

**SIKU YA MWAKA:
THE SWAHILI NEW YEAR**

(WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MOMBASA)*

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MUKHTASARI

Hatujuwi kwa hakika siku ya mwaka ilianza lini, lakini yaonesha kuwa ilikuwako Swahilini kabla ya uIslamu. Ingawa siku ya mwaka si ya kiIslamu, lakini pia haipingani na uIslamu. Zamani siku hii ilikuwa ikisherehekewa katika miji yot'e ya kiSwahili, na bado iko miji ambayo mpaka leo siku k'uu hii yasherehekewa. Lugha ya kiSwahili ina majina ya mabadiliko yot'e ya mwaka mzima yanayotokeya katika nt'i ya Swahili pamoja na Bahari ya Hindi (kwa mfano mvuwa na p'epo mbalimbali), na jambo hili ni moja katika dalili za kuthubutisha kuwa waSwahili ndiyo wanat'i haswa wa p'wani ya Afrika ya mashriki, yaani Swahilini.

A shortened version of this article first appeared in the *Journal of Religion in Africa* (JRA xxv/2, 1993, 202-211). Since then further material has come to light, minor discrepancies have been noted, and some of the *wat'u wa mji*,¹ the Swahili people of Mombasa, have become increasingly aware that their cultural heritage is under threat as never before, resulting in a modest revival of interest in the *siku ya mwaka* observances in the Mombasa area.

Introduction

The concept of the natural year (Swahili '*mwaka*') is found throughout the Bantu family of languages (Guthrie 1970: iv, 143). Today there are three possible years for the Swahili. First there is the Swahili year, the first day of which was once celebrated by all the Swahili people, while the year itself was of especial importance to farmers, to sailors and fishermen as well as to travellers and scholars. Secondly there is the Islamic-Swahili year, the first day of which is, in practice, celebrated on the first day of

* Unless otherwise stated, the Swahili of this article is *kiMvita*, the Swahili of Mombasa.

¹ *wat'u wa mji*: all the Swahili people of the town, as opposed to the narrower term *wamiji* the Swahili people of Mombasa's twelve tribes.

the first month after Ramadhani - 1 *mfungo mosi* (and not on 1 Muharram). Finally there is, since the arrival of European-Christians in the the second half of the nineteenth century, the Gregorian year, which is known to Swahilis who have attended primary school and 1 January has been a government holiday ever since.

Part I

Origins and Early References

In the British Library (Oriental & India Office Collections) there is a 13th / 19th century Arabic manuscript (BL MS Or.2666) which is a copy of an older (but now lost) 'History of Kilwa Kisiwani'. It is said that the original text of the B.L. manuscript was probably penned in the 10th / 16th century. In this document there are numerous examples of the Swahili method of naming the year (Strong, 1895: e.g. 425 & 429). In one instance it is recorded that in AH 910 New Year's Day fell on a Friday (*ibid.*, 424). In another occurrence (*ibid.*, 428) the chronicler states: these things occurred in *sanat al-thulāthā* 'the year in which New Year's Day fell on a Tuesday, but other people say it was on *sanat al-ithnayn* "the year in which New Year's Day fell on a Monday" '. Whatever be the precise date of the 'History of Kilwa Kisiwani' it is clear that the naming of the Swahili year from the day on which *siku ya mwaka* falls goes back several centuries at least.

In the poem *Utenzi wa al-Akida*, the *Mwaka wa Ijumaa* 'the year in which New Year's Day fell on a Friday' was predicted as being a year which would end in misfortune:

Lakini si mwaka mwema

... ni mwaka wa Ijumaa

mwishoni una khaḍaa (Hinawy 1950: 77).

'But the year is not good

It is a year in which New Year's Day begins on a Friday

And ends in deception'.

African or Persian?

The commonly held opinion that the Swahili *siku ya mwaka* is derived from the Persian *nairūz* may be based on an incomplete understanding of the Arabic usage of this Persian-derived word (e.g. Krapf 1882: 338; Gray 1955a: 1-22 & 1955b: 68-72). Amongst Arabic-speaking sailors *nairūz* means 'a solar year', hence there is, for example, *nairūz al-hindī* 'the Indian year', and *nairūz al-bahrī* 'the nautical year', i.e. the solar year of the Indian Ocean region (al-Mahrī 1390/1970: 116). *Siku ya mwaka* may well be a syncretic phenomenon - an African, pre-Islamic, foundation with Islamic additions.

An anonymous annotation appended to the English translation of Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari's *Desturi za waSwahili* ('Customs of the Swahili People') serves to confirm the contention that *siku ya mwaka* is derived from the *nairūz* of the Iranian calendar:

'the Swahili New Year celebration has some of the characteristics of the old Iranian Nauroz,² but one must beware of trying to link them too closely' (Mtoro 1981: 302, Note 1). It is disappointing that the unnamed annotator does not specify what 'the characteristics of the old Iranian Nauroz' were. A comparison would be interesting, as would be a description of the New Year celebrations of other Muslim people.

In centuries gone by Arabian sailors in the Indian Ocean wishing to employ a word or a term for 'a solar year' had to seek beyond the confines of Arabic, for in their own language and culture 'a year' was lunar. And so they employed the Persian word *nairūz*, 'the first day of the nautical calendar' (Tibbetts 1981: 25). Thus, as has already been noted, *nairūz al-bahrī* became the term employed by Arabian sailors whenever they wished to refer to 'a solar year'. The Swahili people themselves have no need for such a term since their language already possesses the word *mwaka*³ to describe this natural phenomenon. Nevertheless some of the *maShekhe* (for example, Shaykh Abdallah Saleh al-Farsy) have preferred the Persian word *nairūz*, perhaps believing that the mere employment of this word could in some way 'sanctify' the supposedly tainted elements of the *siku k'uu ya mwaka* - which is undoubtedly non-Islamic, but not necessarily un-Islamic.

In his doctoral thesis Jonathon Glassman mentions the false connection between *siku ya mwaka* and *nairūz*. He writes:

The Swahili New Year 'is called *Nairūz* in many parts of the Indian Ocean world; the word comes from Farsi, and the solar calendar was assumed by colonial-era scholars such as Sir John Gray [1889-1970] to have derived from Persia.⁴ And yet despite this assumption, even Sir John emphasized the connection

² The old Iranian Nauroz: it is not clear precisely what is meant by 'the old Iranian Nauroz'. Possibly the unrevised Yazdegered solar calendar, which was current from AH 11 to AH 471, is intended. If so, this calendar is of interest in that the discrepancy between the New Year and the vernal equinox was corrected by the insertion of an intercalary month after the first month of the 120th year, after the second month of the 240th year, and so on (Tsybulsky 1979: 148).

³ *mwaka*: while the Swahili language has Bantu words for such natural phenomena as 'year', 'month' and 'day', the Swahili-Islamic word *juma* 'week' (a cycle devised by man) is derived from the Arabic.

⁴ *Nairūz*: Jonathon Glassman, who conducted research along the northern Mzima coast in the mid-1980s writes: 'None of my informants at Pangani used the word [*nairūz*], preferring instead to refer to the holiday as *kuoga mwaka* "to wash the New Year" [i.e. to bathe on New Year's Day]... or simply as *siku ya mwaka* "New Year's Day"' (Glassman 1988: 380). On the other hand, *siku ya mwaka* 'was sometimes referred to by the Persian word *Nairuz*, particularly in documents written by colonial administrators or patrician elites who for their own ideological reasons wished to emphasize links between Shirazi culture

between the solar calendar and the agricultural cycle of rural Africans' (Glassman 1988: 379).

It seems probable that the Swahili solar year pre-dates the introduction of the lunar Islamic calendar to the East African coast, but it is no longer possible to say when the rites and ceremonies of the *siku ya mwaka* evolved. Because the people of the East African coast were formerly farmers, fishermen and sailors, their Swahili solar year continued alongside the Islamic lunar year - the latter bearing no relation to the agricultural and nautical seasons. After the arrival of Christian-European missionaries traders and administrators in Swahili-land in the second half of the nineteenth century the Gregorian calendar supplanted the Hijri calendar in very many respects, and the Swahili calendar in almost all respects.

