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# The belief and practice of divination among the Swahili Muslims in Mombasa district, Kenya

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**This article gives a critical analysis of divination as practiced among the Swahili of Kenya coast. Radical changes in lifestyles were not associated with initial Islamization, but in latter days, Swahili contextualized Islam to recognize some of their cultural practices alongside Orthodox Islam. The belief and practice of divination is among such cultural practices that continue up to now. It is a practice used by some to control their social and physical environment and determine, in some cases, knowledge about their future lives. Through manipulation, explanation and prediction, divination is employed to attain this important human goal. However, Orthodox Islam condemns the belief and practice of divination. Data for this study was gathered from Swahili Muslims of Mombasa District Kenya to investigate the persistence of this belief and practice of divination. It will also explain the reasons responsible for the belief in and practice of divination among the Swahili Muslims.**

**Key words:** Islam, Swahili, divination, orthodox Islam, popular Islam.

## INTRODUCTION

The major aim of this paper is to evaluate the coexistence of Islam and the belief and practice of divination among the Swahili Muslims. This is on the wider dialogue between religion and culture, specifically domestication of Islam in African societies. Islam as a religion has been adopted and adapted by the Swahili people in order to make it their own experience, thus an African Islam. It is therefore, important to study divination in an effort to understand African people in their culture as there is no aspect of life that is not touched by it.

There is no standard definition of divination as it means different things to different scholars (Lessa et al., 1965; Brandon, 1970; Fodor, 1966; Peek, 1991; Bascom, 1969; Turner, 1967). These scholars, however, postulate that divination gives meaning to social symbols that facilitate group solidarity and harmony. In a way, the door to one's choices in life for an African is not closed by fate. A person can always do something that can alter the course of fate. According to Dime (1982), African

understanding of divination is somewhat different from a European one. European understanding of divination is simply finding out the wishes of the deity and acting by them.

Dime (1982: 93) defines divination as "the communication to a consultant of his prenatal choices by a divinity through the instrumentality of 'brabiwei' (diviner)". The diviner can inquire into what were the client's prenatal choices, if any, so as to better his fortunes. One cannot always trace back into time and see where he/she went wrong and take the necessary steps to eradicate ill luck. This is a concept of Uzo/ Ijaw people of southern Nigeria and is shared by other African people. Nevertheless, this idea of trying to better one's chances explains why divination is still prevalent among Swahili. Richard Gehman notes:

"Today, despite scientific knowledge, there is a revival of witchcraft, spiritism and the occult in the West and a persistence of belief in mystical powers worldwide. In fact, belief in mystical powers worldwide is the fastest growing religion in the United States (Gehman, 1989: 98)".

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The aforementioned quotation shows that divination is an activity that scientific advancement has not been able to eradicate. This is because it has a role to play in the lives of people, specifically to provide information for the unknown. The belief and practice of divination is shared by people of various calibers, thus there are rich as well as poor people that engaged in the practice of divination. It forms part of the process of revelation in the day to day activities of an individual. Divination is a system of obtaining knowledge to learn one's cause of misfortunes, whether present, past or future; and ways to renounce or revoke such causes so as to better ones fortunes. This will serve as the definition of divination as far as this study is concerned.

This study was conducted in Mombasa District of Kenya, a cosmopolitan city inhabited by many communities. The choice of this area was based on the two reasons. The first reason is that Mombasa District is inhabited by, among others, the Swahili who are predominantly Muslims. The second reason is that the belief and practice of divination is still prevalent among the Swahili of Mombasa District. The former Mombasa covered an area of 275 square kilometres (Mombasa District Development Plan, 1997 – 2001: 1). There are no official statistics on the number of Swahili Muslims in the district. Records from the local Swahili organizations estimate the number of Swahili in the district to be over 100,000.

