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# Multiculturalism through Spirit Possession

KJERSTI LARSEN

*Masheitani ya kibuki* are said to be Christian spirits from the Sakalava kingdom of Madagascar. Engagement with them can be understood as an elaborate way of handling sameness and difference within a basically multicultural, yet mono-religious, society. The narratives surrounding the spirits also recall the interactions of individuals and societies in the region of the Indian Ocean.

Recently, the ethnic distinctions between the inhabitants of Zanzibar have been highlighted. To belong to one or the other category has had different socio-political implications reflecting the changing power structures. The term *kabila* is used to denote what one considers to be one's place of origin such as waNgazija (from the Comoro Islands), waShihiri (from Yemen), waManga (from Oman), waHadimu (from the east coast of Ungula), waShirazi (from Shiraz, Iran), waSwahili (from the coast or mainland), and waHindi (from India). The notion of *kabila* implies an understanding of origin beyond the place where one currently lives and contains an aesthetic dimension, which relates to habits and ways of life. Although Zanzibar is described as a multicultural society, it is important to consider that the great majority of its population is Sunni Muslim. In this society, Islam coexists with a belief in spirit possession. Interestingly, practices around spirit possession do not negate an Islamic mode of life, but reflect the society's experience of everyday life.

## The spirits seen in Zanzibar

The terms *masheitani* and *majinni* both refer to the spirits. Like human beings, spirits are perceived as beings created and sent to earth (*dunia ardhini*) by God and do not indicate any link to the devil or to the

**Islam and Muslim societies often appear in the contemporary period, at least to the "Western" public, as if uncompromising, inflexible, and unwilling to adjust to modernity. Unfortunately this debate leaves significant aspects of Muslim ways of life and its inherent pluralistic dimensions in the shadow. Zanzibar—a Muslim and multicultural society off the East African coast, like other Swahili societies, has a diverse population, aesthetics and life-style. The multicultural dimension of the island of Zanzibar gets uniquely articulated through the popular belief in spirits called *masheitani ya kibuki* and the rituals performed on their behalf.**

concept of evil. Spirits are said to be both good and bad and just like humans are drawn between Allah and *Iblis*. They have sensory and emotional experiences, soul (*roho*), breath or the vital principle, as well as gender. By inhabiting the bodies of humans—both male and female—spirits have a physical presence in the human world. The spirits exist in distinction from their human hosts. Humans are believed not to be responsible for the actions and behavior of spirits, but are only responsible for their relationship to spirits. In this sense, spirits take the role of social players. The rituals performed on be-

half of *masheitani ya kibuki* illustrate the modes of interaction between humans and spirits.

## Ritual and the acceptance of "other"

A ritual usually takes place just outside the main entrance door of a house. Two big wooden chairs are placed in the centre of the ground straw mats, one for the king and one for the queen. In one end of the room—the end facing Madagascar, which is the spirits' place of origin, there is a table with the spirit's main remedies: a bucket filled with water and herbs, incense jars, white plates with Maria Theresa coins, silver bracelets, lime-stone paste (*talmalandi*), honey, bottles of imported brandy, cups, tobacco, and betel-nut. The ritual starts when the members of the ritual group come out of the house carrying ebony spears or sceptres with silver ornamentation, incense jars, and white plates with silver coins and bracelets. While proceeding they are, together with the audience, singing the opening song,—a praise to the great ones among these spirits. Then, both humans and spirits present, sit down on the floor. The ritual leader offers a prayer to the spirits in their *ki-buki* language since each tribe of spirits has its own specific language associated with their place of origin. The ritual then resumes with a prayer to God in the native language of the spirit, an important act for both Muslim Zanzibaris and Christian spirits, and is performed in the "universal way of praying" by the Zanzibaris. In Zanzibari society language is seen as an important indicator of identity and belonging, but not as a constraint to communication (differences—not even scriptural religious differences—are approached as definite).

