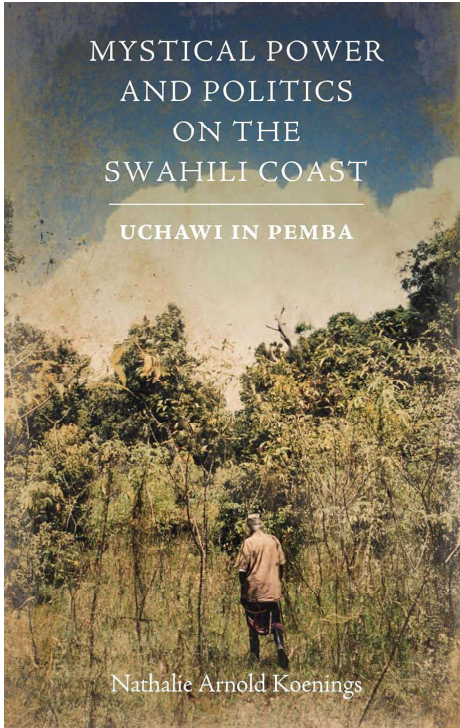


Martin Walsh:

REVIEWS

MYSTICAL POWER AND POLITICS ON THE SWAHILI COAST: UCHAWI IN PEMBA. Nathalie Arnold Koenings. James Currey, Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2024. xxii + 286 pp. ISBN: 9781847013842 (hardback) £95.00; ISBN 9781805433231 (e-book, EPDF) £29.95; ISBN 9781805433248 (e-book, EPUB) £29.95.



In *Mystical Power and Politics on the Swahili Coast: Uchawi in Pemba*, anthropologist Nathalie Arnold Koenings paints a picture of a society where the visible and invisible, the mundane and the mystical, are deeply intertwined and where colonial and local perspectives often clash and converge in complex ways. Insisting that scholars of Zanzibar should pay more attention to Pemba, where she has done research since 1996, Arnold Koenings demonstrates how *uchawi* (typically translated as ‘witchcraft’ but here ‘mystical power’ and usually left untranslated)—entangled with rather than juxtaposed with *uganga* ‘healing’ and Islam—“has shaped Pemban histories and worlds and that, in old, new and ever-changing forms it continues to do so” (p. 20). Part history, part anthropology, part love

letter to Pemba, the book will change how scholars think about *uchawi*, *uganga*, and Zanzibar.

After the Introduction, the book has three parts. The first and longest part, “Power”, which Arnold Koenings rightly describes as the book’s “ethnographic heart” (p. 21), has five chapters. The first uses her experience with *wachawi* ‘witches’ (disguised as dogs) and *waganga* ‘healers’ to introduce the centrality of “mystical power” to everyday life in Pemba. She then juxtaposes that experience with archival colonial reports. A central theme linked to Arnold Koenings’s work as a storyteller is the role of narration in both local experiences

and colonial documents. Like Popobawa in my work, Arnold Koenings shows that *uchawi* “has a lively discursive life” (p. 33), and whether one believes in it or not, how people talk about it has real effects on the world. Chapters Two, Three, and Four take us on a tour of “*uchawi*’s house”, a central theoretical (and, in some accounts, material) structure introduced to Arnold Koenings by a jinn, Shekhe Abdulaziz wa Bahr al Shem, who possessed one of her interlocutors. Encountering an interview with a jinn as a central primary source surprised me, but not, it seems, Arnold Koenings; it is a fascinating part of the book, and I was equally fascinated by her nonchalant treatment of it.

According to the jinn-sheikh, *uchawi* is a house with seven rooms, each representing a different level or type of *uchawi*, from the simplest forms practised by ordinary people to more complex and powerful forms. We encounter the first four rooms in Chapter Two (*uchawi* of a jealous soul, *uchawi* of those who keep jinn, *uchawi* that uses jinn to harm others, and the *uchawi* of those falsely claiming to have mystical knowledge). In Chapter Three, we enter the fifth room: *uganga*. While many previous scholars (and, in my experience, many people who visit *waganga*) distinguish *uchawi* and *uganga*, Arnold Koenings convincingly demonstrates that they share a common origin, knowledge base, and tools and that the distinction between them is often ambiguous and context-dependent. Chapter Four explains the sixth and seventh rooms of *uchawi*. The sixth involves powers of “invisibility, shapeshifting, bilocation and flight”, and, again, we see that these “extreme capacities are reserved for experts across both categories”—*wachawi* and *waganga* (p. 87). The seventh room comprises “*uchawi*’s most murderous realms” inhabited by *wachawi* who require child sacrifice (p. 96). In the final chapter of the book’s first part, Arnold Koenings examines *uchawi* in relation to power in ordinary Pemban life and discourse.

