and troubling scenario for the coastal Muslims concerned, who are cast as insiders and outsiders at the same time, people who do and do not belong. This is reflected in their sense of self, and this ambivalence of belonging for Kenyan coastal Muslims plays an important role in the ways in which people behave and act in everyday life. It also feeds into a historical continuity of political dependency. Over the last four centuries, ultimate political rule over Swahili coastal towns was exercised by external powers, notably Portugal, Britain, and Oman, who then put in charge rulers and administrators, drawing for support from the available quantum of local citizens to assist in running the affairs in their name. Thus over a long stretch of time, coastal Muslims have had to become used to dealing with external political domination. Yet being subject to and having to accommodate external rule also conflicted with their own sense of being the regional historical bearers of civilization (*ustaarabu*) and religion (*dini*) in East Africa, with direct connections to the wider Muslim world.

This ambivalent positionality of coastal Muslims in postcolonial Kenya may be called a 'double-periphery' (Kresse 2009). The term characterizes how coastal Muslims in Kenya are situated within the postcolonial state: experiencing the effects of policies by an adverse 'upcountry Christian' government while at the same time navigating the global politics within the Muslim world. Here, I want to engage more specifically with the thought of how this way of being positioned vis-à-vis dominant social powers and pressures in terms of firstly the *umma* (as a sphere of envisaged religious and normative unity that is constantly contested) and secondly the state (as a sphere of secular power and political control that seeks to suppress all contestation), leads to a broad scope of experiences and exposures which, in turn, create potentials and possibilities of engaging with specific issues that are part of one's local experience with the wider world in mind. In other words, I am interested in the idea that dealing with the challenge of being situated on a double-periphery, for local Muslims individually and also as a group, can result in the development of a range of skills that shape an open-minded and 'cosmopolitan' attitude and conduct – as people are acting in the contexts of their daily lives while 'having the wider world in mind'. This range of skills in turn may be drawn upon fruitfully as a kind of arsenal of ideas and approaches with which to handle regional politics, ideological disputes and internal moral dilemmas.

Below, I list and discuss some ways in which individuals in this position respond to and tackle this challenge. As their resource for this, I am convinced that the scope of exposure and the range of experiences that Kenyan coastal Muslims draw from play an important role. I seek to understand how these may feed into different layers of knowledge and registers of practice that they draw from and use in their everyday lives, both among their social peers, and also vis-a-vis members of other groups. These layers and registers qualify the unique position out of which they experience,

perceive, and then shape and negotiate, their immediate social world in relation to the wider world; and how they situate themselves, and others, within it, discursively as well as performatively. Hereby, being situated on the Islamic periphery may in some respects also constitute a kind of ‘privileged locus’, as Lambek indicated for Muslims on the island Mayotte (Lambek 1990: 26). Their particular range of exposures and experiences may, in response to being positioned on the double-periphery, feed into the constructive development and creative use of a well-informed and historically tested perspective. This, in turn, draws from diverse cultural and linguistic registers of knowledge that inform and help social actors to build up skilful and flexible ways of addressing and negotiating the problems facing the residents of such peripheries. To characterize their overall ability or skill to draw from such diverse registers of knowledge and experience in response to a diverse scope of specific situations on the ground, the term ‘cosmopolitan’ may be useful (despite its current fashionable and often superficial use) because it illustrates how local actors perform their everyday lives while having the wider world in mind. They appropriate knowledge and information from the outside world, adapt it to their own frameworks, parameters and needs, and use it creatively in the way they handle social pressures and build their lives, for themselves and their peers.

Is the periphery, then, and the Islamic periphery in particular, an arena where ‘knowledge’ is seen as particularly valuable and sensitive, in relation to – and possibly in contrast with – the supposed centres of relevant schools and traditions of knowledge, and possibly also in relation to power? While this question cannot be answered easily, it may be worth pursuing. Indeed, ethnographies on other regions of the Muslim world outside the so-called ‘Islamic heartland’ – e.g. the island of Mayotte (Lambek 1993), rural Indonesia (Bowen 1993), and northern Pakistan (Marsden 2005) – have highlighted some ways in which local actors deal flexibly and creatively with multiple (partly competing and partly incommensurable) traditions of knowledge, and how cultures of debate and intellectual discussion are important to everyday life. I will address these matters by means of brief ethnographic and textual examples from the British colonial and recent postcolonial periods, looking at individuals, texts and social dynamics on the Kenyan coast, mainly in Mombasa, an old Swahili town which is also Kenya’s second largest city and East Africa’s biggest port.

Historical Background – ‘under external control’ and Not ‘in charge’ at Home

The Swahili coast has been hosting Muslims from as early on as the eighth century C.E. (Horton and Middleton 2000: 49) and networks of Muslim traders in competing coastal city-states shaped the ‘golden times’ of Swahili trade and influence in the western Indian Ocean, before the arrival of the bellicose Portuguese in the late fifteenth century (Pearson 1998). The Portuguese, driven by imperial, missionary