*Central and Southern Swahili-land*⁵

The earliest reference to *siku ya mwaka* in central Swahili-land was made in 1844 (Krapf 1856: i, 218); in southern Swahili-land the first description, the 'History of Kilwa Kisiwani' excepted, relates to the years 1847 and 1848 (Guillain 1856-57: ii, 107).

In central Swahili-land the feast was observed not only in Mombasa, but also in Jomvu K'uu (a Swahili village to the west of Mombasa), Wasini (an island to the south), and on the island of P'emba. There may well have been celebrations elsewhere in the region (e.g. at Malindi and at Mnarani [Old Kilifi]) but, if so, reliable information has not been forthcoming. It is interesting to note that the observance of *siku ya mwaka* was introduced or, possibly, reintroduced at Mtwapa (a Swahili village to the north of Mombasa) in 1417 AH / AD 1996.

In southern Swahili-land it seems that, in recent years, the *mwaka* celebrations on Zanzibar island have become more, not less, popular (Racine 1994: 167-175). What the current position is in coastal towns such as T'anga, P'angani and Bagamoyo I do not know, but in 1305 AH / AD 1888 the Deutsch Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft (the German East African Company) forcibly occupied a number of southern Swahili towns, including P'angani, on *siku ya mwaka* 1305 AH / AD 1888, when the Swahili New Year coincided with the eve of the Islamic 'id al-hajj. An historical (and exceptionally competent) account of these events was published recently (Glassman 1995).

and the Middle East' (Glassman 1995: 171 & footnote 70).

⁵ Although this article focuses mainly on the observance of the Swahili New Year in central Swahili-land the entire length of Swahili-land observed the *mwaka*, from as far north as Barawa to at least as far south as Kilwa.

Dammann mentions that the waDigo, closely associated with the waSwahili, hold a harvest festival at the beginning of August which they call *mwaka* (Dammann 1940:336, note 20).

maSiwani: The Comoro Islands

The *siku ya mwaka* was, and perhaps still is, observed in *maSiwani* 'the Comoro Islands'; Sacleux's reference to this in the entry for *mwaha* (and *-ela*) in his posthumously published Comorian lexicon is tantalisingly brief (Sacleux 1979).

The Swahili Year

The Swahili people measure their year in *miongo* - decades of ten days - there being thirty-six full decades in the year, the *Siku ya Mwaka* being the first day of the first *muongo* (e.g. Sacleux 1909: 274-275). Thus, for example, a Swahili would say *leo ni ishirini* 'Today is the second decade of the year' (literally, today is the twentieth), or *mia ya kwanza leo* 'it is the tenth decade of the year today' (literally, it is the first hundredth today). The *muongo* was divided into two parts of five days each - mid-way being known as *makasama*, from the Arabic consonantal root *q s m* 'division or divide'. It is said that some rain, however scanty, falls in every *muongo*; thus after a shower a Swahili farmer might say *muongo huu untesa katika makasama* 'some rain has fallen during the fifth day of this decade'. At different times during the Swahili year farmers, fishermen and sailors had specific tasks to perform. A study of these tasks as performed in Zanzibar has been published (Gray 1955a: 2); to do the same for P'emba or Amu might still be possible, but practically impossible for Mombasa, the *waMiji* ('the Swahili people of Mombasa's twelve tribes'), being now almost exclusively town dwellers.

Tables for the calculation of New Year's Day are available (e.g. al-Qa'dawi 1365/1946). Thirty-six *miongo* add up to 360 days; it appears that the epactal days - the 'extra' five days of the solar year (the last of which is *kibunzi*) - may constitute a shortened final *muongo*. The Swahili people simply ignore the additional six-odd hours in every year (so that in 1846 New Year's Day fell on Saturday 29 August, in 1847 on Sunday 29 August, and in 1848 on Monday 28 August (Guillain 1856: ii, 107); in 1951 on Saturday 4 August, and in 1952 on Sunday 3 August (Gray 1955a: 4); in 1992 on Friday 24 July - although for general convenience the observance of New Year's Day was held on the preceding Sunday, the nineteenth). What is certain is that the Swahili language has no expression equivalent to the English 'leap year' or the modern literary Arabic *al-sana al-kabisa*. Fixing every successive New Year's Day according to an immutable sequence of days means that the Swahili year will not always be in harmony with the agricultural and nautical seasons, a harmony which the Swahili calendar is supposed, in theory, to reflect. For example, if the previous *siku ya mwaka* fell on a Sunday (*mwaka wa jumaa-pili*) then the following New Year's Day would fall on a Monday (*mwaka wa jumaa-tatu*). Such a system does not, of course, take leap year complications into account.

In 1909 Sacleux wrote:

Les Swahilis ont une année solaire de 365 jours. Mais comme ils ne

connaissent pas l'usage de l'année bissextile, leur année retarde sur la nôtre de près de 1/4 de jour par an, soit près d'un jour entier tous les quatre ans. N'ayant d'autre moyen de détermination que leur année lunaire, ils font retarder chaque année le *siku ya mwaka* 'jour de l'an' de 10 jours sur la date, qu'il occupait l'année précédente (Sacleux 1909: 274-275). 'The Swahili have a solar year of 365 days. But as they are not aware of the use of the leap year, their year lags behind ours by almost a quarter of a day per year, which means nearly a whole day every four years. As they have no other means of calculation, except their lunar year, they put back each year's *siku ya mwaka* "New Year's Day" by ten [or eleven] days on the [*hijri*] date on which it fell in the preceding year'.

The Pleiades and Siku ya Mwaka

Sacleux's observation is as valid today as it was when he wrote nearly a century ago. It is unfortunate that the method of calculating *siku ya mwaka* described above is 'false' in the sense that there is a slight discrepancy between the Swahili calendar year and the solar year - using the calculations here described, *siku ya mwaka* now recedes by about 30 days every 120 years.⁶ This may not much matter in contemporary Mombasa because, since the 1950s, there have been exceedingly few Swahili farmers and fishermen;⁷ but in other parts of Swahili-land fishing and farming continue. A 'true' Swahili calendar may have been formerly employed by farmers, sailors and travellers; if so, it might have been based on the *kilimia* (the Pleiades) - on their rising and, six months later, on their setting. Indeed the very word *kilimia*, deriving from the Bantu *-lima* 'dig or cultivate', infers an association with the soil. The rising of the Pleiades has, from ancient times, marked the opening of seafaring and farming seasons in the northern hemisphere; with due alteration of details, the same is true of the Pleiades with regard to Swahili-land. In this connection Sacleux writes: le retour annuel de la constellation annonce la reprise des travaux des champs (Sacleux 1939: 376) 'the annual return of the Pleiades marks the resumption of work in the fields'.

In his *African Aphorisms* Taylor records the following (Item 150):

kilimia kikizama kwa jua * *huzuka kwa mvua*
kikizama kwa mvua * *huzuka kwa jua*

⁶ It seems that pre-Islamic Arabia also had a discrepancy between the calendar year and the solar year.

⁷ Since the first World War, and more especially since the second World War, the Swahili living within the boundaries of Mombasa municipality have had almost no opportunity to farm; virtually all their fields and shambas in Kisauni, Changamwe and Mtongwe have, for a variety of reasons, been sold or compulsorily purchased. Commercial fishing in the region is increasingly controlled by large companies.

'when the Pleiades set in sunny weather, they rise in rain;
when they set in rain, they rise in sunny weather'.

In a manuscript gloss Taylor observes: 'On the 245th day before the Neruz the Pleiades or Thurea [Arabic, *al-thurayyā*] are below the horizon. People used not to travel by sea, animals became prone to generate and men the reverse. On the 45th day before New Year's Day [the Pleiades] come across the horizon; the sea is calmer now' [SOAS MS 47752].