Mombasa as well as the rest of the East African Coast had contact with the outside world for many centuries. This is especially so of the maritime nations of the Indian Ocean such as Persian Gulf, Arabia, India and China (Abdulaziz, 1979: 7). The advent of Islam and subsequently its establishment in the coastal settlements led to an enduring influence on the cultural history of the Swahili city-states and village settlements. Mombasa is still an important port serving many land locked countries in Eastern and Central African countries. The social-economic status of Swahili Muslims, generally, in Kenya has neither been constant nor progressing since colonial times. The Swahili ruled the coastal city states for many centuries prior to colonial rule. They controlled the power and wealth along these city states. The Swahili were mainly fishermen and farmers, were also engaged in trade both in overseas and in hinterland of Kenya (Hansen and Twaddle, 1995: 212; Middleton, 1992). The peaceful trade was disrupted by the coming of the Portuguese in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. They ruled the coast for almost two hundred years until they were ousted by the Omani Arabs. The Omani took over control of the East African coast ruling the various towns as well as dominating trade. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Omani Arabs ruling from a sultanate established in Zanzibar Island attained control of political and social dominion on the coast in addition to running an active shipping trade. This period saw the emphasis on the Arabic elements of Swahili culture.

Today, Mombasa is a contested space and no longer

belongs to the Swahili alone. Mombasa is a cosmopolitan city with majority being people from the hinterland of Kenya. The Swahili no longer have the socio-economic command and control of the coast the way they did in Mazrui and Albusaid periods (Jewel, 1976; Kresse, 2007: 52-53). They have been adversely affected from an administrative point of view as well as in land ownership. There is stiff competition for social, economic and political control from all the forces involved, be it the upcountry people who have settled in Mombasa, Arabs, Indians and the Swahili. This situation breeds insecurity and uncertainty that feeds belief and practice of divination.

The researcher observed that in the year 2000, Mombasa and other towns in Kenya witnessed a wave of religious public gatherings popularly known as *mihadhara* in Swahili language. These gatherings are headed by scholars aimed at rooting out popular Islam among the Muslims. They are calling for the return to Sunnah and the Qur'an.

They have a revivalist mission trying to differentiate between tradition (*mila*) and religion (*dini*) (Loimeier and Seesemann, 2006: 7). These scholars encourage Muslims to eschew magical practices as they were in contradiction with the doctrine of *Tawhid*. However, these gatherings have not succeeded in eradicating these magical practices, divination being one of them. The Swahili Muslims see no contradiction with these magical practices and have continued to engage in them. They believe that the course of life can be influenced through it.

This paper aims to discuss the reasons for the belief and practice of divination. Again the recent ghost busting activities of Achiba Mwabakari<sup>1</sup> in year 2004 and 2005, as well as the incident in Mbaraki<sup>2</sup> Girls schools in year 2007 shows how wanting a study in this area is. Achiba Mwabakari had been doing a series of ghost busting and witch-hunting in several villages in Mombasa. His activities brought both joy to victims of witchcraft and sorcery and sorrow to the suspected witches and sorcerers.

The provincial administration was involved in restricting his activities, which unfolded other mysterious behavior from Achiba Mwabakari. Before him, there had been Kajiwe who also sought to bring out suspected witches and sorcerers (Ndzovu, 2000). Mbaraki Girls school, both the primary and secondary section have witnessed incidences where some girls were possessed by spirits who demanded human blood. The spirits received a sacrifice of three bulls, smiled and left the girls. There was a lot of condemnation from some religious leaders that they should not have been given the sacrifice. However, no one wanted to risk dealing with the angry spirits again. Through divination, the concerned parents and well-known exorcists were able to bring harmony and tranquility to the community.

<sup>1</sup> Mburu, Jinaro (2004) Kenya Broadcasting Cooperation, 29/03/2004.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.newnation.vg/forums/showthread.php?=&99511>; see also Omwa Ombara (17/03/2007) East African standard.

## METHODS

The data feeding this study was sourced from former Mombasa district through oral in-depth interviews as well as observation. A sample size of 280 respondents was selected through simple random and systematic sampling procedures to ensure good representation of target population. Key informants such as Muslim clergy, diviners, clients of divination and Swahili elders provided needed classified information and as such the research employed in-depth-oral interviews to obtain details on certain themes of the study. The clients of divination were picked through a snowball procedure and their consent sought when observation was done. However, to get the views of Swahili Muslims on the practice of divination simple random sampling was employed to get a total of 160 respondents from the target population.

