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MARRIAGE, PURITY, AND IDENTITY AMONG THE SWAHILI OF EAST AFRICA

von

JOHN MIDDLETON

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I began writing this paper in order to present some ethnographic data from the Swahili of the east African coast so as to examine a well-known statement by Claude Lévi-Strauss:

....groups practising exchange can, if they like, practise both exogamy and endogamy simultaneously or successively. Exogamy enables them to diversity alliances and to gain certain advantages...; while endogamy consolidates and perpetuates previously acquired advantages...By means of the one, a group opens itself to history and exploits the resources of chance; while the other assumes the preservation or the regular recovery of patrimonies, rank, and titles.

["On marriages between close kin"]

Some Swahili groups exemplify the former and others the latter of Lévi-Strauss' two models. But it is not as clear-cut as that, since every descent group practice both forms of choice. Swahili marriage is a strategic exercise performed by the heads of descent groups who are very aware of its functions and consequences. Their role of international merchants is central to the choices that they make from the range of culturally acceptable possibilities open to them. However, I soon realised that I was writing about several interrelated matters. From the viewpoint of the Swahili, marriage patterns are a crucially important matter as a strategy for ensuring the legitimacy and identity of descent lines. But from outside, I realised that I was writing about cultural identity in a wider sense. This paper is an attempt to discuss this wider sense of the matter.

The Swahili (who rarely use this name for themselves) number about 300,000 to 400,000 people living in a string of small settlements along the 1000-mile long coast from Mogadishu to Mozambique, although interspersed with non-Swahili groups; they have no

obviously bounded territory of their own. They have for centuries been a mercantile middleman society acting as economic and cultural brokers between various forms of Asian and European capitalism and proto-capitalism providing manufactured goods, on the one hand, and African pre-capitalist producers of natural and unprocessed commodities such as slaves, ivory, and gold, on the other. They have never formed a single polity but a congeries of autonomous and competing towns. And they have always been subject to alien states, Arab, European, and modern African, from the beginnings of this society during the first millennium to the present day.

There are two kinds of settlement, both known as "towns", mji, pl/ miji. They vary in modes of production, forms of descent and stratification, roles of women and men, and notions of purity and honor; all are Muslim and literate. Those that I call Stone-towns are densely built-up places, formerly seats of petty rulers, engaged as middlemen in the international trade. Those I call Country-towns are really large rambling villages, engaged not in international trade but in provision of food and services for the Stone-towns.

Country-towns are in the main ethnically and culturally homogeneous, and lack elaborate stratification. On the other hand Stone-towns are highly diverse in ethnic origins, and are organized in many series of social and cultural hierarchies defined in terms of ancestry and religious, moral, and sumptuary behavior. Country-towns reckon descent cognatically, Stone-towns mainly patrilineally. Here I discuss them, and especially the constituent groups known as waungwana or "patricians" of the Stone-town of Lamu, in north-eastern Kenya. The Lamu patricians number about 6,000 people belonging to about 20 sub-clans; there are probably no more than 12,000 patricians along the entire coast today, so they are a small minority; but their cultural behavior is considered the epitome of Swahili culture and although poor today they still enjoy high prestige.

II

The internal structure of a Stone-town is fluid. Lamu, like all Swahili towns, is divided into two named territorial moieties, separated by a central congregational mosque. There are about 20 other mosques. The dividing line has changed to accommodate changing population size and distribution, and when that happens the identity of the central mosque is likewise changed. The people of Lamu have also been divided into two named demes, not territorial but formerly the traditional organs of town government, now lapsed; the names are still known, but little used. There are some 30 named wards. In the northern moiety there are some 20 patrician subclans, each consisting of patrilineages that have been until very recently corporate trading houses. The subclans are named and ranked, most claiming to be segments of clans in Arabia and bearing both Arabic and Bantu (Swahili) prefixes, according to who is speaking of them. Most are related to similarly named subclans in other coastal towns. Wards and lineages are coterminous in neither name nor location. In the southern moiety there are no patrician subclans, only descent groups of Bajun fishermen, Hadhrami Arab immigrants from the late 19th century, and the descendants of slaves known as wazalia, "country-born"; all these are reckoned as Swahili. There are also Kikuyu and other up-country immigrants, never called Swahili and seen as representing the despised national government.