Many years later an informant from Siyu made similar observations about the Pleiades:

[kilimia] kikisha kudhama, uchendalo ni nuhusi: ukieka kidhio cha nyumba huikai; akidhaawa kijana kwa siku dhilee humuwei, na akiwa mepona huwa dhudhu; na ukichulia nnadhi huuchungui, maana nnadhi ukibaleghe uwe huchekwa; na mbudhi huwa kimyaa. Na siku kidhukapo hicho kilimia ufanyalo lolot'e hubahatika likafaulu; na mbudhi utawasikia wakigorgia, yaani hutoa sauti n bobobo tuu, na kupiga p'ua; basi wach'u hunena, kilimia kimetoka mbudhi hao hukidhuma 'once [the Pleiades] have disappeared whatever you do will be unlucky; if you start to erect the foundation pile of a house, you will not live in that house; if your child is born during this period, you will not rear him or, if he survives, he will be an idiot; if you plant a coconut palm, you will not harvest the nuts because by the time the tree has matured you will have hoisted sail [i.e. set out on your final voyage]; and the goats fall silent. When [the Pleiades] reappear, whatever you do will be lucky and successful, and the goats will be heard grunting, that means making a noise which sounds like bobobo, snorting through their nostrils; and so people would say that the Pleiades have appeared thus the goats begin bawling'.⁸

Of course it is no longer possible to say whether, two hundred and more years ago, Swahili farmers and sailors calculated the New Year by the stars, but such speculation is plausible. What can be said is that the original purpose of *siku ya mwaka* was to mark the beginning of the agricultural and nautical year,⁹ it is clear from the calculations currently employed that the primary purpose of the observance is no longer agricultural and nautical but religious and cultural, that is to say it is an occasion on which the

⁸ Information transmitted by MaChiya of Siyu to Yahya Ali Omar in Mombasa in the 1950s.

⁹ the agricultural and nautical year: the fact that the Swahili language has terms for all the vagaries and phenomena of weather along the East Coast of Africa is conclusive evidence that the Swahili people have lived along the Swahili Coast for countless generations, and that it is they who are the true natives of Africa's eastern seaboard.

Swahili people offer prayers to Almighty God that their town may be blessed and that evil may be averted throughout the coming year.

Further observations on the Swahili year:

Ahmad Sheikh Nabhany records a variant method of calculating the date of the New Year (also following the 'false' calendar). Since, for example, the *siku ya mwaka* of 1413 AH / AD 1992 began on a Friday, then the hundredth day following (i.e. the last day of the tenth *muongo* 'decade') fell on a Saturday.¹⁰ Thus the eleventh *muongo* began on a Sunday, and the two hundredth day following fell on a Monday (i.e. the last day of the twentieth *muongo*). The twenty-first *muongo* began on a Tuesday, and the three hundredth day following fell on a Wednesday (i.e. the last day of the thirtieth *muongo*). The thirty-first *muongo* began and the thirty-fifth ended (fifty days later) on a Thursday. Thus the last *muongo*, i.e. the thirty-sixth decade, began on a Friday and ended (ten days later) on a Sunday. The final, short, *muongo* began on a Monday and ended, five days later, on a Friday, on *kibunzi*. Since, in the example above, *kibunzi* - the last day of the Swahili year - fell on a Friday, the following New Year's Day must fall on a Saturday (Nabhany TS: 70 - adapted).

Sir John Gray avers that in the Zoroastrian calendar the word *gatha* is used for the five 'additional' days at the end of the year (Gray 1955: 4). As far as Swahili is concerned the word *gatha* is unknown - and there is no Bantu word in the language denoting these intercalary days, nor any word for 'leap year' (JRA 1993: 127).

Because *siku ya mwaka* falls on a Sunday only once in every seven years it has recently become the custom for the *khitma ya mji* 'prayers for the town' to be transferred to the preceding Sunday in those years when *siku ya mwaka* falls on a day other than Sunday, thus enabling many in paid employment to attend the early morning rites and ceremonies. For example, in 1413 AH / AD 1992 *siku ya mwaka* fell on a Friday, and so the *khitma ya mji* was transferred to the preceding Sunday [when I wrote about the 1992 Swahili New Year I was unaware of this arrangement - JRA 1993: 131].

Part II

New Year's Day in Mombasa: the past

The waP'aza of Ng'ombeni

In Mombasa the arrangements for *siku ya mwaka* were the responsibility of the waNg'ombeni, of the twelve Swahili tribes of Mombasa. Ali Jamaadar Amir writes:

kuna waP'aza wa Ng'ombeni; vile vile wako waP'aza wa Kinuni. Ngoma

¹⁰ *muongo*: no month ever goes by [in Swahili-land] without a little rain (Lyne 1905: 284); but the Swahili put it more precisely, saying that no *muongo* (no period of ten days) ever goes by without a little rain.

*katika sherehe ya mwaka mpya wa kiSwahili yajulikana kwa jina la Gungu; vifaa vya ngoma hiyo zot'e huekwa na waP'aza wa Ng'ombeni. Wazee kweli wamekufa, lakini wameata wajukuu, na vitukuu, na vilembwe na vilembwekeza. Mpaka leo maVugo, Barugumu, uPatu na kadhalika - vyot'e hivyo vyapatikana kwa waP'aza wa Ng'ombeni. Kwa hivyo waP'aza wa Ng'ombeni wako; hao waishi Mjuakale karibu na msikiti wa Mlango wa P'apa, hapa Mombasa.*¹¹ 'There are the waP'aza of Ng'ombeni; similarly there are the waP'aza of Kinuni. The dance during the festival of the Swahili New Year is known as Gungu; the essential elements required for this dance are always provided by the waP'aza of Ng'ombeni. It is true that the elders have died, but they have left grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren and great-great-great-grandchildren. Up to the present day *mavugo* [pieces of horn which are rattled], *barugumu* [kinds of horn which are blown], *upatu* [a round brass tray which is beaten like a gong on appropriate occasions¹²], and so forth - all these are to be found amongst the waP'aza of Ng'ombeni. And so the waP'aza of Ng'ombeni exist; they live in Mjuakale, near the Mlango wa P'apa mosque, here in Mombasa'.

A legal document dated 1913 associates the waNg'ombeni with that area of Mombasa island known as Kwa Shee Mvita: 'I am satisfied that the land on which [the grave and ruined mosque of Sheikh Mvita] stand has been used by members of the waNg'ombeni and other tribes for years past for the performance of certain religious ceremonies. I make order that the area shall be large enough to allow of the ceremonies taking place as heretofore'.¹³

The Mwaka holidays

The *mwaka* holidays formerly extended throughout the entire final 'short' *muongo* of five days and then into the *mwaka* proper¹⁴ (in recent times the length of the holidays was reduced). The holidays were important not only for adults but also for children. An informant from Siyu relates as follows:

kabula ya siku ya chonda kwa siku sabaa vijana humpa mwalimu wa

¹¹ waP'aza: communication from Mu'allim Ali Jamaadar Amir, dated *mfungo tano* [safar] 1416 AH / AD July 1995 (see also Lambert 1958: 10).

¹² In Mombasa the raffia sticks with which the *uPatu* is beaten are called *vibodoo*.

¹³ Judgement of the Recorder of Titles, Cause No 177 of 1913. Cited in letter from Secretary, Waqf Commissioners, to Town Clerk, Mombasa, dated 7.v:1935 (WF/66/A).

¹⁴ This may seem a very long holiday period but I suggest that it dates from pre-Islamic times when it would have been the only major holiday in the Swahili year.

*chuoni 'yai la mwaka', wala si yai kweli watowalo, bali hutowa pesa, wakampa mwalimu; ndipo mwalimu awapapo ruhusa ya 'muharama'; na kijana ambae hakutowa pesa za muharama hufungwa chuoni hendi kwao.*¹⁵ 'Seven days before New Year's eve the pupils of the *chuo* give their teacher a New Year's egg, but it is not really an egg which they give, rather what they give the teacher is money.