### Conceptual framework

This study was guided by conflict and functional theories. The conflict theory operates on the premise that society is a stage populated with living, struggling and competing actors. Competition over scarce resources such as money, leisure, sexual partners and opportunities for a job with a good pay is at the heart of all social relationships. Competition rather than consensus is characteristic of human relationships. Conflict theory approaches the problem of social inequality from the standpoint of the various individuals and subgroups within a society. It examines the needs and desires of people rather than the needs of society as a whole. Social inequality is created from the struggle of valued goods, respect, and services that are in short supply. It is within the social universe that conflicts arising from human relationships are acted out. Conflicts are inherent in the very nature of social structure. Although conflict is innate in social structure, it is not always violent or manifest. It can be latent. Lewis Coser differentiate, two types of conflict when he says:

“Conflicts, which arise from frustration of specific demands within the relationship and from estimates of gains of the participation, which are directed at the presumed frustrating object, can be called realistic conflicts. On the other hand, although still involving interaction between two or more persons, are not occasioned by the rival ends of the antagonists, but by the need for tension release of at least one of them (Francis, 1982: 44)”.

Beliefs in and practices of divination in most societies arise from social conflicts. Such conflicts may be either manifest or latent. Conflict theory asserts that religion operates to preserve the wealthy and the powerful in their privileged positions in the society. Selfish motives and unsuccessful ambitions are some of the social conflicts responsible for practices of divination. Communal or personal grudges kept by an individual or a group of people arising from the availability and distribution of resources are known to result in divination. Evans-Pritchard posits:

“In the daily tasks of life, there is ample scope for friction. In the house-hold, there is frequent occasion for ill-feeling between husband and wife and between wife and co-wife arising from divisions of labour and sexual jealousies. Among his neighbours, a man is sure to have both secrecy and open enemies. There may have been quarrels about cultivation and hunting areas. There may have been rivalry at dances (1937:101)”.

Such incidences and many others are lush grounds for beliefs and practices of divination. The function of these beliefs and practices is to provide outlet for social conflict as will be further explained. The

persistence of beliefs and practices of divination among the Swahili designates their functional nature in consigning human roots to enigmatic events.

The other theory utilized in this study was the functional theory. According to Francis Abraham, one of the premises of this theory stipulates:

“Every element of a system has a function that contributes positively to the continued operation of that system or negatively to its disintegration and change. The central focus of functionalism is the analysis of such contributions, which are called eufunctions (positive), dysfunction (negative) or “survival” that is an element that makes no contribution at all or has outlived its purpose (Francis Abraham)”.

In this respect, it can be argued that functional theory seeks to explain social elements or cultural patterns in terms of their functions and consequences in a society. Functionalism sees the contribution of religion to human societies and cultures to be based upon its central characteristic, namely, its transcendence of everyday experience in the natural environment. Humans live in conditions of uncertainty, and their aptitude to control and affect the conditions of their lives is limited. Due to limited resources, religion assists individuals to adjust to these three core human problems; contingency, powerlessness and scarcity.

Religion is seen as the most basic mechanism of adjustment to these problems. To the functionalist, religion provides a supra-empirical ethical order and if no definite answers can be provided, then “Allah will reveal all in the fullness of time”. This entails that after death religion answers the problem of meaning and sanctifies the norms of the established order. Religion provides grounding for the beliefs and orientations of men in a view of reality that transcends daily experience. Functional theory has helped this study into understanding the role that Islam should play in the life of a Muslim. Islam is a practical religion expecting its followers to have a complete way of life. All events that happen in a person’s life are to be taken as one’s destiny and to solely rely on Allah during times of misfortunes such as death, sickness, barrenness, quarrels and other failures in life. A Muslim should not seek help from none other than Allah (Qur’an, 1: 4). Seeking help from none other than Allah amounts to *shirk*, associating partners with Allah (Qur’an, 31: 13). Islam is to be a complete way of life to a Swahili Muslim and one should not consult diviners to have knowledge of the unseen.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines the Swahili Muslim and divination. This deals with the Swahili cosmogony which answers the objective on Swahili beliefs and practices of divination. The subsection on the Swahili and Islam is to reinforce this study’s perspective on differentiation between Islamic culture and Swahili culture. In as much as the Swahili people are Muslims, they do not have one hundred percent conformation to the Islamic dogma and practice.