and pecuniary motifs (Strandes 1961), constituted the first of a historical string of external groups who came to politically dominate the coastal region and its ports. Others in line were the Omani Arabs, and the British (and Germans, for colonial Tanganyika before 1918). This tradition of political dependency upon externally situated powers on the Swahili coast was continued – at least in the perception of coastal Muslims – after the end of the British colonial period, when African rulers from upcountry took over. Historically, these ‘upcountry’ people (*wabara*) who were mostly Christian were seen as adversaries by the coastals (*wapwani*), who had not been in full charge of their own affairs for a long time and thus had to deal with alternating instances of external domination during different stretches of the colonial and postcolonial experience. Specific antagonisms and alliances existed during each of the phases, and the relationship to the Muslim rulers was categorically different to that with Christians, as a common bond of religion created closer proximity and made longer-term processes of social integration possible: the Omanis, like other incoming Muslim groups (Hadramis, Baluchis et al.), over time became part of Swahili society. This constitutes part of the historical background to a scenario that Kenyan coastal Muslims have been situated in since well before Independence. Politically speaking, they have been on the periphery of the administrative units or spheres of influence that they were part of, and administered by, for a long time.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the fact that coastal Muslims are on the periphery of the postcolonial Kenyan state is their (often experienced and much talked about) difficulty in obtaining official documentation, especially passports and the national identity cards that every citizen is by law required to carry – which leads to regular police controls around the country whereby policemen ‘charge’ a certain ‘fee’ from all those without ID in order to be released from custody. Here, one often hears complaints that Muslim applicants for IDs or passports are required to submit not only their own birth-certificate (which suffices normally) but also those of their parents and grand-parents. This demand can rarely be met (not least due to the lack of complete provision of birth certificates), so that often bribery is the only way to such a document. Based on such experiences, they feel discriminated against as second-class citizens in Kenya, and this view of them as supposedly lesser citizens is also projected in other instances of public discourse and administration.

For a better possibility of comparison with other Muslim contexts, further details about the internal diversity of the Muslim community should be mentioned. The dominant majority group here has been Sunni Shafii for centuries. Religious leaders are either *sheikhs* or *sayyids* (*masharifu* in Swahili, families linking their descent back to the Prophet Muhammad), often belonging to long-standing Hadrami networks (of the Alawiyya *tariqa*; see Bang 2003). These consist of scholars and traders with long-term roots in the region, while there is a constant flow of incoming and outgoing members between the Hadramaut, the Comoros and various parts of the Swahili coast. Other relevant Sufi branches in the region are Qadiriyya and Shadiliyya. Significant minority groups are the Ibadhis from Oman (especially with the move of the Sultanate to Zanzibar around 1840), and the Shii groups of Ismailis,

Ithnasharis (recently grown in size through African converts) and Bohras, as well as other Muslim sub-groups of sailor and trader communities from across the western Indian Ocean, especially South Asia (see Salvadori 1989).

Between Worlds, Regionally

Being situated between different kinds of cultures, ethnic groups, economic systems and religious and political forms of authority and control – and thus, being pushed or obligated into a mediating role of corresponding sub-varieties – has been a continuous feature of urban communities on the Swahili coast. Hereby, they are ‘facing both ways’ (Parkin 1989), toward the trading communities of their Arabic- or Gujarati-speaking Muslim peers across the Indian Ocean on the one hand, and on the other toward the communities of hinterland allies, the Mijikenda, who provided labour, military support and a potential pool of future citizens and dependents. This has been documented historically and discussed from diverse angles in relation to different ethnographic perspectives, regional contexts and historical periods (e.g. Willis 1993; Parkin 1991). For the contemporary Kenyan coast, recent research on the Boni on the Northern Swahili coast (Faulkner 2006), and on the relations between the Giriama and the Swahili in Malindi, a port-town not far north of Mombasa (McIntosh 2009), shows and analyzes in context the intertwined negotiation of ethnic, linguistic and religious identity on the coast and hinterland. In both cases, the urban-based Swahili Muslims are seen (and in part resented) as privileged counter-parts who are economically better off. They are portrayed as well-versed in their linguistic and religious knowledge as well as in business strategies, and thus present pathways of opportunity to financial and social independence (beyond the reliance on family networks), as assimilating the urban-based Muslim community is easily possible. Swahili Islamic and trading networks in the Boni and Giriama areas thus connected these groups of historical hinterland-dwellers to the wider world outside, and in turn they affected and shaped their existent social worlds in economic and religious terms. This continues to be an ambiguous relationship for both sides, as the connection and mediation has brought to the fore a set of chances, dangers, and sensitivities. Within the northern Swahili region, these studies attest to an ongoing and complex historical relationship between long-term neighbours, one that includes mutual antagonism as well as interdependence. Becoming Muslim, marrying into the urban-based community and cultivating one’s linguistic abilities in Swahili in a pronounced way, leads to membership in the urban community. But even if processes of ‘Swahilization’ and ‘Islamization’ here seem interlinked, there is no homogenous Muslim community that the new converts would immediately be part of, but a loosely united diversity of competing groups and strands – situated in the specific dynamics of particular urban communities themselves.

For the Swahili coast, I am tempted to speak of a parallel between the respective regional, national, and transnational frameworks applicable to the coastal Muslim

community: one could perhaps say that in the same way as their presence and mediation affects and afflicts these social groups living on the periphery of the coastal 'Swahili world' (the Boni and Giriama), the Swahili Muslim townspeople are themselves (as I sketched out) affected and afflicted by forces that are seen as external but at the same time constitute units to which they belong as well (Kenya, the *umma*). Feeling dominated, politically by the presence of the 'upcountry Christian' state, and in terms of Islamic ideology by externally coined reformist critique and missionary activities (partly initiated and funded from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, or Iran), the ambivalent relationship to these bigger forces in wider frameworks to which one belongs is, for individuals, reflected in a combination of reluctance and reliance. Possibilities towards connections and engagement with the wider world are opened (e.g. Islamic education in the Middle East, political participation and representation), but largely on the terms of those offering these possibilities (scholarships, or administrative positions). For individual actors in their specific circumstances and decision-making processes, taking this on board and anticipating the demands, constraints and limits within which they would be able to fulfil their own aspirations and desires, and at the same time creatively using these markers of restriction as a potential that, rightly approached, can be used to make one's argument and build one's own way toward the aspired positions, is the challenge that needs to be handled and balanced.