Shaykh Mbarak Ali Hinawy writes: '... A few days before the end of the year (this year is the farmer's year of 366 days beginning from a certain period of monsoon) another *muHarama* of 8 pice is paid [to the *chuo* teacher]' (Hinawy 1964: 34)¹⁶ It is then that the teacher grants them the holiday known as *muHarama*;¹⁷ and the child who has not paid the *muHarama* money is kept in and cannot go home'.

In former times the holidays before the *mwaka*, *siku ya kibunzi* especially, were strictly observed. Krapf notes the legend of three Mombasa fishermen who went afishing on New Year's Eve and, for this, they were destroyed and turned into three fabulous rocks which, it is said, have remained in the sea as a warning to after generations (Krapf 1882: 119).¹⁸

kibunzi: New Year's Eve

The preparations for New Year's Day actually began on *kibunzi - chonda* in northern Swahili¹⁹ - 'the last day of the old solar year' / New Year's Eve', when housewives would prepare different kinds of *mikate* 'bread' as *sadaka* 'sacred offerings' for the coming feast.²⁰ One special dish made by the ladies of the *mtaa* ('neighbourhood') for

¹⁵ Information transmitted by MaChiya of Siyu to Yahya Ali Omar in Mombasa in the 1950s.

¹⁶ Fahmy Mbarak Ali Hinawy recalls giving his *chuo* teacher, a nominal thirty cents as *muHarama* on *siku ya kibunzi* in the Mombasa of the 1940s.

¹⁷ *muHarama* (northern Swahili): littéralement 'jours sacrés', ce sont les deux jours de vacances *kibunzi* et *Siku ya Mwaka*, auxquels ont droit les écoliers à l'occasion du renouvellement de l'année solaire *niruzi* (Sacleux 1939: 622) 'literally "holy days" - these are the two holidays *kibunzi* and *siku ya mwaka*, to which school children are entitled on the renewal of the solar year *niruzi*'. In practice the two days were extended to seven, as stated by MaChiya.

¹⁸ A similar legend attaches to three rocks of the Ozi Reef - *Mwamba Ziwaiu* - in northern Swahili-land.

¹⁹ *chonda*: synonymous with *kisirani* and *nuhusi*; le jour de l'angoisse (Sacleux 1939: 148).

²⁰ *mikate*: Krapf mentions a particular kind of *mkate* known as *kitumbua*, which is prepared with rice flour; he writes that it is 'made on special days, e.g. at *Kibunzi*' (Krapf 1887: 162); nowadays *vitumbua* are enjoyed throughout the year, at any rate in Mombasa.

siku ya mwaka is a speciality to mark the in-gathering of the harvest (and other special occasions of thanksgiving, such as weddings).²¹ It is called *t'angalizi* - literally 'a mixture' - which Sacleux describes as: le plat de résistance des grands repas que l'on offre à ses amis à l'occasion du Nouvel An, *Siku ya Mwaka*, et dans qqs autres circonstances (Sacleux 1939: 867). This delicacy is usually composed of seven basic grains - for example, *mahindi* ('maize'), *maharagwe* ('a species of bean'), *k'unde* ('a reddish-brown bean'), *mbazi* ('pigeon pea'), *p'ojo* ('a species of small pea'), *mtama* ('millet'), and *dengu* ('lentils'). However as many as seven times seven different kinds of grain may be used.²² The kind of grain to be used (e.g. millet, wheat, rice) would have depended in part on the predictions of the town crier during the days preceding *kibunzi* (Anon. n.d. 61-62). Early the following morning (that is to say, on New Year's Day) the town crier would return with his assistants and each household would put their offering of freshly baked bread into a common *k'apu* 'a large basket' - the contents to be distributed at the mid-day feast.

Sacleux, who was in Mombasa in 1897, wrote that on New Year's Eve: on laisse éteindre le foyer. Les cendres, où sont déposées tantôt au carrefour de deux sentiers, tantôt sur le bord de la mer, ou sont mêlées à un peu d'eau dont on asperge les murs de la case (Sacleux 1909: xxii) - 'The fire is allowed to go out. Ashes are deposited now at the crossing of two paths, now on the sea-shore, or they are mixed with a little water and sprinkled over the walls of the house'. While Taylor wrote c.1880: *Siku ya kibunzi wat'u hupaka ivu katika viambaza vya nyumba. Aonekanaye hakutia, wat'u huja wakimtezea kwa nyimbo* (SOAS MS 47752: 114) - 'On New Year's Eve folk smear ash on the walls of their houses. If one is seen not to have daubed ash, then folk come and sing a mocking song'.

A note in another of the Taylor papers reads:

siku ya kupita mwaka asubuhi huoga wot'e pia, na nyumbani mle huchorachora ivu viambazani (SOAS MS 54343: 141). '[Early] in the morning of New Year's Day absolutely everyone goes to bathe, and ashes are smeared on the [outside] walls of one's house'.

The ashes are also scattered over the lintel in the belief that this will keep out evil spirits. Now that many housewives in Mombasa cook by gas or electricity, and now that

²¹ harvest home: according to the Zoroastrian calendar *Nawrûz* 'was the time of harvest and was celebrated by popular rejoicings' (Levy 1993: 1047a).

²² *t'angalizi*: A 'recipe' written in about 1880 reads: sifted corn, *p'ojo*, vetch beans, *k'unde* [brown beans], *fiwi* [cape beans], mixed and cooked in large earthen pots ('*majungu*'), And afterwards mixed with *ufu wa nazi* ('rasped coconut with the juice unstrained from it'). In: SOAS MS 210014 [original Swahili text in SOAS MS 47757, 14-18].

many houses are no longer built of mud and wattle the practice has virtually died out in Mombasa, but it continues in the Swahili village of Jomvu K'uu, west of Mombasa island.

The children have a relaxing time at school: 'The whole of the last day of the year (this is called *kibunzi*) is spent in each boy trying to draw a beautiful drawing on his slate (a piece of board) and colouring the drawing with different colours specially prepared by himself. At night (New Year's Eve) all the children collect at the teacher's house and recite various verses to keep themselves awake till 4 a.m. when they all leave for the sea. Should the boys of a particular school reach the beach first and get into the water they would prevent any other school singing and coming their way, they dress and keep their stick ready and the parties fight.' (Hinawy 1964: 34).

Formerly *kibunzi* was the time when both children and grown ups acquired new clothes. This is no longer the case, probably because nowadays new clothes are given and received at *'id al-adhā* and *'id al-fitr*.

New Year's Day

Of New Year's Day in Mombasa Taylor wrote: *Siku ya kupita mwaka asubuhi huoga [wat'u] wot'e pia, na nyumbani mle huchorachora ivu viambazani. Kisha hwenda (hawendi wot'e, mmoja mmoja basi) shambani, wakitafuta miti iitwayo mmwaka-mwaka, wakirudi hufunga mlangoni. Vijana huteza ngoma 'si zetu'. Wat'u wazima wanawake huteza msoma, waume hawana hatta ngoma. Asipooga mt'u Siku ya Mwaka kibunzi kitamshutia* (SOAS MS 54343, 141) - 'On the morning of New Year's Day, before sunrise, absolutely everyone goes to bathe; at home, inside, ash is smeared on the walls. The folk go to an area of scrub - not as one large group, just individually - looking for a shrub called *mmwaka-mwaka* "the soap-berry tree" [Sacleux 1939: 574 & 637]; when they get back home they hang [a branch of] the shrub over the door.²³ The young people dance the dance which is called *si zetu* [see below]; the adult women dance a dance called *msoma* [Krapf 1882: 343; Sacleux 1939: 598]; the men have no dance at all. If someone does not bathe [before sunrise] on New Year's Day, [folk say that] the Old Year will fart on that person'.