The identity of the Swahili is a paradox for many scholars. This is due to Swahili community’s dynamic capacity to absorb external features and influences through gradual integration of a multiplicity of outsiders into their society (Kresse, 2007: 36 - 37; Loimier and Seesmann, 2006: 55 - 66). Thus, it is imperative to ask ourselves “who are the Swahili?” This question has often prompted a quest for ‘origins’, a search for that historical

moment at which, as well as the historical process by which the Swahili can be said to have come into being (Mazrui and Sharrif, 1994: 17). Some scholars do not believe that the Swahili exist as an ethnic group (Maxon, 1986).

To them, Swahili are a mixture of Arabic and African races. On the contrary, the Swahili are an ethnic group that is distinct from other African ethnic communities and definitely very different from the Arabs (Kim, 2002: 10). The Swahili are an urban Muslim Community that emerged along the east African coast around 800 A.D (Horton and Middleton, 2000).

It is not easy to trace Swahili culture *per se* without referring to Islam today. This is because the Swahili are essentially Muslims, in that, they have adopted Islam as their religion with remnants of their old cultural practices (Bakari and Yahya, 1995: 142). Islam has contributed immensely to the emergence of rich Swahili culture. Islam, as a universal religion, made allowances for significant regions in its cultural manifestations in different parts of the world, while maintaining all its basic tenets (Bakari and Yahya, 1995). Swahili culture as at today is one expression of African system. Acceptance of the Islam by the coastal communities marked a qualitative change, which can be dated fairly reliably to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Early travelers' accounts mention Islam mainly to show that the inhabitants of East Coast were divided into believers and non-believers.

Al Mas'udi's account written around the 10<sup>th</sup> century showed that at least some form of Swahili was spoken (Middleton, 1992: 38). He also observed that the coastal settlements were self-governing with forms of sacred kingship, which contained both Muslims and non-Muslims. Ibn Batuta, the famous Arab geographer, had visited Mogadishu, Mombasa and Kilwa in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

He wrote about the piety of the ruler of Kilwa who was visited by religious men from Hijaz and its inhabitants who were pious Muslims of the Shafii sect (Bakari and Yahya, 1995: 143). He also noted that the people of Mombasa were very religious, honorable and just, with their mosques well built (Quraishy, 1987).

The religious life of the Swahili Muslims was blended with Islam (Larson, 2001). For example, veneration of ancestors continued and also added Islamic saints. Swahili Muslims pay homage to their immediate ancestors, their leaders and also Muslim saints, for instance, the Sheikh at Mackinnon Road along Mombasa-Nairobi highway in Kenya. Paying homage to Islamic saints was seen to bring blessings (Baraka), the barren women are able to conceive and also mysterious ailments are cured (Mohamed and Chamunyu, 2005).

### The Swahili spiritual world

Indeed the Swahili cosmogony is enriched with various spiritual beings such as the ancestral spirits (*koma*),

nature spirits (*mizimu*), benevolent spirits (*pepo*<sup>3</sup>) and jinns (*majini*). This Swahili world-view enhances the persistence of the beliefs and practice of divination. Before the spread of Islam into East Coast of Africa, the Swahili worshipped according to the traditions of their ancestors. The central theme in the Swahili religion is a belief in Creator called *Mungu* (God). This belief is accompanied by a belief in the mystical powers of both living and non-living intermediaries. According to the Swahili beliefs, *Mungu* is the *Muumba* (Creator) of everything in the universe. The name of the Creator is always invoked in performing certain rituals or supplication. However, not all prayers are made directly to *Mungu*. Occasionally, they have to pass through the various categories of intermediaries. To the Swahili people, *Mungu* is an all knowing deity. He explains what is beyond human comprehension. The Swahili believe that the ancestral spirits are guarding their living relatives from calamities. As such, ancestral spirits serve as means of communicating with *Mungu*. The ancestral spirits are intermediaries between *Mungu* and living members of the Swahili community.