'Between worlds', Globally Speaking

On a macro-level, looking at the global social relations within the wider Swahili-speaking community through its networks (including those from coastal Kenya), a similar scenario to that of the regional level, of being situated between different worlds, can be seen. As migrants, temporary or long-term, many families have relatives living abroad, in the West (UK, continental Europe, or North America) or the Gulf states, people who left as students or job-seekers of various kinds. Having brothers, uncles, aunts or cousins living in these economically powerful regions creates opportunities of migration and economic improvement for oneself (and one's immediate and wider family network), and the consciousness about these opportunities even by those family members who could not travel themselves, boosts their confidence and the range of practical opportunities to improve their own lives. The scope of experiences and the range of information gained in these countries, then (whether by first or second hand), informs and increases the varieties of knowledge and practice that individuals draw from in their everyday lives.

Something similar applies, again – just as in technologically well-connected urban regions all over the world – to the ways that new media are used, especially by the younger generation, as sources of information and means of communication. Over the last decade in Mombasa, for instance, internet access has become easy, reliable, and affordable to a broad scope of citizens who can use a sizable number of public internet cafes (open to both genders without separation) from early mornings

until late at night. Many entertain email-relationships to friends and family members in the countries and regions mentioned above, and the use of websites for socialising, but also for education and information on politics and religion, and other practical matters, has become a relatively wide-spread phenomenon. A large range of Swahili-speaking websites exists, on almost any kind of topic. Next to music and social networks, websites by locally and globally competing Islamic networks are also popular. Texts, as well as audio-and video-recordings of lectures by leading Swahili Islamic scholars can be found. Overall, the internet is being used broadly and by many people, for private and professional ends, in worldly and religious matters. As elsewhere in the world, its use covers and shifts between education and flirtation, news and politics, Hollywood and Bollywood, football and other sports, and many kinds of chat-rooms and social networks. As in most urban centres around the world nowadays, people are online and connected to images, people, and institutions from elsewhere through the new media.

Swahili and Arab Worlds: Religion and Language

The characterisation of Swahili Muslims as situated on a ‘periphery’ of the Muslim world, vis-à-vis an Arabo-Islamic heartland, has to be qualified, as the region is of course part of a long inter-connected ‘global world’ of Islam (Loimeier and Seesemann 2006). While simple oppositions between centre and periphery are always problematic, focus on the translocal character of Islam has shown how Islamic networks span across regions in ways that do not always privilege the Arabic peninsula. For the western Indian Ocean, both the importance and the dynamic character of Islamic networks (historically the Hadrami, but also Omani and South Asian ones; today e.g. Saudi-Arabian, Iranian, and Pakistani ones) can only be understood with regard to a variety of factors that include religion, next to trade, kinship, and politics (for historical perspectives, see Bang 2003; Freitag 2003; Reese 2004; Simpson 2006; Salvadori 1989, 1996). On the Swahili coast, well-established links to the Hijaz but also other littoral Muslim communities have facilitated pilgrimage, education, and trade. To illustrate closeness between the Swahili and Arab worlds, we can, for instance, look at a prominent East African Islamic scholar of the early twentieth century, Sayyid Ahmed bin Sumayt (d. 1925; see Bang 2003). Born in the Comoros, of Hadrami background, and based in Zanzibar, he travelled to the Hadramaut, Mecca, Cairo, and Istanbul for several years of higher education, gaining an impeccable reputation over there. Later on, his close friend, Sheikh Abdallah Bakathir (d. 1925), followed his footsteps and earned the recognition of the Mufti of Mecca who sent him on teaching and mediating missions to Java and Cape Town (Farsy 1972: 25–29). Such examples prove an active integration of East African Islamic scholars into a global network of interactive *ulama*. Talking about them in terms of centre-periphery does indeed only make sense to a certain extent and as a matter of degree. Yet in contemporary local discourse among Swahili-speaking Muslims – and also traceable in Swahili

Islamic writings since the 1930s – a heightened sense of difference to ‘Arab’ Muslims comes across, of both admiration and rejection.¹ Over the course of my fieldwork, people often told me how they had found ‘Arabs’ (those based in the Middle East) prejudiced and arrogant in their behaviour towards ‘Africans’ or local ‘Arabs’ of the Swahili coast. Several of my friends and acquaintances in Mombasa had personal experience of visits or working stays in the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia, or they knew directly of friends and family who had been. They recounted that instances of mistreatments and discriminatory behaviour towards visitors and labourers from the Swahili coast (and other foreigners) by Arabs over there were common (though sub-differentiations according to countries and specific situations were important too). Often, I was told, passports would be taken in possession by the employers before work could begin, and were kept as a ‘security’ so that workers were bound to stay with the respective employer, even under bad conditions. This could lead to underpayment or even the denial of wages, as foreign lower-level employees were practically without legal rights or representation and treated without concern. When people told me such stories, they would make a contrastive remark, relating the lack of proper minimal consideration and respect for fellow human beings (and especially fellow Muslims) here to the explicit demands of hospitality and humility by Islam. Implicit here was the expectation that Arab Muslims, if anyone, should respond to such demands better and more completely than others, being, after all, from the core region of Islam and native speakers of Arabic. – Yet I also know of young coastal men who gained relatively well-paid jobs in the Middle East and felt respected; after their return, these people often use their acquired savings to invest in the founding of a small business back in East Africa.