Some forty years earlier Krapf had already noted the custom of hanging a branch or a twig from the lintel. During a short visit to T'akaungu in 1843 he wrote:

'At the entrance of a house I observed a truss of rods.²⁴ On my asking

²³ This custom may perhaps be associated with harvest and the concept of fertility.

²⁴ a truss of rods: there is a Hindu practice not dissimilar to the Swahili custom: 'In Gujarati *tōran* (Sanskrit *torana*, a portal) means a cord with mango and other leaves attached to it hung from door-post to door-post or across a street on festive occasions' (Whitworth 1885: 321). The *toran* may still be seen in Mombasa (for an illustration see

after the meaning of this practice I was told that the Sooahelees were wont to hang up some twigs at their gates on the beginning of their New Year. I have never observed the custom with the Arabs'.²⁵

On New Year's Day *chuo* children 'pupils of the Qur'an school' used to go to the home of their teacher where they slept throughout the night. Just before dawn on New Year's Day, accompanied by their teacher, they would go down to the sea and bathe, the pupils taking with them their *mbao* 'writing-boards'. On his writing-board each pupil had written *sura yake* 'the pupil's individual portion of the Holy Qur'an allocated to him by his teacher for study' - the words had been written with *jasi* 'a chalk-like stone' (Sacleux 1939: 183). Then, after wiping his writing-board clean, the pupil would wipe his heart - the gesture symbolising the boy's desire to memorise the Holy Qur'an. After coming out of the water pupils drew patterns on their clean boards.

Sometimes it happened that a pupil overslept and failed to bathe before dawn. In such a case the boy became the object of his companions derision, their song being as follows:

Kibunzi kinamshutiya

na Mwaka unampitiya!

Kibunzi kinamshutiya

na Mwaka unampitiya! (for a variant see: Hinawy 1964: 34).

'The Old Year has farted on him,

and the New Year has passed him by!

Elsewhere *vyama vya wanawake* 'groups of adult women' would also go down to the sea and bathe; presumably the symbolism of this custom, known as *kuoga mwaka*, is the washing away of the Old Year and all that was unclean therein. Bi. Kaje wa Mwinye Matano (c.1890 - c.1981) comments:

wakike hawendi p'wani. Wakike watakwenda oga upande mwengine hawa-tangamani. Siku hizi watoto huoga manyumbani (Mirza 1991: 28) 'The girls don't go to the beach. They bathe on another side [of the island]; they do not mix. These days [the 1970s] children just bathe in their houses' (Mirza 1989: 45).

The Siku ya Mwaka Procession

Just before dawn male adults and all the *chuo* children of the town assembled at Ngomeni, the Portuguese-built fort. Driving a sacrificial ox in front, the entire assembly

McCrae et al., 1985: 13).

²⁵ CMS Archives, Krapf's Journal, entry for Sunday 31:xii:1843 (folio 228, CA5/016/164). In that year, 1259 AH / AD 1843, *Siku ya Mwaka* occurred in the month of *sha'bān* / August.

of many hundreds would move off in procession along *Ndiya K'uu* (the High Street of Mombasa's Old Town) reading aloud portions from the Holy Qur'an with the intention of petitioning God to protect their town throughout the coming year. It was forbidden to cross the road in front of the procession. The procession in which the bull or cow is led by a rope from Ngomeni (the Portuguese-built fortress) to Kwa Shee Mvita (the area around Shee Mvita's grave in the north) has been discontinued for several years.²⁶ Shaykh Abd Allah Saleh al-Farsy, an opponent of *bid'a* 'innovation' (i.e. a belief or practice for which there is no precedent in the time of the Prophet Muhammad) wrote:

Mwaka huu hauna ukhusiano - chembe hii - na uIslamu. Basi imekhusu nini 'kisomwe hiki'? 'kiliwe hiki'? 'kichinjwe hiki'? Na huyo mnyama atakayechinjwa apitishwe majiyani na vijuzuu²⁷ vya Qur'an anapita akisomewa, mpaka afikishwe hapo pa kuchinjiwa! Na kuitakiqi kuwa sharti achinjwe hapo! (Farsy 1397 / 1977: 32). 'This [Swahili] New Year has nothing whatsoever to do with Islam. So why then must something [from the Holy Qur'an] be read? Why must something be eaten? Why must something be slaughtered? And the beast that is to be slaughtered is led along the wretched lanes [of the Old Town], going on its way while sections of the Qur'an are read over it until it reaches the place where it is to be slaughtered! And to believe that it is obligatory for the animal to be slaughtered there!'

The traditional route of the *siku ya mwaka* procession had seven stations.²⁸ They were, starting from Ngomeni (the Portuguese-built fortress):

- i the Mandhry mosque;
- ii the Jeneby (al-Azhar) mosque;
- iii the Mkanyageni mosque (known as *kitovu cha mji* ('the navel of the [old Swahili] town');
- iv the Mlango wa P'apa mosque;
- v the Mswalani mosque;

²⁶ The procession of the bull: during the days immediately following *Siku ya Mwaka* the waTangana of Mtongwe (just to the south of Mombasa Island) used to process with a bull or cow to Mtendeni (now within the precincts of the Kenya Navy Base) where it was slaughtered. The Mtongwe ox, unlike its Mombasa counterpart, was not led by a rope. This information has been kindly supplied by Chief Abd al-Aziz Ahmad mKilindini.

²⁷ *vijuzuu*: in Swahili, the noun *juzuu* is assigned to the 'N Class' (Noun Classes 9 & 10), so that the singular and the plural are the same; here, however, the *vi-* prefix gives to the Islamic word *juzuu* a pejorative meaning which it is virtually impossible to translate adequately.

²⁸ I am obliged to Chief Abd al-Aziz Ahmad mKilindini for this information.

- vi the Kilifi mosque;
- vii Kwa Shee Mvita.

The first three stations are in the southern half of the Old Town known as Kavani, the moiety which was formerly the home of the *miji mitatu* 'the three Swahili tribes of Mombasa', while the last four stations are in the northern half known as Mjuwakale, the home of the *miji tisiya* 'the nine Swahili tribes of Mombasa'. At each station there was a halt during which the *adhān* ('the call to prayer') was proclaimed. It was forbidden to cross the road in front of the procession'. The reason for this prohibition was that some believed the sacrificial cow could drive evil spirits out of the town; and so, if someone crossed the animal's path there was the possibility that the evil spirits would be diverted and enter the person unlucky enough to be in the way.

Eventually, at dawn, the men accompanied by the *chuo* children arrived at the grave of Shee Mvita, the ladies having already assembled there. Some of the *waMiji* (members of the twelve tribes of Swahili Mombasa) claim Shee Mvita as their ancestor and the eponymous founder of Mvita (i.e. Mombasa). *Khitma*, a recital of the Holy Qur'an, may be undertaken throughout the year, in particular after someone's death; but *khitma ya mji* is normally recited only on the morning of New Year's Day - the intention being *kuzungua mji* 'to fence the town with Qur'an readings'; *kuzungua mji* could also apply to abnormal circumstances such as drought or plague. A former Qāḍī of Mombasa has given *khitmat al-balad* as the Arabic equivalent of the Swahili *khitma ya mji*, and *ruqyat al-balad* as the Arabic equivalent of the Swahili *kuzungua mji* - for neither of these two Swahili concepts exists in classical Arabic (al-Mazru'ī 1353/1934: 44, footnote 2).

After *khitma* the ox was slaughtered near Shee Mvita's grave. Also, in Zanzibar town, it is reported that during the reign of Sayyid Sa'īd (obit 1273 AH / AD 1856) the sacrificial ox was slaughtered on New Year's Day in front of the Sultan's palace (Farsy 1942: 76). It is claimed that the slaughtering of the ox originated in pre-Islamic times.