In the book’s second part, “Crisis”, Chapters Six and Seven turn to the effects of the Zanzibar Revolution on Pemba. In Chapter Six, Arnold Koenings demonstrates how, before the revolution, power and authority were associated with elders, crystallised in the institution of *usheha* ‘headmanship’, and that both *sheha* and elders, more generally, were associated with mystical power. During and after the revolution, age-based power relations were disrupted, often through violence and forced “modernization”, and Pemban *uchawi* lost much—but not all—of its power. Chapter 7 addresses additional reasons for *uchawi*’s diminishment, including the loss of land to non-Pembans (including land inhabited by jinns and *wachawi*) and reduced access to resources during

President Abeid Karume’s rule, leading to increased competition and disruption to people’s normal ways of caring for one another.

The book’s final section, “Transformations”, contains its eighth and ninth chapters. Chapter 8 addresses contemporary Zanzibari and broader Tanzanian politics in relation to Pemba, which Arnold Koenings shows has become synonymous with opposition in ways not unrelated to its longtime association with *uchawi* itself. In Chapter 9, she addresses the rise of reformist Islam, demonstrating how its critique of *shirk*, including *uchawi*, some forms of *uganga*, and jinn exorcism, has led many Pembans to disassociate themselves—at least discursively and publicly—from these practices. The book concludes with a chapter on recent economic development in Pemba and its ongoing effects on not only mystical power but also on ordinary life and people’s identities as Pemban.

Arnold Koenings’s book offers unique insights about and fascinating examples of the intertwining of political and mystical authority and the importance of storytelling in constructing social and imaginative worlds. Scholars of the Swahili Coast, in particular, will benefit from her rich description of Pemba’s social and geographical landscape, illustrating how historical and cultural contexts shape local practices and beliefs. I learned a great deal from her deep understanding of the moral ambiguity of *uchawi*, which can be both protective and harmful, complicating its depiction both in the colonial archive and in the discourse of contemporary Swahili Muslims influenced by reformist ideologies. I also appreciated reading about her experiences and interactions with Pembans and their jinn, which provide a vivid account of how she came to understand the complex dynamics of *uchawi* in Pemba. The book offers a nuanced understanding of how *uchawi* is perceived, practised, and integrated into the social fabric of Pemba, emphasising the everyday nature of *uchawi* and its deep entanglement with social relations, desires, and moral judgements.

If I have one critique of the book (and only if I must!), it is simply that its length will make it difficult to include in an undergraduate course, and few of the chapters can stand alone. One chapter that could work for undergraduates, I think, is Chapter 9, which I plan to include in a course on Islam in Africa: it offers a much more nuanced and humanising perspective on how ordinary Muslims engage with reformist ideas than much of the previous literature on the Swahili coast has done.

But what could Arnold Koenings have left out? The ethnographic material is

so rich that I can't fault her for wanting to include so much of it. As a scholar of Swahili, I was enchanted by her lingering on individual Swahili words, excavating them for deep meanings and metaphorical connections to one another—as she says, moving “with grave alertness to the power of language to create the world of which it speaks” (p. 15). As a lover of good writing, I was delighted with the writerly sensibility she brings to the book, weaving in her interlocutors' stories with her own experiences and deft analysis. *Mystical Power and Politics on the Swahili Coast* is a book to enjoy as much for what you will learn from it as for the writing itself.

K.D. Thompson

K.D. Thompson is Evjue-Bascom Professor of the Humanities in the Religious Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin Madison. Their books include Popobawa: Tanzanian Talk, Global Misreadings (Indiana University Press, 2017), and the edited volume (with Erin Stiles) Gendered Lives on the Western Indian Ocean: Islam, Marriage, and Sexuality on the Swahili Coast (Ohio University Press, 2015). They are currently writing an ethnography of an Islamic radio station in Tanga.

ZANZIBAR WAS A COUNTRY: EXILE AND CITIZENSHIP BETWEEN EAST AFRICA AND THE GULF. Nathaniel Mathews. University of California Press, Oakland, CA, 2024. xvi + 338. ISBN 9780520394520 (hardback) £80.00; ISBN 9780520400702 (paperback) £25.00; ISBN 9780520394537 (e-book) £25.00.

Although not explicitly stated, this book is based on the author's doctoral dissertation and is the product of many years' research on the relationships between the peoples of Zanzibar and of Oman. It begins with an introduction that establishes the problematic, and provides an overview of the history of Zanzibar, with particular attention to the Omani contribution in the longue durée, exploring the relationships between Oman and Zanzibar and the effects of the Zanzibar Revolution, and paving the way for the ensuing discussion.

The rest of the book is divided into three parts. The first part, “Belonging in Zanzibar”, deals with the history of the Omani presence in Zanzibar, the rights that they claimed, and that were often contested or denied, in the Isles in the run-up to independence, and the political struggles between the ASP and the ZNP in the early 1960s. The author then goes on to explore the events

Tanzanian Affairs

Issued by the Britain-Tanzania Society

No 140 Feb 2025



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