Among ordinary Muslims on the Swahili coast, knowledge of the Arabic language is often associated (or even equated) with knowledge of Islam. Therefore, fluent speakers of Arabic are often seen as more learned and thus more advanced Muslims. For instance, the returning graduates from institutions of higher learning in the Middle East often impress fellow Muslims with their acquired Arabic language skills. In speeches, they may often use more and longer Arabic quotations and expressions than usual (from the Quran and other Islamic texts), and thereby risk losing their audiences who would usually not understand Arabic. And while many of the ordinary Muslims seem impressed by the supposed demonstration of Islamic expertise through verbal performance, others (especially among the older generation) resent such performances which they see as boastful shows which have little to do with substantial knowledge of Islam. In these circles, I repeatedly heard the mocking comment that for those returning youth from the Middle East anyone who could speak passable Arabic was already a ‘sheikh’. Such comments played

¹ Such difference is not usually associated with coastal East African Muslims with ethnic Arab background (Hadrami or Omani) who have become integrated into the Swahili context over many generations while keeping their transregional networks active. It might be associated however, with some of the East African scholars returning as ‘Arabised’ from their periods of higher education in the Middle East.

upon the (mistaken) assumption of equivalence between Arabic language and Islamic knowledge, and they implied that alongside an over-emphatic concern for language, an appropriate sense of recognition of substantial Islamic education had actually diminished. I also heard from some Swahili Muslims who had gone to study Islam in the Middle East in the past that they had felt treated as Muslims of lesser value, too. Thus, on whichever side of the argument coastal Muslims in East Africa stand, there is constant pressure upon them to prove themselves as properly knowledgeable Muslims (knowing the Quran, knowing Arabic, knowing proper manners) in order to be accepted by others, and to accept each other, as 'good Muslims'.

Tackling *umma* and Colony: Sheikh al-Amin Mazrui

One major regional school of Islamic thought has openly contested and rejected claims that the knowledge of Arabic could be equated with the knowledge of Islam, or that Arabic could be the only language of religious teaching and instruction. This follows the thinking of Sheikh al-Amin Mazrui who initiated the systematic use of Swahili as written and printed language of Islamic education. A so-called 'coastal Arab' of Omani descent, a student of Sayyid Ahmed bin Sumayt, and a member of the Mazrui clan which had ruled Mombasa between the 1730s and the 1830s, he was the leading figure of a regional East African movement of Islamic reform from the 1930s, and was himself inspired by the writings of Muhammad Abdu and Rashid Rida and his influential journal *al-Manar* (Mazrui 1980: xi). He used Swahili to publish regular Islamic pamphlets that contained critical commentaries on social developments within the coastal Muslim community with a view to British colonial rule and the wider Muslim world. Addressing coastal Muslims in their own language he sought to increase their critical consciousness as well as their general and Islamic education. For the latter, the knowledge of Arabic ultimately did indeed remain a crucial tool. In a text called 'The Arabic language and Muslims' (*Lugha ya Kiarabu na Waislamu*) written around 1930, using Swahili language in Arabic script as part of the weekly circulated double-sided sheet of paper called *Sahifa* (Arabic for 'page'), Sheikh al-Amin emphasized the importance for all Muslims to learn Arabic properly, as a means to acquire the necessary Islamic knowledge for proper guidance (*uwongozi*). He characterised Arabic as God's gift to *all* Muslims, as a unifying language that did not belong to Arabs only, before going on to lament that 'the dire straits that we are in today are to a large part due to the fact of not knowing Arabic, and because of this, we have reached a state where we understand neither religious nor worldly matters anymore' (Mazrui 1955: 22). With regret he points out the 'stupidity' (*ujinga*) of a Muslim who prays and does not know what he says, or who recites the Quran 'like a parrot' (*kama kasuku*), without any understanding. By starting *Sahifa*, a selection of whose articles was published and reprinted twice between 1944 and 1955 in a small book with the title *Uwongozi* (Guidance), Sheikh al-Amin Mazrui had introduced

Swahili as a mediating language to disseminate Islamic (and general) education to a wider public – yet in this particular text he also anticipated future times when all Muslims would be sufficiently trained in Arabic so that the need for this kind of Swahili writing would cease. A highly influential Islamic scholar in the region, he was also an important social critic who in his pamphlets raised critical questions about the colonial regime, Christian missionaries, Western values – and also his own community. He resented the fact that Muslim school-children should know the history of the British Empire better than Islam, and be more knowledgeable about ‘civilization’ (*ustaarabu*) in Western than in Islamic terms.

Sheikh al-Amin can be seen as a role-model for a kind of regional cosmopolitan perspective grounded in the knowledge of Islam and society, and inspired by diverse and overlapping backgrounds. Perfectly bilingual, in Kiswahili and Arabic, yet wary of politics and the institutions of power, he endorsed the pursuit of modern science and technology as part of general education among Muslims, for their own intellectual and social development. This is well illustrated in the education of Sheikh al-Amin’s own son Ali – now a world-famous professor of political science and African Studies based in the USA – who was sent for secondary school and university degrees in the colonial centre (with stations in Huddersfield, Manchester, and Oxford; Mazrui 2006: xi) before returning to East Africa as professor at Makerere University in Uganda, one of the former pearls of East African higher education from the colonial to the early postcolonial times.

In another pamphlet reprinted in the *Uwongozi* collection, called ‘How are we imitating the Whites?’ (*Namna gani twaigiza Wazungu*; Mazrui 1955: 6–8), Sheikh al-Amin Mazrui voiced a sharp critique of coastal Muslims for imitating particularly the bad habits of the British colonial expats, such as drinking, flirting, dancing, idling, and also engaging in sports such as golf and football. In contrast to such, as he saw it, meaningless or irresponsible behaviour, he observed some of the good and recommendable features of conduct among the British (good discipline, focus on education, hard work, technical training and engineering) being picked up and made useful by upcountry Africans. These were often Christian converts, historically regarded by coastal Muslims as less civilized and more ‘backward’ in cultural and educational terms. Now, as Sheikh al-Amin castigated coastal Muslims for copying the bad habits of the colonials while their upcountry adversaries were cleverly picking up on useful aspects, he already pointed at a potential future political scenario in which coastal Muslims could loose out to better qualified and more diligent upcountry Christians (which indeed came to ring true after Independence).