There are two important factors here. One is that subclans are not segmentary organizations: lineages may join from elsewhere merely claiming common origin; the second is the privatization of resources. The Islamic institution of waqf makes an entail on a house or plot, or sets up a charity. These rights are without time limit, and essentially the meaning of waqf is that the property may never be sold or given away (although a few houses have been sold to Europeans, who stand outside the local hierarchical system).

III

Let me say a little about identity as it affects the Swahili. What may be called the "external" identity of any people is twofold, one identity being given by outsiders and one by the group itself (the names may be the same). In Africa an external identity was either given by a colonial power or the indigenous one was confirmed by that power, in order to categorize and control the various populations. Typically every so-defined group was aware enough of its situation to use its colonial identity as a weapon to emphasize its own sense of coherence and to ensure that it gained its share of administrative services and officials. To enter the new arenas of wealth and representative government a group needed and benefitted from a colonial identity, and many fought to acquire one or claimed to have had one before colonialism. The same was true of the Swahili under British colonial rule.

The name "Swahili" was first used by the colonial Arab Sultanate of Zanzibar in the 18th century. The name, from the Arabic sawahil, "coast" or "edge" referred to the coast people whom they found there and subjugated. and then defined as non-Arabs and so as marginal Muslims. The Swahili came to use it as a newly defined identity in face of the Zanzibar enemy, as well as continuing to use membership in a particular town to be more important in everyday affairs (eg Mwamu, a person of Lamu).

The British were allies against the Sultanate. At first a colonial census would show the coastal population to be entirely "Swahili", as a form of opposition to the Sultans. A later census would show only a handful of "Swahili" and most people to be "Shirazi", an identity invented to claim an earlier non-Arab but still Muslim origin in Persia. Once the power of the Sultanate was weakened by the British many Swahili came to call themselves "Arabs", to escape certain fiscal and legal disadvantages. Today "Swahili" is used in protest against the administrations of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. Swahili refer to their new rulers

as "WaAfrika", Africans, an epithet of scorn as showing them to be non-Muslim, uncivilized, and fit only to be slaves.

In brief, to see "Swahili" as merely an identity "invented" by colonial governments, as a "tribe", is naive. The main factors, among others as well as Swahili, have not only been colonial policies but also the inner structural contradictions within a given society. Let me turn now to these inner structural oppositions and contradictions and the "internal" identities of members of the coastal towns, and the uses made by them of ethnicity.

IV

Throughout Swahili history has run the dilemma of origins. The Swahili form a Janus-society, facing both Africa and Asia with themselves at the precarious middle; yet, although they have been weak within the total trade system, in a very real sense they have controlled it by being the brokers between culturally different peoples with no direct contact with one another. Most Swahili towns have been on the same sites for at least a thousand years. The sites were first occupied by Cushitic pastoralists, today represented by only a few hunting and gathering remnants behind the coast. The sites were taken over by Bantu-speakers during the first half of the first millennium, who built up the mercantile role of these settlements, first by trade with the Yemen, then Oman and the Hadhramaut, Persia, India, China, Indonesia, and the Levant, on the one side, and with the hinterland and the more distant interior, on the other.

Islam was accepted during the 10th and 11th centuries, and the towns have since been centres of devotion and scholarship, ustaarabu or civilization and utamaduni or urbanity, set in a wasteland of barbarism, ushenzi. At the core of Lamu are its patricians, the main producers of non-agricultural wealth, the local leaders of Islam, with the responsibility for the continuance of the all-important trade. Around this core have been clustered marginal

categories: slaves and their descendants, descendants of concubines, local fishermen, hunters, lower-rank Arab immigrants, long-settled Bohra Indian retailers, and others, all to some degree amalgamated as Swahili (as were in time even the upper-class Arabs of Zanzibar).

The patrician merchants of Lamu and of other towns have faced perennial problems: ensuring a favorable position in the market and retaining their subclans' wealth over the generations; the ambiguities of their ethnic and cultural origins; and the defining and retaining their distinct identity as against all others, whether of the overruling colonial powers, patricians of other towns, their own non-patricians, and the many neighboring peoples with whom they have maintained a symbiotic relationship in which their own superiority has been uncertain. Any patrician subclan has also to compete with others of Lamu. These problems have involved the definition of internal identities. It has not been a question of being identified by colonial and post-colonial administrations but of constructing a pattern or world of moral coherence with themselves at the ill-defined and unstable centre.