The *gungu* dance is known throughout Swahili-land,²⁹ but in Mombasa it is danced only on the morning of the Swahili New Year while some of the verses (possibly some of the tunes too) differ from *gungu* dances elsewhere in Swahili-land). The men dance in pairs, while the women sing and clap in time with the tune. The main text of these verses together with an English translation is given below.³⁰ Two further *gungu*

²⁹ *gungu*: it is instructive to compare this dance with the *shindwa*. *Gungu* is for men, *shindwa* for women; *gungu* is performed during the day, *shindwa* at night; *gungu* is danced at one fixed point, *shindwa* is peripatetic (except, so I have been told, in Zanzibar); neither dance employs drums and so, strictly speaking, cannot be described as *ngoma*.

³⁰ The Mombasa *gungu* verses were provided by Nasoro wa Khalfan mKilindini, an eminent

verses and the text of the *shindwa* dance is given in the Appendix.

I

*tujile*³¹ *kushika moo* *jumbe*³² x 2
*ndiswi wana*³³ *wa muali*³⁴ *p'embe*³⁵ x 2

We have come to pay our respects to the great chief;
 We are the descendants of Muali P'embe.

II

pumbavu likipumbaa *p'umbe*³⁶ x 2
jit'u lisilo nadhari *ng'ombe* x 2

When the fool becomes extremely foolish
 He is a big fool without any understanding, like an ox.

III

wat'u hawendi tena *P'emba*³⁷ x 2
kuna nyama mla-wat'u *simba*³⁸ x 2

our people will not go again to P'emba
 there is a creature there who devours people, a lion.

elder of the *waMiji* and, in his youth, a well-known singer; he was also good enough to make a recording of the verses - each with its own *mahadhi* 'tune'.

In this revised version of the *gungu* verses I am indebted to Mu'allim Muhammad Sa'id Maṭano for enlightening me as to a number of obscurities in the original version.

³¹ *Tu-* ('we'): the singers of these verses are the *waMiji*; the tense is the old perfect in *-le*.

³² *jumbe*: the house of the *jumbe* or *tamimu*, the clan chief, where members of the clan can always be certain of hospitality.

³³ *wana*: literally 'children'; actually *wanat'i*, the original inhabitants of Mvita.

³⁴ *Muali*: *muungwana* 'freeman', i.e. Shee Mvita was a man who was personally free, with the rights and liberty of a citizen, not a slave.

³⁵ *P'embe*: In Swahili-land the *p'embe* 'horn' is a symbol of power and might (*alama ya utukufu*).

³⁶ *p'umbe*: more or less redundant, the word means extreme stupidity.

³⁷ *P'emba*: from Mombasa to P'emba is a sea voyage of about 45 minutes. For much of the 18th and part of the 19th centuries P'emba was the granary of Mombasa.

³⁸ *simba*: a lion. It was believed that P'emba witches had the ability to change themselves into man-eating lions.

IV

*Shee Mvita mzuwie ng'ombe*³⁹ x 2

*Asinwe maji kwa pembe*⁴⁰ x 2

O Shee Mvita! restrain the ox
by the horn, so that it does not drink water.

V

*Kijakazi*⁴¹ *Saada nakutuma*⁴² *huyatumika*

Kamwabiye mama ni muinga hayalimika

Nafanye mkate palekati tupa kaweka

*Nikereze p'ingu naminyoo*⁴³ *ikinemka*

O Saada! I sent you on an errand, but you have not gone yet.

Go and tell Mother; she is still a simpleton, she has not yet become shrewd.

Let her bake some bread and put a file in the middle of it;

Let me saw the handcuffs and let the chains be broken.

Following the prayers came the singing and dancing, after which most of the older *waMiji* would have gone home. Now it was the turn of many hundreds of Mombasa's poorer people, adults and children, to flock onto the greensward around Shee Mvita's grave where they would eat boiled meat. This occurred about half-an-hour after midday. In the past each family would have prepared different kinds of *mikate* 'kinds of bread' for which Swahili housewives are deservedly praised - for example, *mkate wa kumimina*, *mahamri*, *vitumbua*, *vibibi*. It was strictly forbidden for anyone to take back into the town any remnants, for was not the food *sadaka* 'a sacred offering', intended to avert calamity from the island during the years ahead?

After the feast the bones were collected and put in a sack together with a number of ornaments provided by the ladies of the *waNg'ombeni*.⁴⁴ The sack was then tied and given to fishermen who dumped it with its contents, including the gold, in the

³⁹ *mzuwie ng'ombe*: restrain the [struggling] ox, i.e. prepare the ox for slaughter.

⁴⁰ The head of the ox is forced back in preparation for the knife; in such a position the beast is, of course, quite unable to drink.

⁴¹ *Kijakazi Saada*: a young slave girl.

⁴² *na-* ('T'): the singer is Fumo Liyongo - the folk hero of the Swahili people; he has been imprisoned, but is planning to escape.

⁴³ *naminyoo*: i.e. *na minyororo*.

⁴⁴ ornaments: in previous centuries they were of gold - gold had made a major contribution to the rise and prosperity of the Kilwa Sultanate. Nowadays the ornaments are of base metal.

sea between Ngomeni and Mackenzie Point (as it is now named in the charts). By doing so, some believed, plague and other sicknesses would be averted from the town for another year.

In the past *siku ya mwaka* was a public holiday. Yet, although a holiday, 'on s'exerce ensuite, mais pour quelques instants seulement, à chacun de ses travaux ordinaires' 'people then go about their ordinary tasks, but for a few moments only' (Sacleux 1909: xxii), i.e. the tasks one expected to perform throughout the coming year. Thus the *mkulima* 'farmer' might spend a moment digging in his field, while the *mshoni* 'tailor' might sew on a button, and so forth (Hinawy 1964: 35). This custom was known as *kushika mwaka kiwindu* 'holding on to the New Year's anchor rope' - i.e. pointing oneself in the right direction. The phrase is now obsolete (Sacleux 1939: 424). Of this practice Shaykh Mbarak Ali Hinawy observed: 'The boys then return to the school [from the beach] and remain there for an hour so as to begin the year. This sitting is called *kushika mwaka kiwindu* and the rest of the day is a holiday' (Hinawy 1964: 34).

The schools of course had a holiday too and the *chuo* children, instead of being beaten by their teacher with a *kikoto* 'a switch made of raffia' would beat one another while chanting nonsense verses such as the following:

Bwana Salale 'Kitoka'

Huyu si mwana ni nyoka

Kitundu cha mnazi k'oboka

Mwalimu homa homa

mshike mbele na nyuma!

'Mr Salale "Hatchet Man"!

He's not a child, he's a snake.

O nest in the coconut palm, fall down!

Let fever seize the teacher, both in front and behind!

Another song which the young pupils used to chant goes thus:

*Si zetu si zetu * za mwalimu wetu*

*Kipanga na mbao * na kalamu zetu!*

'They are not ours, they are not ours;

they belong to our teacher,

ink pots and writing planks

as well as our pens' (Hinawy 1964: 34).

The remaining lines are obscene.

*Part III**New Year's Day in Mombasa: The Present (1992 and 1995)*

During a recent sojourn in Mombasa the writer was invited to attend the New Year's Day prayers, on Sunday 19 July 1992 (the feast day proper actually occurring on the following Friday, 24 July). There was no procession as in years gone by. A few elderly waMiji assembled at Shee Mvita's grave just before dawn, an annual assembly which now requires a government permit. The surrounding neighbourhood, Kwa Shee Mvita, is situated in the area of pre-Portuguese Mombasa - formerly known as K'ongoweya - and includes the burial ground of a section of the waMiji (the Kwa maShee graveyard, belonging to the Nine Tribes). It was, the writer believed, an ill omen for the future of the Swahili New Year in Mombasa that no school children were present.