In conclusion, he put particular emphasis on the recommendable aspects in which the ‘whites’ (*wazungu*) educate their young women to responsible and knowledgeable mothers, care-takers, and cooks – and he encouraged these points for imitation. As we can see, Sheikh al-Amin demonstrated sensitivity and a critical eye for both the dangers and promises emanating from contact and exchange with Western colonials for the future of Coastal East African society. And he sought to get his points across to his Muslim peers in clear terms and a widely accessible manner.

Tackling *umma* and (Post-)colony: Sayyid Omar Abdalla, 'Mwenye Baraka'

Another important regional Islamic scholar example who mediated between Western and Swahili society, though in the later colonial period, is Sayyid Omar Abdalla (d. 1988)² from Zanzibar, locally known also as 'Mwenye Baraka' (The Blessed One, Owner of Blessing). He was successful in pursuing a twofold pathway of both secular and Islamic education, which was made possible through the support of the colonial administration. In fact, he is labelled a 'colonial teacher' in a recent comprehensive study of Islamic education in twentieth century Zanzibar (Loimeier 2009: 400). While he was a student of the Sufi-oriented scholar Sayyid Omar bin Sumayt, one of the most highly regarded *ulama* on the East African coast and son of the famed Ahmed bin Sumayt, he also went to Makerere University in Uganda, a premier site of higher education in British East Africa, to study biology (1939–1942). He qualified as biology teacher, and went to teach in Zanzibar at 'Dole', a Teacher's Training College. Later on, he went for further studies in Arabic and Islamic Law at SOAS in London (1952–1954), and in Philosophy in Oxford (for a BPhil degree, from 1961 to 1963), financed by the Zanzibar Government. The goal was to prepare him to head the newly founded 'Muslim Academy' back in Zanzibar. This he did from 1954, after returning from London and, on his way, having conducted *hajj* in Mecca and benefitted from an extended educational visit in the Hadramaut to maintain good relations within the established Alawiyya networks.

While running the affairs and teaching at the Muslim Academy, he continued to travel: next to many trips within the coastal region, he undertook educational visits to Hadramaut and Nigeria (there he established a direct link between branches of the Qadiriyya *tariqa*, while attending a conference on Islamic law; Loimeier 2009: 405–6). In 1963, he graduated from Oxford with a BPhil dissertation on 'The concept of felicity in medieval philosophy'. After the bloody revolution in Zanzibar in 1964, he was imprisoned for 2 months before being released by the revolutionary leader Karume himself (apparently because he had taught a number of revolutionaries). In 1968, he was again personally released by Karume after being imprisoned for coordinating the interests of local *ulama* vis-à-vis the revolutionary socialist government (Loimeier 2009: 407). Following these difficulties, he moved to the Comoros where his mentor Sayyid Omar bin Sumayt had become *mufti* in 1967. There, he was appointed a teacher of English for the French colonial government, on the condition of mastering the French language; for this, he was required to live a year in Paris, which he did in 1971. On the Comoros, he also taught at his own mosque, and was appointed as ambassador of Islamic affairs in 1975, before becoming a widely travelling representative of the Muslim World League. As an adept and flexible intellectual and an admired teacher who was good in dealing with people – remembered indeed as

² My account here is based on both Loimeier and Bakari, and on conversations in Mombasa and elsewhere about him, especially with Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir.

‘man of the people’ (*mtu wa watu*, in Swahili) – he was an important mediator between different social and educational worlds, bridging the Franco- and Anglophone colonial systems and the Swahili context. By example, he inspired young coastal Muslims to develop their own critical faculties in engagement with a large range of religious and secular sources and texts.

He was multi-lingual to the point that he was ‘at ease in Kiswahili, Shingazija, Arabic, English and French’ (Bakari 2006: 366). Through his widespread travels (in Africa, Europe and America) and teachings he worked hard toward ‘transcending local, racial, national and ethnic boundaries’ as a peaceful mediating figure (Loimeier 2009: 408) between parts of the world that, through the colonial system, were linked to each other yet at the same time seemingly disconnected and at odds with each other. Having lived while moving between different social worlds and political regions, he died in 1988 on the Comoros, of diabetes. In retrospect, one can say that he both benefitted from and used the colonial apparatus and its demands for qualified local Muslim leaders, teachers, and administrators. In fact these demands initiated and shaped his career path – as he was drawing from two intersecting life-worlds based on diverse normative frameworks and educational demands: the European colonial one (of Christian roots and secular orientation), and the coastal East African one (of Islamic roots and worldly character). Despite the fact that he himself had undergone and benefitted from modern secular education as well as the traditional regional Islamic schooling, ‘he played a significant role in defending the traditional approaches to Islam and the legitimacy of Islamic mysticism as an integral part of Islamic intellectual legacy’ (Bakari 2006: 368). This is also reflected in his honorary title with which he is remembered in East Africa: ‘Mwenye Baraka’ means the ‘Blessed One’ or ‘Owner of Blessings’. This title can also be read to highlight his kindness and goodness to people around him; people remember him as generous and gracious, interacting well with people of any rank and kind and making them feel at ease.