The patricians are also in a perennial commercial quandary. A lineage, as a corporation, must be exclusive so as to keep property and profits within it; but at the same time it must make and retain useful ties with both related and unrelated groups elsewhere. They solve the quandary by the careful arrangements of marriages of daughters and by the notion of purity. The marriages of first-born patrician daughters are arranged by early betrothal, are monogamous, and have rare divorce. A first-born daughter is typically married to a paternal parallel cousin, or to a cross-cousin so long as he is of the same lineage. The cousin chosen should be that cousin who has already been selected to become future head of the lineage as a commercial business house. Marriages of later-born daughters are more usually with cross cousins (defined now essentially as of the same clan, of the same or

another town), may be polygynous, have higher rates of divorce, and may be with distant trading partners. There are of course many ways of reckoning kinship, and the formal rules are adjusted to take note of remote "parallel cousins". Strategic choices and correct rank can be ensured by making desirable mercantile partners into close kin by adoption of children, even of unborn children. This is later validated and sealed by formal betrothal, which removes the vagaries of actual kinship and birth and ensures a proper and regular ongoing series of marriages.

Patrician sons are married with rather different factors in mind. The elder ones are typically married to a paternal parallel cousin, of the same lineage. Others marry cross cousins, and the term may be extended very far in order to "catch" daughters of poorer patricians elsewhere who may be of use as new or future trading partners. And some may make secret or clandestine marriages with non-patrician women who have money or useful skills and who find marriage (although secret, siri, it is legal) with a patrician socially useful for her own personal career. These marriages, and most later-born daughters' marriages, may be seen as exogamous, with the deliberate purpose of extending trade partnerships and networks.

Residence after the marriage of a patrician first-born daughter is uxorilocal; in virtually all others it is virilocal. The bride's father transfers to his daughter inalienable rights of residence in a lineage house -- or in a floor of a house -- virtually always subject to waqf, so that she becomes the pivot in an uxorilocal marriage. This house is the same that was given to her mother at her marriage, by her father and so on back in time. But it is that mother's husband who legally transfers the rights. The house is owned by the lineage, but because they are parallel cousins the spouses are both of that same lineage. Marriages with distant cousins and other Swahili but non-patrician lineages are virilocal so that these wives

do not receive rights in a lineage house. Those few younger daughters married to trading partners in Arabia (of the same clan) do live uxorilocally, so that their husbands stay in the house when visiting, and trade exchanges are made within the house only (there have never been central markets other than the Zanzibar slave market).

The pattern is simple. Patrician paternal parallel cousin marriage encysts the patrilineage and also limits the spread of affinity. Those made by patricians with cross cousins and non-patricians are exogamous and do not do this, but make or strengthen distant ties by bonds of affinity. The first type of marriage and lineage encystment reassert lineage identity and cohesion over time; other marriages structure networks of kin and intertown relations.

V

Let me turn to the notion of purity, held by patrician women and crucial to patrician identity. I cannot here describe the rites of arusi or harusi, usually mistranslated as "wedding" but properly including both initiation and the following wedding as a single process. Its key element is the transformation of a female child into a wife, whose "beauty", ukuti (literally the green shoot at the top of a growing coconut palm), is brought out and then publicly demonstrated (by her wearing fine clothing, lavish cosmetics, perfumes, and jewelry) after her virginity has been demonstrated by the rite of "putting the groom inside". This "beauty" is seen as the external expression of the new completeness of her inner and potential purity that Swahili say is given by the removal of the incompleteness (and so impurity) of childhood and of menstrual and hymeneal blood and the demonstration of virginity. The giving of gifts at the wedding by the groom gives heshima, "honour" or "reputation" to both his and his wife's lineage. Women themselves do not gain honour but purity, but their wedding gives honour to the husband's line. Elaborate weddings (and they

are extremely elaborate and costly, taking up to a week) give purity to first-born daughters. They are not performed for later daughters except by the wealthiest and highest ranking lineages which thereby ensure even greater purity for their women and greater honour for their men. Women gain completeness from their purity, inward-looking; men from honour and reputation, outward-looking. The bride has acquired moral completeness and purity by her deliberate and carefully timed loss of virginity; then she has the rite of ntazanyao, "showing the soles of her feet"; then finally by the rite of kutolezwa nde, "to be shown outside", when she is shown in public as a wife whose marriage has been consummated during the honeymoon, fungate, "eight days". The husband is shown in public at dance and poetry competitions and then after the honeymoon by prayers and feasting in the mosque.