However, three years later, in 1416 AH / AD 1995, the *khitma ya mji* was held on the Sunday preceding *siku ya mwaka* which fell on a Monday (25 *mfungo tano* / 24 July). The occasion was heralded by notices posted on the outside of many of Mombasa's mosques. In the event there was a gathering at Kwa Shee Mvita of some six hundred folk - a significant increase on the attendance of three years previously. In accordance with custom, people assembled at Kwa Shee Mvita shortly after *ṣalāt al-fajr* 'the dawn prayers', seating themselves in the open air in three groups: men and women and some two hundred children from local Islamic schools together with their teachers.

Because the sky was overcast it was decided to assemble under cover - in the spacious and airy carpentry workshop of the adjacent Allidina Visram school. The assembly sat on the ground in rows, facing a row of dignitaries, everyone sitting on sheets of brown paper, waiting quietly until numbers had grown to some thirty or forty - mainly elderly Swahili. Printed books were taken out of a box and distributed, each book containing one *juzuu* 'one thirtieth portion of the Holy Qur'an', the whole comprising the Qur'an in its entirety. Permission to begin was requested from the most impoverished-looking person present, an elder of Mombasa's waTangana tribe. To commence the proceedings the *Qādi* of Mombasa - himself a *mMiji*, a member of Mombasa's twelve tribes - uttered the word *al-fātiha*, after which the assembly recited the opening chapter of the Holy Qur'an. The *qādi*'s presence was not without significance in so far as some East African Muslims have expressed the opinion that several of the *siku ya mwaka* ceremonies are not Islamic. Presumably that is why it was possible to write a hundred and fifty years ago that 'les Arabes de Zanzibar ne prennent aucune part à cette fête (Guillain 1856: ii, 107) 'the Arabs of Zanzibar [presumably waManga, i.e. unassimilated Omani Arabs] do not take any part in this festival'. Guillain's statement is slightly misleading in that those Muslims who decline to participate in the Swahili New Year

are not confined to 'the Arabs of Zanzibar'.⁴⁵

Again, Muhammad Saleh al-Farsy (a younger brother of Shaykh Abd Allah) in his charming novel depicting life in a typical Zanzibar village described the *siku ya mwaka*, but then added in brackets:

Hayo ni mambo ya bidaa na uzushi, na ya ushirikina wa kikafiri yaliyochanganya na uIslamu. Mashekhe na wana wa vyuo wanapiga makelele sana juu ya ushirikina huo na mwingineo (Farsy 1960: 32); 'these are matters of innovation and invention, polytheistic and atheistic matters which are confused with Islam. Shaykhs and scholars object in the strongest terms to such polytheism and to other things'.

Such criticisms regarding the Swahili New Year are partly based on such Qur'anic verses as 'thy Lord suffices as a guide' (Arberry 1955: ii, 58), partly on objections to those elements in the proceedings which pertains to evil spirits, and partly on objections to the belief relating to *thawabu* 'a reward of merit from God', e.g. the belief that the reading of *khitma* can cause the transfer of *thawabu* from the living to the dead.⁴⁶

After the opening chapter had been recited together, every individual read from the printed books - some silently, some aloud. When the qādi deemed sufficient time to have elapsed he clapped his hands as a signal to stop. Those who recited *khitma* believed that they had obtained *thawabu* 'a reward of merit from God' which can be credited, as it were, to the account of a named individual who has died; this practice, at the completion of a *khitma*, is known as *kufikiliza* (literally, 'to transfer' the *thawabu* from oneself to another who is deceased), while the entire procedure, from beginning to end, is called *kukhitimisha*.

⁴⁵ 'the Arabs of Zanzibar': many of the *wamanga* of Zanzibar City would have disassociated themselves from the *siku ya mwaka* ceremonies at Makunduchi since the Swahili folk of Zanzibar island were (unlike the *wamiji* of Mombasa island) mainly rural, and aspects of their religion would have been regarded by the Omani Arabs as objectionable.

⁴⁶ *thawabu*: there is a *hadith* attributed to the Prophet Muhammad which says that one's good deeds, and thus the *thawabu* ('reward') for one's good deeds, end on the day of one's death. There are three exceptions:

- i *sadaka yendayo kulla siku* ('benefactions which continue day by day' [e.g. by causing a well to be dug, often near a mosque]);
- ii *ilimu wapatiyayo wat'u manufaa* ('knowledge which brings people benefits' [e.g. the founding of a school]);
- iii *mtoto mwema mwenye kumuombeya Mwenye-ezi Mngu* ('having a pious child who prays for one to Almighty God'). Related by Muslim (Mazru'i 1356 [1938]: 4).

The mashada la tambuu

About an hour later, towards the end of the readings and the prayers, there was a light shower of rain, which some would doubtless interpret as a good omen. Numbers inside the carpenters' workshop were now some seventy or eighty, with groups of ladies waiting outside. One of the elders came round the seated rows of men with a basketful of 'silver' shillings, distributing a coin to every person present, a symbol of the hope that the coming year might be a prosperous one. Another elder then came round with a *mrashi* 'a sprinkler', and sprinkled *marashi* 'fragrant rose water' into one's cupped hands. Finally, an elder shook hands with all those leaving the workshop, wishing each and every person God's blessing throughout the coming year. Married *waMiji* males were presented with a *shada la tambuu* 'a green betel leaf known as *tambuu*, folded like an envelope with aromatic cloves pinning down the folds - with three tabs appended to the lower side, also cut from the betel leaf'. The *mashada* had been divided into four lots, each lot being placed on a round copper tray (the *uPatu*, to which reference has already been made). The contents of three of the trays were for married male members of the *miji mitatu* 'the three tribes', while the *mashada* on the fourth tray were for married male members of the *miji tisiya* 'the nine tribes'.⁴⁷ The *mashada* had been prepared the evening before by some of the ladies.

kutinda nyama ('the slaughtering')

After the readings and prayers had ended, an ox, a goat and a hen, all of the same colour, were slaughtered in accordance with Islamic procedures - a number of *waMiji* having each contributed one hundred shillings in order to buy the animals.

The gungu dance

In 1413 AH / AD 1992 there was no *gungu* dance to round off the rites and ceremonies. Three years later there was a revival, albeit on a modest scale - two elderly *waMiji* danced for several minutes, one of the two employing a *t'ambi* ('a long, white, cotton scarf') with considerable skill and elegance. The words (see above) were sung by Nasir 'Chaka' mKilindini, the deputy *tamimu* ('chief') of the three tribes who, in his youth, had been a renowned singer.⁴⁸ The *kipokeo* ('chorus') was sung by the ladies. The writer understands that a video of the *gungu* as performed in Mombasa was made in the 1980s, but he has not yet seen it.

A group of ladies tidied up Shee Mvita's grave as the men and *chuo* pupils were

⁴⁷ *mashada la tambuu*: it is a matter of pride for a young Swahili male when he is first presented with a *shada la tambuu*, for the act signifies that he is now a representative of his family. Such presentations are not confined to *siku ya mwaka*, but also occur at weddings.

⁴⁸ Shaykh Nasir Khalfan mKilindini died in Mombasa on 19:viii:1418 AH / AD 20:xii:1998.

leaving. This was done to fulfil a *nadhiri* (a solemn vow made to God).

Shortly after mid-day a crowd assembled consisting, in the main, of poorer members of the town, they had come for a meal of free boiled meat, each person bringing their own supply of bread - bread of the European type.

*The shindwa dance*⁴⁹

In the evenings both before and after *siku ya mwaka* Swahili ladies in both Jomvu K'uu and Mombasa would sing and dance the *shindwa*. In 1973 Bi. Shamsa binti Muhammad Muhashamy described the dance thus: 'One or two months before *Siku ya Mwaka*, when the crops are about to ripen, a few women sneak to their neighbours' house at night and surprise them with this song and dance. This action is called *kumtiliya moto jirani* ("to light a fire for a neighbour"). This dance consists of women pounding vertically held bamboo sticks [formerly known as *mivungo*⁵⁰] on the ground. The next year the neighbour will respond - *kulipa shindwa* ("to repay *shindwa*") - by bringing twenty or thirty shillings to the woman who organised the previous year's visit and by singing a special song' (Strobel 1975: Appendix I, 371). A Mombasa version of the *shindwa* is given in the Appendix.