Among the Swahili elders (*wazee*) people continue to remember and admire both Sheikh al-Amin Mazrui and Sayyid Omar Abdalla, for their stance of advocating the combination of both Islamic and secular knowledge as part of a proper and overarching education. This is a legacy that is continued prominently today among large parts of the coastal Muslim population.

Tackling *umma* and Post-colony: On *Radio Rahma*, the ‘Voice of Mercy’

Changing the focus in terms of historical period as well as media, we now turn to the ways in which radio stations have recently been used by Muslims as discursive platforms to negotiate internal divisions, debates, and conflict. Set in a situation of post-9/11 politics in Kenya, in which Muslims are often treated as potential suspects of terrorism by the government, coastal Muslims present a vulnerable

minority needing to prove their loyalty to the state (Seesemann 2007). What I found remarkable in the efforts of a couple of young Muslim radio makers who I got to know quite well was the dedicated way in which they tried to use and shape a local Islamic radio station as a means of constructive (and unifying, if also controversial) debate within the *umma*.

Picking up on the relaxation of media laws after the change from President Moi to Kibaki at the turn of 2002–2003, the son of a recently deceased well-known coastal politician opened a small Islamic radio station in Mombasa. The station began by broadcasting recitations of the Qur'an and religious poetry during the month of Ramadhan in 2004. This was well-received within the Muslim community, and the owner felt encouraged to establish a complete broadcasting programme, consisting of news bulletins, discussions and phone-ins, as well as educational broadcasts, quiz shows and brief advertisements by local businesses, apart from the ongoing element of religious recitations and Islamic music.

Here I focus in on a phone-in programme dealing with current social and political issues regarded as important for the *umma* by the makers, two young men in their late 30s or early 40s. They had managed to build up a reputation for their programme by successfully engaging a regular and active audience, men and women of different ages who called in or sent text messages to contribute their questions and comments. The two men I will call Saidi, a man whom I knew well from my previous fieldwork, and Ali, who was one of the few full-time employees of the radio-station (and whom I got to know well during many conversations). Ali was one of the two or three main moderators of *Radio Rahma*, and he was on air during early morning, afternoon, or evening hours, depending on the broadcasting schedule. Apart from the joint programme with Saidi, he also moderated quiz shows and advertising phone-ins, and he ran an evening show ranked around the discussion of social issues concerning the Muslim community, giving voice to representatives of local youth initiatives one time and interrogating a local politician on his record another. Ali was well educated in Islamic and secular terms, and spoke Arabic and English well, apart from Kiswahili. Stemming from the coast, near Mombasa, he had moved to Nairobi where he completed media training courses and worked for Kenya's first Islamic radio station, *Iqra Radio*, before joining the *Radio Rahma* team.

Radio Rahma became very popular with local Muslims of different age and gender over the first years of its existence. When listening in to the programme during several visits between 2005 and 2007, I witnessed a vibrant and steady participation from listeners in phone-in programmes, with men and women of different age groups (and educational backgrounds) contributing engaged comments and questions, complaints and suggestions to carry further the queries and discussion initiated by the makers. Ali contributed to the success story of *Radio Rahma* in no mean way, it seems to me. He was able to bring in a rare and well-balanced combination of abilities that qualified him perfectly for the job as moderator in a radio station that was Islamic but also worldly in outlook, and wanted to be in touch with the thoughts and feelings of ordinary Muslims in their everyday lives. Apart from his education and verbal skills, he was truly gifted in the art of relating to people, with

an air of politeness, seriousness and respect. Yet he was also flexible and able to adjust, when need be, to create a sense of sincere encouragement for callers for whom it was hard to talk and express themselves, or to assert an authoritative position vis-à-vis people who were either taking too long or violating the rules of politeness and proper expression. He had a pleasant voice and carried himself somewhere between statesman and sportsman, between journalist and scholar, as everyone's potential friend and interview-partner.

Ali's co-moderator of the show and its main initiator was Saidi. He did not have previous radio experience or media training before going on air, but he too brought in a mixed background of qualities that contributed much to the interest and positive feedback that their programme generated. As a former musician he was used to perform in front of audiences. He was a good speaker who employed simple rhetorical skills to much effect: speaking slowly and clearly, in short sentences and able to focus in on a few keywords that would stick in the minds of the audience. He was known within the Muslim community for his previous initiative to start off a kind of independent social consciousness movement among young Muslim men a few years back. Then, as a religious layman, he had given regular public speeches in local mosques, criticising the Muslim establishment for not showing engagement and solidarity for their disadvantaged ordinary peers, and criticising common Muslims for not standing up for themselves to improve their circumstances. His contributions to the radio programme were inspired along such lines of social and political engagement. Saidi had also travelled extensively in East Africa, and lived in difficult circumstances (among poor, desperate and hungry people). Based on these experiences, he had a good way of addressing and speaking out for the disadvantaged, pointing at social problems that were otherwise often kept hidden. Saidi had also built up a reputation among local Muslim youths of speaking up against established social divisions of tribalism (*ukabila*) and religion (especially through *madhhab*) that he saw obstructing the perspective for social progress.

What made Saidi popular on *Radio Rahma* is the programme in which he appeared twice a week during two morning hours, next to Ali who acted as moderator and facilitator. This revolves around the discussion of pressing, contentious or sensitive issues to the Muslim community, selected and introduced by Saidi. The format is such that Saidi starts off with a brief prepared speech on the topic, after which the listeners are invited to contribute by asking questions or airing their views. Practically oriented broadcasts I listened to included a critique of the Mombasa City Council for letting the water hydrant system deteriorate, leaving hydrant locations unmarked and broken water-pipes in disrepair. Saidi highlighted that such neglect caused serious health risks and problems to use the hydrants in an emergency. During this programme, people phoned in to provide concrete information about where in Mombasa repairs and demarcations needed to be done. This had an almost immediate effect, as I saw a day or two after that broadcast when city council workers were marking hydrant locations in bright yellow paint at different locations in the Old Town.