The first category of intermediaries includes *Koma*. These are the spirit of their ancestors. The *Koma* are the ancestors who established the society and introduced the rules for proper social order. Immoral or antisocial behaviour can be punished by offended ancestral spirits possessing the persons and communicating through them reasons for their distress. This forces the offenders to mend their ways. They are, therefore, much revered in the society. The *Koma* are periodically said to commune with their living relatives when given *sadaka* (offerings) and *kafara* (sacrifice).

In the course of this study, the researcher witnessed a ceremony known as "dressing the spirits" in Chamunyu village. Different descendants were suffering from ailments and this was seen to be an affliction. Several descendants had dreamt on different occasion that their ancestral spirits are complaining that they had been forgotten. A diviner was consulted and he interpreted their dreams as follows:

"Your ancestors want you to commune with them. You should slaughter a black he-goat, chickens and also prepare food items. Also buy clothing items, red, blue, black and white at 10.00am, you will go to the graveyard, our libation and offering. The pieces of cloth will be tied to the trees (Mohamed and Chamunyu, 2005)".

After this, order was restored in this village. Prominent Swahili Muslims were buried in elaborate tombs, at which their descendants burnt incense and made sacrifices to appease the ancestors (Nurse and Spear, 1985, 95). For instance, in Mombasa, there is a grave of Shehe Mvita in Allidina Visram High School compound. Every year, there are elaborate rites done around his grave to commemorate the beginning of Swahili traditional solar year,

<sup>3</sup> Pepo, among the Swahili is a positive benevolent spirit that benefits them, especially offering mystic protection and guidance.

which is different from the ordinary solar year<sup>4</sup>. The celebrations details differ from town to town along the coastal strip. There is blending with Qur'anic recitations as children with elders moved from house to house collecting offerings with a black bull. The journey ended by the seashore where the bull was slaughtered, shared among those present cooked and eaten without salt or washing it. These celebrations are not done every year, but now periodically, when people face adversities (Mohamed and Chamunyu, 18/08/2005).

*Pepo* are another group of spiritual beings who serve as intermediaries. *Pepo* from a Swahili root means to sway or reel about, just the way a person does when possessed (Middleton, 1992: 173). They are limitless in number, invisible to ordinary people and are not restricted to any place. Some send various kinds of sickness particularly those associated with hysteria or trance like behaviour to individuals by possessing them. Such harmful *Pepo* can be controlled by either the individual or the medicine men. From observation and interviews with diviners and elders, it was noted that there are different kind of *pepo*, some representing tribal names and Swahili are able to recognize them by the items they demand (Omari and Mataka, 2005, Kibwana; 2005). *Pepo* belongs to different tribes and religious affiliation. They may be Muslims, Christians, or heathens. When an individual is possessed, the items that a *pepo* demands have to be made available, even if under ordinary circumstances they shun them. Based on this discussion, popular ones are explained. Examples include *pepo wa kimaasai*, who wears red cotton cloth, or the red shuka worn by Maasai. The individual possessed by *pepo wa kimaasai* also loves ghee, licking it and applying it all over his/her body. One may also demand to carry a spear. The possessed person also speaks with a Maasai accent or at times speaks the Maasai language. If the Swahili do not know the *pepo* at all, the *pepo* will identify himself/herself, by name and place of origin. There is also *pepo wa kinyika* whose place of origin is among the Mijikenda community and a possessed person speaks the language. Items that help identify the spirit are palm wine and incense. They wear blue *shuka* or *kisutu*. It is also common for this spirit to appear in form in sickness, earache (Salmin, 2006). Their shrines have a pot, which has to be filled with palm wine. Palm wine may not be drank on a daily basis, but during possession by this spirit, it has to be available to commune with them.