Conclusion

Writing about *siku ya mwaka* in 1955, Sir John Gray ventured the opinion that 'there may well come a time when this long-lived custom will have fallen everywhere into desuetude'. As has been observed above, many of the events once common in Mombasa on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day are now quite forgotten. The present writer considers that Sir John Gray's opinion, at least in so far as Mombasa is concerned, may indeed be justified; and yet, as this article has attempted to demonstrate, while agricultural and maritime in origin, the Swahili New Year has survived not in order to

⁴⁹ *shindwa*: Sacleux says that the word derives from the 'dialectes du Nord', i.e. central and northern dialects (Sacleux 1939: 840). The *shindwa* seems to have been well established in Mombasa by the mid-eighteenth century, during the governorate of Liwali 'Ali bin 'Uthmān bin 'Abd Allāh al-Mazru'ī (al-Mazru'ī 1995: page 47 of the English translation).

Shindwa was one of some twenty Swahili dances which the British administration might prohibit on grounds of immorality - see the Schedule to the Mombasa Municipality (Native Dances, Processions and Strolling Musicians) By-Laws, 1934 (*Kenya Proclamations, Rules and Regulations 1934*, General Notice No 1304).

⁵⁰ *mVungu* (*hiMvita*): 'Sorte d'instrument de musique employé dans certaines danses *ngoma*; c'est ou un bambou, ou un bâton creux (*kama mwanzi* [like bamboo]), dont on percute le sol' (Sacleux 1939: 635).

mufungu: 'The bamboo cane. The cane was formerly used for quivers, which are now made of leather. They now only use bamboo in dancing, as a kind of rude musical instrument, stamping them on the ground' (Krapf & Rebmann 1887: 273).

provide scholars with material for study, but to express the spiritual hopes and fears of the twelve Swahili tribes of Mombasa as they assemble year after year at Kwa Shee Mvita, their family home, to pray that God may deliver their town and island from every evil throughout the coming three hundred and sixty five days.

In a characteristically thought-provoking essay Ali Mazrui suggests three distinct phases in the history of Mombasa as a city (Mazrui 1996: 158-176). First there is what he calls 'the Afro-Oriental phase', when Mombasa (or Mvita) was an overwhelmingly Swahili town; it was during this phase when the *siku ya mwaka* observances were at their height, not only in Mombasa but throughout all Swahili-land. Ali Mazrui calls the second historical period 'the Afro-Occidental phase', when Mombasa was at last 'discovered' by European-Christians, first by the Portuguese and then by the British; towards the end of this period, with the Swahili component of Mombasa diminishing by the decade, the *siku ya mwaka* rites and ceremonies were allowed to remain - a picturesque occasion, but a harmless one. The third phase of Mombasa's history is currently in progress - 'the Afro-global phase'.

Since the European-Christian occupation of Swahili-land in the second half of the nineteenth century, the annual *siku ya mwaka* has been generally understood by foreigners as being a syncretic survival from the 'Afro-Oriental phase'. Today, in the current 'Afro-global phase', *siku ya mwaka* is one of the few occasions in the year when the autochthonous people of Africa's Swahili coast can together express their Swahili identity.

APPENDIX

Two additional verses of the Mombasa *gungu* (the whole meaning is not yet clear to me):

nguvu za mwanangu zapoteya bure

kupata sahani

kupata sahani

*mumezisahau sima za mivure*⁵¹

ni k'ungu k'ondo zake ni jioni

jongoo akenda mato hayaoni

werevu wa k'owa

werevu wa k'owa

imengandama nyumba maungoni

⁵¹ *mvure* (mi-): sorte de pot en bois de *mvure*: il sert d'assiette aux *waNyika* pour manger le riz cuit *sima* (Sacleux 1939: 635); a *kiMvita* word derived from *kiNyika*.

The efforts of my [married] son are wasted
 to get china plates x 2
 you have forgotten the porridge which you used to eat from wooden platters.

The flea attacks at night,
 the millipede walks with unseeing eyes,
 the cleverness of the snail x 2
 is to have its house attached to its back.

The Mombasa Shindwa verses

The following verses have been written down by Mu'allim Ali Jamaadar Amir, to whom I readily acknowledge my indebtedness.

A cassette of the *shindwa*, as sung at State House Mombasa by the ladies of Jomvu K'uu in the presence of President Jomo Kenyatta, has been given to me by the kindness of Shaykh Nasir Khalfan mKilindini. The Jomvu verses differ slightly from the Mombasa version given below.

Nyimbo za Shindwa

- 1 *tujile kutiya moto twaweta*
 tujile kutiya moto twaweta
 twaweta
 twaweta

- 2 *usimteeze p'apa*
 *atakupiga msamba*⁵²
 wat'u wajiliya vyao
 nyinyi mwajiramba vyanda

- 3 *mambo na wenyewe mambo*
 wengine wakitamani
 *Shekhe ni Khamisi Kombo*⁵³
 uladi Khamisi T'ani

⁵² *-piga msamba*: 'kick while horizontal', as opposed to *-piga teke* 'kick while vertical'.

⁵³ *Khamisi Kombo*: the heroic Swahili chief of the *miji tisiya* from 1865 to 1896. He lived for many years at Mtwapa and, with Shaykh Mbaruku bin Rashid bin Salim al-Mazru'i (died in exile in 1328 AH / AD 1910), valiantly but unavailingly opposed the British occupation of central Swahili-land. Shaykh Khamis Kombo died in 1328 AH / AD 1903.

- 4 *ngoja mwezi uwandame*
 *tuwaeneze vishuka*⁵⁴
 mume ni k'uni za k'oko
 zisipowaka hufuka
- 5 *ajabu ya mBashiri*
 mChangamwe mwenye mbeko
 alimpiga mamaye
 kwa kipande cha ukoko
- 6 *ajabu ya mBashiri*
 mChangamwe wa hishima
 alimpiga mamaye
 akampa na mtumwa
- 7 *Khamisi Kombo amekimbiya*
 *chepeo*⁵⁵ *cha mzungu*
 Khamisi Kombo amekimbiya
 chepeo cha mzungu

An English translation

- | | | |
|---|--|------------|
| 1 | We have come to burn [the woodland]
We are calling you | x 2
x 2 |
| 2 | Do not provoke the shark,
it will strike you with its tail,
[other] people eat their [food],
[but] you lick your fingers. | |
| 3 | Great deeds [are the achievements] of particular people,
while others long [to achieve such deeds],
Khamisi Kombo is the Shaykh [of Mtwapa],
the descendant of Khamisi T'ani. | |

⁵⁴ *vishuka*: it is possible that this word should be *vizuka*; *kizuka* - 'femme en état de demi-réclusion *uzuka* ou *eda*, à la mort de son mari ou après divorce (Sacleux 1939: 427). During the prescribed period the *mwenye eda* 'the person in seclusion' wears a *hishuka*, a headscarf made of white calico.

⁵⁵ *chepeo*: c.f. French 'chapeau'. The expression *amekimbiya chepeo cha waZungu* has become proverbial.

- 4 Wait for the new moon to rise,
we shall make widows of you,
a husband is like pieces of mangrove firewood [when damp],
if they do not produce fire [at least] they will produce smoke.
- 5 This mBashiri has done something wonderful,
a mChangamwe worthy of respect,
he hit his mother,
with a piece of crust [from the top of the cooked rice].
- 6 This mBashiri has done something wonderful,
a mChangamwe worthy of honour,
he hit his mother,
and gave her to a slave.
- 7 Khamisi Kombo ran away from x 2
the European's pith helmet. x 2

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am indebted to Mu'allim Muhammad Sa'īd Maṭano for reading a draft of the revised version of this article.