Over time, Saidi and his host Ali tackled a number of controversial topics by phone-in discussions, stirring up or re-igniting public interest and debate. Among

such topics were, to name just a few: a critical look at the economy of the Kenyan coast and how (which in Saidi's eyes had been misused by the upcountry government); the sensitive historical question of how and why the coastal Independence movement of 'Mwambao' had failed in the early 1960s (discussed with one of its former representatives); how social life and educational awareness on the Kenyan coast compared to other Muslim regions in the world (discussed with a Kenyan Muslim professor living in Turkey). Their programme became something of an institution within the Muslim community of Mombasa. Several initiatives on matters of local politics and social well-being were sparked off through them, and both were regularly approached by private people, businessmen and local functionaries for further or information. Saidi made it clear from beginning that he would be able to back any statement he makes by documentary evidence, and many people of diverse status and background found this impressive and reassuring, while for members of the criticized Muslim establishment this constituted a source of worry and concern.

Taking Stock: Comparative Aspects

In terms of a general attitude, we can speak of an historically grown open and convivial Islam on the Swahili coast, one that has at all times been connected to the shifting wider trends of Islamic doctrine and ideology within the Muslim world – and affected by them (recently, for instance, sharp ideological attacks by so-called 'Wahhabi' and Salafi reformists have been prominent in public discourse). At the same time, the Muslim community has largely been open towards other, incoming, conceptual frameworks and beliefs, and accommodative to local customs and traditions. This characterisation is not meant as a simplification or even homogenisation, for the internal diversity of Islamic factions and sub-orientations is remarkable, deriving not least from the multiple ethnic and regional backgrounds along the western Indian Ocean that were integrated here. The last decades have seen such an increase of internal rivalry and ideological confrontation among Muslims that the general features of openness and conviviality seem in danger (as in other parts of the Muslim world too). Yet these features, borne out of the multiple and complex historical, ethnic, and regional underpinnings of Muslim society on the Swahili coast, were the ones that made possible and sustained the long ongoing co-habitation of Muslims with non-Muslims (and Muslim others).

Let me pick up again on the term 'cosmopolitan' used above. While I am sceptical of the recent inflationary uses of the term (see Simpson and Kresse 2007: 15), I do find it useful to characterise an attitude of engaging oneself locally that draws from the available resources of worldly knowledge and knowledge about the world – with the wider world in mind, so to speak – even if partly as a result of (possibly adverse) historical circumstance and social pressures. This, I think, is common on the Swahili coast, also and significantly due to the fact that the social world is and has been situated 'between worlds', in close relation to a variety of other

worlds by which it is influenced and in which it is partaking. These may themselves exist in a relationship of fundamental social tension (as the Muslim world and the Kenyan state) so that enduring and mediating this tension, or facing it and dealing with it, is a task that coastal Muslims have to face in their daily lives. My point here was to show how the historically existent double-challenge for local Muslims, of being subject to, and of having to respond to the (often conflicting) demands of *umma* and state, amongst other detrimental effects also encourages (or even pushes for) the development of particular skills of navigating the world (including the use of knowledge, language, and educational resources). Employing these appropriately, some remarkably adept and resilient people manage to address pressing social problems in a constructive manner which might well be called cosmopolitan. Such an attitude addresses both sides of demands and pressures on the double-periphery by drawing flexibly from the diverse range of available sources and resources.

Coastal Muslims in Kenya have been negotiating such demands of *umma* and state by accommodating them within the wider universe of regional Islamic discourse and practice, with all its internal contestations. I have illustrated my case with some historical, textual and ethnographic illustrations that are ranked around historical individual personalities. In conclusion, I would like to raise a comparative question for discussion: whether this kind of pattern (or should we call it 'potential') may also be observable in other regional contexts around the Muslim world, for instance in South-East Asia or South Asia, which are socially framed by similar constellations – a long history of Islam, of confrontation and co-habitation with non-Muslims, of imposed colonial and postcolonial order with structures that both constrain social practice and provide opportunities for exposure and development.

My wider argument here was about a kind of cosmopolitan sense of perspective being developed (or at least encouraged) by design, in terms of the external and internal pressures put upon local Muslims to prove themselves at the same time as 'good Muslims' (including good knowledge of Islam and Arabic) and 'good citizens' of a decidedly non-Muslim (and for many Muslims seemingly 'anti-Islamic') state which had initially been developed as a British colony and continues to be characterised by some of its features. The challenge has been to prove oneself in the face of such adverse constellations, as deserving members of both communities at the same time. This may in some ways be a contradictory agenda, precisely because the demands of the 'secular-Christian' state (itself a bit of a paradox) require distance from any explicit Islamic agenda and rhetoric while Islamic commitment demands negligence of (or even resistance towards) matters of the secular state.

