

BOOK REVIEW

Nathalie Arnold Koenings. *Mystical Power and Politics on the Swahili Coast: Uchawi in Pemba*. Woodbridge: James Currey, 2024. xxii + 286 pp. Maps. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$130.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781847013842.

Mystical Power and Politics on the Swahili Coast is a remarkable exploration of what is usually translated as “witchcraft” (“*uchawi*”) in what is widely considered its East African hub—the island of Pemba, in the Zanzibar archipelago. Drawing on three decades of research, hundreds of interviews, and innumerable informal conversations, personal observations, and uncanny experiences, Nathalie Arnold Koenings has managed to develop an original approach to an otherwise thoroughly saturated and polarized topic in African studies. At the same time, the book represents a serious contribution to the English-language literature on the Zanzibar Revolution and its aftermath, especially outside the usual focus on the “main island” of Unguja. Focusing as it does on an at times violently immobilized and isolated rural population, it is also a contribution to the broader historical and anthropological scholarship on the Swahili-speaking peoples of East Africa, which has overwhelmingly tended to emphasize their urbanism, cosmopolitanism, and mobility.

Following a Preface that situates what follows in the author’s personal and professional biography, and an Introduction that lays out key aspects of her approach to *uchawi*, agency, and authority in Pemba (in particular, her emphasis on their fundamental ambiguity), the book is divided into three parts: “Power,” “Crisis,” and “Transformations.” This structure reflects, and to some extent reproduces, an historical periodization broadly shared among her elder Pemban interlocutors: “‘before the revolution’ (*kabla ya mapinduzi*); ‘revolution’ (*mapinduzi*); and ‘Republic’ (*Jamhuri*)” (170). Koenings’ sensitive appropriation of this framework allows her to show, at one level, how thoroughly interconnected “mystical” and “political” power are, while at another level complicating the framework itself by showing how the violence of “revolution” has been repeatedly reenacted, haunting Pemba’s “doubly marginalized” (205) position in both Zanzibar and Tanzania by reinscribing aspects of its pre- (and purportedly counter-)revolutionary character.

Part One, “Power,” consists of five chapters. The first orients the reader through Koenings’s own unsettling introduction to the ambiguity of *uchawi* in Pemba before tracing out the misrecognitions of various colonial officials who struggled to draw a categorical moral distinction between *wachawi* (“witches”) and *waganga* (“witch-doctors”). The next three chapters elaborate an architectural schema for understanding the hierarchy of *uchawi* by its “doors” or

“rooms”—seven in all—with the first being the most innocuous and ordinary (basically envy or ill-will) and the seventh being the most extreme and demanding, involving human sacrifice. This schema, it turns out, is based on interviews the author conducted with a 900-year old jinn speaking through a Pemban woman in Dar es Salaam—a fact that may surprise some readers (though for those with experience in such matters the most surprising aspect may be possessing a spirit calm, patient, and articulate enough to lay out such an intricate structure in detail). The fifth chapter puts this structure in motion through the juxtaposition of narratives about famous Pemban *wachawi* of the past, and of peoples’ own brushes with the most upsetting forms of *uchawi* and its more teasing, competitive, and humorous aspects as well.

Parts Two (Chapters Six and Seven) and Three (Chapters Eight and Nine) focus on the harrowing period from independence in 1963 to the assassination of Abeid Karume in 1972, and its aftermath in the era of “multiparty” elections beginning in 1992. Chapter Six explores the revolution’s assault on two key figures of public authority—elders and *masheha*—each conceptually linked to mystical power and the distinctiveness of Pemban society. Chapter Seven links commodification of the rural landscape (including the sandy soil of the invisible city of Ging’ingi) and administrative interference in ritual involvement with its resident jinns to the deathbed destruction of magic books by elders who fear their irresponsible use in a degraded present, exerting one last measure of agentive control in so doing. Chapter Eight presents a concise political history of the multiparty era to make two larger claims: First, that although forms of *uchawi* and state violence resemble each other in some ways, the former provide “practical and existential” resources, not metaphorical or rhetorical ones, for engaging the latter. And second, that the violence that has plagued elections in Zanzibar is not simply about manipulating their outcomes but is, in a polity that owes its existence to the violent overturning of an election, an uncanny repetition of that founding violence, revictimizing a population reconstituted as enemies of the revolution. Chapter Nine, finally, explores the rise of Islamic reform in Pemba, and how practitioners of new prophetic healing and older forms of *uganga* debate the efficacy, morality, and religious acceptability of different methods of engaging with afflicting jinns. It underscores nicely a point made in the introduction: that all such forms of “otherworldly” power and expertise are “imbricated, multivalent, mutually constitutive, historical, and particular” (4).

Throughout the book, Koenings deals with ambivalence, ambiguity, and apparent contradiction in *uchawi* discourse less as a function of their different contexts of utterance or speech genres than as intrinsic to the uncanny nature of “mystical power” itself. The montage-like effect illuminates well both the “feeling-knowing” (44) of the occult and the importance of training and expertise to engage with it responsibly, but readers may find themselves wishing, at times, for a fuller sense of who some of these narrators are, and in what social situations they made the specific statements about *uchawi* that they did. One gets the sense, however, that in many cases this sort of detail has been withheld by an author who clearly knows these people intimately, out of a well-founded concern for their safety—a concern, incidentally, that obliged Koenings to delay the

publication of much of this material for some time. We are fortunate indeed that she now has.

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