The spirit inhabiting the ritual leader (*fundi*) is the king (*mfalme*) called grandfather (*Babu*). As king, *Babu* wants his feet atop a stool (*kibao*), and the sceptre in his hand. Arriving guests, human and spirits alike, greet the ritual leader by kneeling in front of her and *Babu* when he inhabits her body. The spirits usually initiate the interaction with the audience. If the spirits are attracted to someone among the audience they will give them coins, and also ask for coins from the audience. The spirits offer brandy to those whom they like. If they are in a good mood they might even give brandy to those who ask for brandy. Humans who are offered brandy have to drink it. If they reject the spirit will empty the cup on the head of that person. Both the drinking of brandy and the act of emptying a cup on the head of a person are disruptive acts, although anticipated and part of the ritualistic performance. During the ritual both spirits and humans consume alcohol. Since the spirits are Christians, not Muslims, Zanzabari Muslims

## Zanzibar coast



PHOTO BY KJERSTI LARSEN, 1997

maintain that they have to drink in order to make the spirits feel welcome and their faith respected.

Such a communitarian philosophy and tolerant awareness of other religious faiths reveals the essential acceptance of difference inherent in Zanzibari society. This open everyday-life philosophy also illustrates that it is possible to share space with, and accommodate, humans and spirits of different modes of being and living styles whether they are your guests or your hosts. Difference becomes a highly valued expression of social behaviour. Yet, there seems to be a fragile balance between being with and being against "the other." In times of crises an identification of "the other" as the cause of everything problematic, has so far, also in this society, shown to be a successful political strategy.

## The otherness of spirits and the otherness within

The experience of being inhabited by spirits should be analysed through the concept of "embodiment" which encompasses critical reflection. Through being embodied by spirits women and men can extend their understanding of themselves. Their self-awareness does not necessarily happen at the moment of spirit inhabitation, but can occur afterwards, in remembering, and discussing their experiences with the spirits. Moreover, by observing others being embodied by spirits women and men have the possibility of contextualising themselves in opposition to the spirits and recognising themselves in the spirits. Through observing the spirits acting and interacting with humans and other spirits in this world, Zanzabaris gain perspectives not only on their lives but also on their position in society and questions concerning identity, morality, and life-style. Important in this process of reflection are the dimensions of comedy and parody—dimensions evoked by the fact that the ways of spirits are characterised by excessiveness. Thus, laughter is associated with situations when the taken for granted modes of life and living (*ngoma ya kibuki*), are challenged and conflicting moral codes meet, such as the standardised forms of Islam and Christianity.

The spirits caricature human behaviour to the extent of parody, but they also present another viable way of life. The spirits represent, at one and the same time a duplication of and a contradiction to human beings; they are, simultaneously, the same as and different from them. In this world (*dunia*), spirits and humans can be seen to comment upon each other as well as upon the notion of difference and compatibility as such. In Zanzabari Muslim, multicultural society, notions and demarcations of difference form an inherent part of life and relationships. Both a distinct separation between self and other and their interconnectedness are expressed through the phenomenon of spirit possession. Hence, multiculturalism as reflected in relationships between humans and spirits should be understood in terms of interactions and identification, not as expressions of segregation and communalism.

Although a multi-cultural society, Zanzibari politics are not characterized by multiculturalism in the sense of flexibility and a motivation to accommodate difference. This is shown time and again, and especially in relation to the more recent introduction of multi-party rule and election procedures where precisely religious faith and places of origin were again turned into political issues of exclusion and inclusion. Still, within this political atmosphere the phenomenon of spirit possession allows people to live, reflect upon, and accommodate their experiences of difference and sameness with regard to the "other" both in their society as well as within themselves. By being embodied by spirits and thus, for a period of time becoming the other, individuals gain knowledge of what is for them, considered foreign. Observing relatives and friends going through a bodily transformation, becoming an other, Zanzabaris develop an awareness of identity which makes possible identification with the other, while at the same time, distinguishing between self and other, us-them. This sense of separatedness is maintained because of the distinction between humans and spirits that is never transgressed. Through the pluralistic presence of spirits of different origins and religious faiths and their ability to materialize in this world through the use of different human bodies, the other, otherness or difference become someone and something that is known and, at least, in ordinary daily life, livable.



PHOTO BY KJERSTI LARSEN, 1997

Zanzibar is a place constituted by migrating spirits and mobile people. And, the migratory ways of both humans and spirits within the Indian Ocean produces various forms of difference and sameness where inclusion characterizes daily life and exclusion is the main message of the dominant political ideologies.

## Objects used in spirit ritual, Zanzibar

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