So from the outset and through the set-up, coastal Muslims face a balancing act when trying to tackle the demands put to them. Thereby, their acquired knowledge and education, their use of language and verbal capacities, and the ways in which they are socially embedded in the community, are the recurring *topoi* within Swahili Islamic discourse. The coastal Muslim community, through its spokespeople and representatives, struggles against the impression of being of minor importance and on the margins of *umma* and state. In doing so, coastal Muslims draw from the long-term exposure to and experience of ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity that underpins and characterises Swahili society. We cannot

here go deeper into the historical dynamics that have shaped the coastal cities, largely by integrating newcomers from the outside (see Kresse 2012). But the resulting presence of social diversity in its multiple dimensions in the immediate urban neighbourhoods of course has created more mutual exposure to the ways that others live – Muslims or non-Muslims. We know that such exposure can lead to an increase of social animosities and an outbreak of open conflict between the respective groups, as much as to a boost of mutual understanding. In the Swahili context, too, such a breakdown of the precarious social balance has happened before. Apart from early historical battles between rivaling coastal city states and their communities, the so-called ‘Likoni clashes’ in 1997 were an instance where existent tensions between ascribed ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ – *wapwani* and *wabara* – led to violence, including some dead, many wounded and thousands of displaced people (HRW 2002). While this was then an orchestrated and successful attempt to stir instability and violence by the governing party, in order to divide residents, dispel oppositional voters and thereby secure re-election, the precarious social balance may be disturbed and toppled in different ways, from within and from the outside. Yet for the continuation of peaceful social cohabitation and interaction to be a (possible) reality, the balance needs to be kept stable. This spells out a general task for social communities around the world, pointing also to competing forms of cosmopolitanism, parochialism and tribalism existing uneasily and side by side on the same social terrain.

Conclusion

I have here described a certain social (historically grown) scenario within which people, through exposure to a scope of influences, are pushed or driven to develop performative abilities of acting with a wider world in mind. Socially, a rather open and convivial form of Islam has dominated over time – this has been challenged and threatened, but not overturned (until now). Individually, social actors who become engaged in facing the double challenge of the pressures of *umma* and state, develop their specific skill of navigating the world accordingly. The German term ‘*Weltgewandtheit*’, I think, aptly captures this in one word, signifying the knowledge or skill of moving appropriately in the world, or to tackle worldly matters well. This is an ability that individuals acquire and shape through a combination of talent, knowledge, experience and engagement with the world. In the examples above, we have caught brief impressions of how a few remarkable individuals have made use of the available sources and resources (of knowledge and experience) at their disposal to deal with worldly matters as part of their particular Islamic conviction. Through their social engagement, they acted as advisors, spokespeople, role-models or mediators for their social group. If this skill of *Weltgewandtheit* indeed captures an aspect of cosmopolitanism, it can be understood to build on two complementary aspects, an openness to the wider world (*Weltoffenheit*) and a pool of experience of it (*Welterfahrung*), as I have argued elsewhere (Kresse 2012).

These observations also speak, I think, to Peter Mandaville's description of trends of 'Islamic cosmopolitanism' in European contexts. He discusses Fethullah Gülen and Tariq Ramadan as providing viable and fruitful pathways of a civil Islam, which in different ways engage Muslims as responsible citizens in a wider public arena (the state) that is not at the forefront defined by Islam. Mandaville highlights 'pluralism and social civility' as key features characterising such 'Islamic cosmopolitanism' (Mandaville 2005: 320). He emphasises that these features could be key for fruitful and open-minded religious and political engagement within the Muslim world, and by extension, between it and the West. Here, I have pointed, from the perspective of my observations from the Swahili coast, to a regional example where pluralism and civility exist and intertwine too, possibly along similar lines. This may provide stimulation and food for thought for further comparison, both across regions and conceptual approaches – with Robert Hefner's work on 'civil Islam' (2000) in Indonesia as another obvious reference point, for instance.

Perhaps a few thoughts on the social actors described above are in order, in terms of the representative character and the exceptional position they hold within their respective Muslim communities. In their engagement, they go beyond the established confines of social groups, to invoke, in different ways, a sense of larger social unity for the benefit of their own community. As leading figures addressing social pressures and powerful external adversaries (as well as internal ones), they stick out. In contrast, many coastal Muslims are often seen to have succumbed to the established political paradigms and social circumstances that seem to work against them. Many ordinary coastal citizens are Muslims who have not managed to resist external pressures but become disillusioned as to their political future; this illustrates the gloomy picture on the Kenyan coast more widely.

The cosmopolitan attitude discussed here is not inherently linked to Islam, but, as I have tried to show, grows out of the conditions of experience that shape people's lives individually and socially, as a potential for actual practice that some individuals then do pick up on. The *umma* as global community of Muslims provides one possible frame (among several) of connecting, of being socialized and integrated into a wider social community that goes beyond people's immediate experience. The adjective 'cosmopolitan' might seem a difficult term, not least due to the fuzziness that has come about through a wave of references to it. But it might still be an appropriate adjective when qualifying the ways in which some individual Muslims (on the Swahili coast or elsewhere) address and negotiate matters of concern to them in social interaction with others, whether as leading-figures or ordinary people, in debates and discussions or through other means of communicative performance.

These concerns may be linked to or shaped by religion, politics, or other frames of meaningful social interaction. As far as the sources and references involved within these processes draw from and refer back to interpretations of Islam while the concern is sensitive to (or revolving around) worldly matters, by addressing social problems in everyday life, matters of moral conduct, or political issues relevant to the Muslim community, we may say that the actors described here engage in the negotiation of common social, moral and political problems through Islam (or their interpretation of it).

Picking up again on Soares and Osella's argument for *Islam mondain* as a paradigm of approach that is flexible and inclusive, particularly in terms of a social and cultural model and reference point for orientation (Otayek and Soares 2007: 19), I have suggested it might indeed make sense to speak of mundane or 'worldly Islam' when looking at examples such as discussed here. In the end, this would also mean, wary of the initial caution with which I started this article, to make sure to include enough 'world', the lived experience of social actors with a view to their hopes and expectations, in our ethnographic and conceptual investigations. Being able to capture much of the 'world' in which people live, rather than initially focusing too much on 'religion', is surely a good thing when trying to understand human beings (who happen to be Muslims) in their respective social contexts. *Dini na dunia*.

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