Purity is not only given to women but also to the lineage house, a large, permanent, enclosed and very private stone building of two or three floors that as waqf is inalienable. It is kept clean and ritually pure, free from evil spirits and other forms of pollution of the town outside the walls (there are no windows, merely a central courtyard) by a senior woman of the lineage known as mpambaji, "decorator" or "adorner". She is also responsible for the elaboration of the bride's "beauty", and for the washing of the lineage's corpses in the dark central room of the house where the girl undergoes her initiation before her wedding; a widow is also secluded there, as a "phantom". The house, except for this dark and concealed room a place of pure women (female slaves did not count in this respect), is set within the impurity of the town, the place of men, commerce, strangers, slaves, and evil spirits. The wife's being given residence within the house (where traditionally she was in seclusion during the daytime, able to go outside only in the dark of evening) unites its and her purity into the ongoing purity and honour of the descent line and group. The lineage house is more than a building. It is the only place where a woman can acquire true purity

by her marriage and then retain it by living there. Other women cannot acquire "real purity", usafi wa haki, even if patricians, married to patricians, or being the concubines of patricians -- concubines were given other small and non-permanent houses by their partners, so that although their children were legitimate their daughters could not acquire purity and were not given patrician status as were their brothers.

The whole complex of marriage, house ownership and residence, wedding, and purity of descent, house, and women (who are both wives, sisters, and mothers of the lineage men) is a form of privatization of space, time, persons, and property by these merchant corporations who thereby gain security and advantage in commercial competition. Much of this has gone today, but it is spoken of continually.

The Swahili have always been merchants, and for them purity and honour are resources like any others, to be acquired and transformed into profit. Purity is acquired by patrician women by rites performed inside these private houses and is not easily available to others. Honour or reputation is acquired by men partly from the purity of their wives and sisters and also from their piety as measured by their behaviour at the mosques. Mosques are also property always subject to waqf and are owned by individual subclans. In brief, mercantile wealth is transformed into waqf property; this property bestows purity on women and reputation on men by the performance of ritual; and these are transformed into identity, as it were the personality, of the subclan and its lineages by the rites held at the very end of a patrician wedding.

VI

The identity of a town depends on that of its patricians. So far I have given the impression that a town's patricians form a set of subclans and lineages with pure ancestry going straight back in almost all cases directly to Arabia and so forming a fine phalanx of

clear identity, even if the actual claims are historically virtually all without foundation. However, it is more complex than that. One of the more significant Swahili phrases is milozi wa mji, "the pillars of the town", and another is watu wote wana siri zao, "all men have their secrets", a phrase that refers essentially to ancestry. These pillars are poets (shaha or "shah", a sign of their high status; they understand more of God than do ordinary people, and it is said that "poets go deep into the sea, to find secrets"), scholars, skilled craftsmen, accountants and financiers in the traditional ocean and interior trades, and other specialists necessary to a mercantile economy. They are by no means necessarily senior patricians, and they include women; and in the past slaves might also be considered to be "pillars". Both the leaders of pre-colonial demes, and even kings, were elected and not strictly hereditary, and the same holds for the heads of lineages engaged in business.

A central problem in these towns, in particular for patricians, is how to accommodate these differences of personality, morality, and ability. They have to be recognized, explained, and validated within the context of the underlying dilemma of African and Asian origins. This is done by the construction of pairs of opposed yet complementary categories that are expressed in terms of ethnic origins. These axes of differentiation, opposition, and conflict include those between Stone town and Country town; men and women; pairs of moieties and demes; free and slave and those of free and slave ancestry; well educated and poorly educated; rich and poor; long-settled patrician merchants and newly arrived Hadhrami retailers; those knowing Arabic and those ignorant of it; elegant Swahili speakers and clumsy Swahili speakers; poets and non-poets; good orators and poor ones; and many more. These various pairs are none of them coterminous, in terms of particular origin, with others at any given time in any simple dualistic schema; every person or group is in several categories, each category in a pair being linked by situational interest with categories of

other pairs.