The other popular *pepo* is *pepo wa kipemba*. As the name suggest, their origin is Pemba Islands and one who is possessed by this *pepo* likes to chew charcoal. Their clothing is black *shuka* and a possessed person speaks with a Kipemba dialect. *Pepo wa kipemba* are basically

spirits of exorcism and aid diviners as well ordinary Swahili to sniff and remove harmful spirits in a person (Kirami, 2006; Mataka, 2005; Kombo, 2005). The last popular *pepo* is *pepo wa kiarabu*. This *pepo* wears a white *shuka*, loves aloe wood and incense. The possessed one speaks with an Arabic accent or Arabic language. The *Pepo* may demand that his *kiti* wear a golden ring with coral or silver ring with turquoise and a white *shuka* (a piece of calico usually worn as a loin cloth).

Both men and women can be possessed by *Pepo*. The possessed person becomes the *Kiti* (chair or seat) of the *Pepo*, which then is likely to possess him or her on future occasions. It is important to understand how Swahili families came to acquire *pepo*. The elderly Swahili give the following account:

“As part of our belief, there are harmful spirits as well as witches and sorcerers wishing to harm our families. Our forefathers thought it prudent to ask powerful medicine men of their time potions and medicine to guard our villages. With passage of time, the spirits were incorporated and with these, single spirits grew into families and identified some of the ascendants as their seats (O.I, Kibwana Kombo; 13.08.2005, O.I, Saumu Mastura, Mikanjuni 10.08.2005, O.I, Ukumbini, Jomvu, 12/12/05)”.

A family of *Pepo* may occupy a house and be inherited by the human family that lives there, often choosing one or more of the children as their favorites. Such *Pepo* are called *Pepo wa Nyumbani* (house spirits). They are not harmful and indeed offer mystical protection and help if treated well by owners of the house. Such a family maintains a room for them, which is kept clean, sprinkled with *Marashi* (rose water) and fumigated with *Uvani* (incense) and *Udi* (aloe wood). There are also shrines for these *pepo* and custodians periodically visit them. If the *Pepo* has bad news, he possesses his *kiti*. If bad mystical powers are being exerted on the family, the *kiti* may wake up even at night noisily to counteract the bad thing. Diviners or their mediums are often possessed at will, whenever the need arises with consultation. Ordinary Swahili Muslims at times may call the *Pepo* to consult them or inform them of events occurring within the family such as death, and wedding. Benevolent spirits are very important as far as divination among the Swahili Muslims is concerned. It is observed that most Swahili families do have members who can be possessed at will, at times or when a calamity occurs. They do prepare families or give explanations to otherwise unknown things. Any *pepo* possessing a person for the first time, will identify him/herself, giving a name and a place of origin and status.

The Swahili believe in the existence of *Majini* (Jinns) (Kibwana Kombo; 13.08.2005, Saumu, Mikanjuni 10.08.2005; Ukumbini, Jomvu, 12/12/05; Middleton, 1992, 173). It is believed that *Majini* are kept by specific

<sup>4</sup> See Magnus Echter, “Recent changes in the New Year’s Festival in Makunduchi, Zanzibar. A Reinterpretation”, in Loimeier & Seesemann (2006) *The Global World of the Swahili: Interfaces of Islam, identity and Space in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century East Africa*. 133-160. He discusses the Swahili year and the interaction between human and spirits and their transformation.

people for wealth, prestige and power. These people can call them, talk to them, and share a meal or coffee while discussing business affairs (Ukumbini and Jomvu, 12/12/05). One informant gave the following account in his childhood days:

"I remember I was in class four and had not my paid school fees. I was residing in old town, while my grandfather used to live in the mainland. I went to collect fees from my grandfather and it was late so I stayed the night then. I had my supper and went to bed, but was unable to sleep due to mosquitoes. At around midnight my grandfather sat in the main living room with a coffee pot as if waiting for some visitors. Then I saw a python descending from the central pole in the living room near where my grandfather was seated. It came down coiled itself and soon changed into a man wearing a white kanzu and turban. He told my grandfather that there were many others of his kind outside, but we see your grandchild awake. My grandfather told them to let me be, drink coffee and that they should discuss business. The man (jinn) then told my grandfather that he will get the money to pay school fees under his pillow, to give me the following day so that I can go to school. After that I felt sleepy... (O.I, Ukumbini, Jomvu, 12/12/05)".