Some examples. Women may be free or slave, or today of free or slave ancestry, and so in some situations women consider themselves as forming, and acting as, a single category as opposed to all men. All women are considered by men to be irresponsible and sexually voracious by nature, whereas men of course prefer to see themselves in opposite terms. But in particular cases free women are considered, by both men and women, as pure and as pious Muslims, and so as responsible and sexually virtuous, whereas slave women are created of "fire" and are members of non-Islamic spirit cults considered to be "African" in origin, and so are irresponsible and sexually impure. But some free women are also adherents of spirit cults and then linked with slave women. Free women are morally pure, and their men are attributed honour; non-free women and men lack these qualities, and so in this dimension free women and men form one category and the non-free women and men form another with opposing concerns and behaviour. Patricians consider themselves to be orthodox Muslims, of greater antiquity than those only recently from Arabia, and in each town one of their mosques has traditionally served as the town's congregational mosque; mosques were until very recently forbidden to slaves, and today still to women; but 19th century Hadhrami immigrants, although at first poor and so categorized with slaves, gained wealth by selling to slaves (which patricians refused to do), gained wealth, accepted slaves into their mosques, and since it is they who have most recently come from Arabia, it is today their mosques that are the congregational ones and patronized also by the descendants of slaves (although still not by women); patricians are abandoned as old-fashioned worshippers in their unfashionable mosques. Hadhrami were once grouped with slaves and, even though from Arabia, as being poor; they practised different forms of wedding and so could not acquire proper "purity". Today most are wealthy, as are many descendants of

slaves, and most patricians have become poor. A last example is that of scholarship, the most highly regarded of all skills. Islamic scholars have included patrician men, Hadhrami men, and slaves, and among these categories have been and are women. As against are reckoned non-scholars, whether patricians, slaves, or other categories. These ambiguous oppositions are expressed in many ways: in nuances and subtleties of speech, temperament, clothing, house decoration and ornament, cuisine, gesture, poetic and craft skills, elegance and adornment of women (even so far as whether a cosmetic comes from Paris or only Mombasa), and so on. All this amounts at first sight to a superb Gluckmanesque set of cross-cutting ties, but it also makes certain or irrevocable identity almost impossible to define for anyone.

VII

Each of these categories and qualities is linked to a particular ethnic origin. Hadhrami obviously come from the Hadhramaut (but argue as to which Hadhrami towns are superior to others), but all others may change over time and when necessary may be subdivided. Patrician lineages in Lamu are given origins in the Yemen, in Oman, in the Hadhramaut, in the Maldives, in Persia, in India, in Andalusia, in the Comoros and Madagascar, and in Africa itself, in Somalia, Ethiopia, Egypt, and in Shungwaya, the mythical Swahili homeland at the mouth of the River Tana, or its constituent settlements, today all long-ruined but still visible and visited, or in unions between the people of Shungwaya with 16th century Portuguese sailors or 9th century Chinese ones. Except for the Shungwaya complex and parts of southern Arabia, none of these are historically accurate as places of subclan origin, although they do of course exist and there were visits and even occupations by Chinese, Portuguese, and others. Each of these claimed places of origin is given specific moral qualities and fields of learning, poetry being linked to some, piety,

wantonness, stupidity, servility, and other qualities to others. Long debates are held on these matters, and today suspect origin can be linked to moral contagion such as that from America, Japan, or Iran. The places of claimed origin are also often evaluated according to their distance from Mecca, but this is not invariable as the Swahili (of Lamu, at least) have myths of the Prophet's travels to Ethiopia and Lamu itself. And since the Sharifu subclans and families claim direct descent from the Prophet are given high spiritual status, no others can claim Mecca itself. Those of slave ancestry cannot easily claim Asian origins, as they come from the interior of Africa; but that is subdivided rather fancifully both by region (Maniema, Nyasa, Ethiopia, and so on), and also by high rank or royalty being claimed as having been held before a particular ancestor was enslaved. Slaves who were accepted as scholars and as "pillars of the town" were often addressed as "patricians" in a moral sense and then linked particularly to Ethiopia and Egypt.