The aforementioned quotation is one of the many accounts given to show the amicable interaction between some Swahili Muslims and jinns. They are not feared, but have an understanding and cooperation with their human friends. Jinns also, normally, identify themselves when they first possess a person as this is their nature. The *Majini* are believed to be a community and they have social classes like the human beings. Thus, we have some who are slaves and others who are free.

Other *Majini* can cohabit and marry human beings after they have transformed themselves into human form (O.I, Kibwana Kombo; 13.08.2005, O.I, Saumu, Mikanjuni 10.08.2005, O.I, Ukumbini, Jomvu, 12/12/05, see also Middleton, 1992., 173). However, the doctrine of *Kufuu* (equal social standing) is also maintained, that is, a Jinn who is a slave married a human slave and a non-slave jinn married a human being of similar status. The resultant offspring of the marriage were spirit children. If a married female jinn's husband died, she goes back to her world and may take one of her offspring with her. She will also keep an eye to see that no bad mystical forces harm the human beings she had stayed with. Today we do not have instances of Jinns marrying human beings. This is because the people who were familiar with their language are dead.

The Jinns can either be friendly or a nuisance to people. They can be captured through magic and used for different goals; they may be kept so as to produce wealth. They are given gifts with high symbolic value, such as *Marashi*, *Ubani* and *Udi*, which strengthen social relations between them (people and Jinns). If the

person's request to the jinn is high, he may sacrifice an ox or a cow. Other people have been known to sacrifice fellow human beings to their Jinn in order to have more wealth (Kim, 2004, 105).

In the foregoing discussion, the cosmogony of Swahili both in the main Mombasa Island and in the mainland villages is based on the acceptance of God's power, compassion and order. Beneath God's power are the unforeseeable whims of God's creatures, both the spirits and the living. There are variations in the beliefs and practices concerning the spiritual beings especially between Swahili residing in Mombasa Island and those in mainland (the Mombasa mainland areas such as Likoni, Changamwe and Kisauni) (Kim, 2004., 105; Middleton, 1992: 171).

This is evident in the vocabularies used to refer to the spiritual beings. For the Swahili residing in town, they have in their vocabulary words for the spiritual beings such as *Jini* (jinn) *Shaitani* (Satan) and *Ruhani* (benevolent spirit) with Arabic roots due to their close association with the Arab merchants. For the country Swahili, the names of the spiritual beings such as *Pepo* (benevolent spirit); *Mzuka* (Ghost), *Mzimuni* or *Panga* (Shrine), *Koma* (ancestral spirit) have Bantu origin. These variations have implications on the belief systems. Although both believe in more or the same spiritual beings, the African names latently imply that people from the mainland areas are superstitious. The underlying argument is that whether they have Arabic or African name, they are central in the Swahili belief system. The spirits and the living are engaged in never-ending attempts to gain and exercise power (Larsen, 2001). Even if the experience of perfect happiness cannot be achieved during life, people might seek and hope for some degree of earthly harmony and order. Thus, the Swahili see evil, ill health and moral pollution as being everywhere, and every person and community must continually counter them to purify and reconstruct flawed sectors of experience.

In summary, all rites in Swahili religion are performed by or under the direction of a ritual specialist, custodians of the numerous shrines found along the coastal shore line. Most rites are performed to purge harm and ensure that the harm will not befall an individual in future. This explains the necessity of a person to consult a diviner from time to time to ensure that all is well. We have mentioned some beliefs, traditions and practices of the Swahili, which were and are partially still in practice, with specific reference to divination.