These uses of a variety of claimed places of ancestral origin is consistent with the importance given by the Swahili to history and time. The myths of most African societies construct cosmologies comprising human and non-human entities, and stand outside the passing of time. Those of the Swahili are quite different: most deal with the founding of particular towns by immigrant merchant-princes who marry local royal daughters, and are located in both space (by being about a particular place) and in time (by using the names of historical figures, although any Western-type dating is not made). Each town's myth, usually called in English a chronicle, as it is written (in Swahili, Arabic, or Portuguese), includes references to those of other towns; and so some kind of historical series of town foundations over time can be constructed (a town is founded, kubuni, by the building of a mosque). The "truth" of these myths is essentially as expressions of Islamic truth. This is seen in the link between date of founding, place of origin of founder, closeness of ancestry to Mecca, and

the strength of the "civilization", ustaarabu (which means "quality of long settlement, and has nothing to do with the name Arab) and utamaduni, "urbanity" (the same root as the name Medina). These notions refer to the qualities of purity, honour, and piety. Except for the anomaly of the Sharifu, patricians possess the most of these qualities because of their ancestry, and slaves the least because of theirs.

I have mentioned that places of origin may be linked to moral behaviour and skills. These ideas are used to explain differences in individual abilities, a matter of crucial importance for Lamu and the other mercantile towns. In a rural peasant society it may not greatly matter if a lineage or family head is able or not, intelligent or stupid, and indeed such notions may not be of any importance. But in a mercantile society it matters a great deal. The headship of a patrician lineage, a trading house, is chosen for ability and not by genealogical position, as were kings also. Differences in intelligences and ability, within any one lineage, which are seen as not necessarily coexistent with piety, may be explained in terms of presumed ancestries of small lineage segments. The more African the origin, the less able the members, is the general view. I have said that segments do not form a segmentary system but can merely join themselves to existing lineages and subclans. Men and women of different abilities may have them attributed to ancestral origins, both of immigrant male forebears and of their mothers and grandmothers, including wives and concubines.

VIII

These claimed ethnicities are not selected haphazardly. They refer to trading partners in the African-Asian trade in which the Swahili have played the role of cultural brokers. On the Asian side, ties have been mainly those of common clanship and marriage; on the African side, by clientship, the former being between "equals" and affines, the latter not.

The former has moral content, the latter not, so that if a woman is sexually virtuous, her ancestry may be from, or linked with, a named group of trading partners in Arabia or Persia; if not, it is from trading partners in Africa. Besides trading partners, the groups chosen tend to be those that have been powerful and with which the Swahili towns have engaged in warfare. Trade and warfare are linked: it is said biashara ni vita, "trade is war", and both the victor in war and the trader who has made the better bargain shows superior power over the other.

The role of women is important here also. Women, in particular those of certain patrician lineages, are linked to spirit husbands, by possession. Spirits are believed to live in the towns, and to comprise both good and evil ones who may have intercourse with and even marry living persons, although following the normal rules of rank. Spirit husbands, marohani, a type of jinn, come from those other peoples who have been trading partners, both in Asia and Africa (some are European). These spiritual links provide a form of shadow trading network, gifts between the "spouses" symbolizing the main commodities of the trade proper, and some of the women's personal qualities and identity derive from the people to which their spirit husbands belong.

Swahili thus construct a moral landscape of the outer world of trading partners with themselves at the center, the center of purity through generations of women, but with their own moralities dependent through claimed ancestry on that world's peoples, a nice reflection of their actual mercantile position: economy and morality fit neatly. By building an ethnic structure that mirrors that of actual and historical trade relations, the members of a town place their town in the centre of that world, a focus of the many commercial, productive, patron-client, military, and other relations into which they have entered. They construct it in an ideal and nostalgic form, even if only a temporary one, as a cosmology of relations of

mercantile exchange and of potential hostility that may be transformed into partnership and alliance. This cosmology ensures continuity of the town's structure and so of its identity as an urban corporation, a microcosm of the mercantile world. Just as all cosmologies attempt to build on reality by using actual places and personages where possible, the Swahili do the same. Just as all cosmologies stand outside time, so the Swahili of today try to remove the passing of recent and present time, which has seen their decline into a shadow of their former greatness and civilization. And just as all mythologies are means of explaining and resolving paradox, change, and contradiction, so do the Swahili by these cosmologies that can be, and are, revised to accommodate the vagaries of personality and achievement within the more permanent structure based on purity and honour, qualities that provide an ideological skeleton for a town. To call this nostalgia is really a Western ethnocentric and misleading view: it is rather the building of a firm identity in thought to remove the threats and fears of history. These cosmologies deal place their own fragile history at the firm centre of things. Until recently the Swahili were at that centre, and this cosmology structures and validates that lost world: by playing with history they can make their fate comprehensible.