Some of these beliefs, traditions, and practices are no longer in existence or have been replaced by Islamic ones. Overall, the Swahili as a moral community has its own body of beliefs that distinguishes it from Islam. The Swahili body of beliefs helps define its sense of identity and tradition within the frame of Islam today. The process of Islamization has had a significant influence on some Swahili customs.

## The practice of divination among the Swahili and Islam

Here an Islamic theoretical explanation on divination is emphasized. This is followed by field findings. Divination is considered *Shirk* (associating partners with *Allah*). This is because it makes the diviner to share in *Allah's* attributes such as All-Knowing. This means that *Allah's* power of knowledge is attributed to diviners. People approaching diviners think of them as having the ability to know their past, present and future. Again the details divulged therein as who is responsible for working evil against someone that normally sows seeds of discord in the society. The details of divination have made families to break down or neighbors to quarrel. It is for these facts that Islam does not permit the art of divination in any form. Divination is condemned both in Qur'an and Hadith of the Prophet. *Allah* instructs Muslims to shun off from this practice as it is an abomination of "*Shaitan's*" work and a sin in the light of Shari'a (Qur'an: 5: 90). This injunction is further buttressed by a tradition of the Prophet, which stated that whoever visits a diviner and believe in what they are told, then for forty days their prayers will be invalid (Shad, 1992: 174).

The aforementioned discussions represent the blue print judgment as far as divination in Islam is concerned. It should be noted that there are many discrepancies found in the practice of Islam. Islam has been adapted according to social milieu in which different Muslims find themselves. In the following paragraphs, the practice of divination is examined among the Swahili Muslims. Islam as a religion only becomes a living religion when it is practiced by people. Much of what is prohibited still continues to be practiced by being legitimized by the people subscribed to it. Divination as a belief and practice is legitimized by recognition of witchcraft and sorcery as realities that its believers have to deal with. To safeguard themselves, Swahili Muslims see no contradiction in using the Qur'an together with other traditional methods to ward off magical evils.

Consulting diviners and medicine men is widely practiced by the Swahili as they see no contradiction, but a perfect blend of Islam with their culture. The divinatory books are written in Arabic and they are part of Arabian traditional culture. Aspects of Arabian culture were transmitted along side Islam just like Christianity came with a package of western culture. During this time, most advanced in Arabic language among the Swahili Muslims were the Islamic priests and teachers. They were poorly paid for their services and some took to divination and other healing practices to supplement their income. The association of divination with these Islamic priests and teachers further reinforced the ordinary Swahili Muslims conviction on the permissibility of these acts.

Today, consulting diviners among the Swahili is clouded with more uncertainty especially when it is done by the Muslim clergy. First observation that prompted this

study is the backsliding of the very clergy that were calling for rooting out "popular Islam". Most of the popular and powerful diviners are well educated teachers belonging to the Sharif family, believed descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h). This in itself validates and legitimizes divinatory acts for therapeutic rituals. They are the custodians of religion and customs.

The clerics also exhibited this uncertainty in their responses to whether Islam allows any form of magic and specifically to distinguish good and bad magic. Out of 60 Swahili Muslim clerics that responded in the field study, 45% were able to say that Islam distinguished between good and bad magic. While 53% respondents asserted that Islam does not distinguish between good and bad magic. This is to say that all forms of magic are prohibited in Islam. Believing in the existence of evils magic, as a reality, Islam has given a window for the belief and practice of divination (Qur'an: 2:102). In their responses they advanced the following reasons:

The Qur'an forbids all forms of magic - 23%.  
 Divination sows seeds of enmity between people - 22%.  
 It is only God who has knowledge of the unseen - 8%.  
 Every form of magic is bad, that the end does not justify the means - 37%

This is because divination as a practice entails seeking help from other than *Allah*. This would entail asserting that there are other beings than God who are All-Knowing. As a result, the practice of magic is forbidden in the Qur'an. Therefore, they see any form of magic as bad. The aforementioned responses show that a slight majority (53% against 45%), are of the opinion that all forms of magic are prohibited in Islam. These are responses given by the Muslim clerics who represent latently the authority of Islam. If some of the custodians are not certain regarding the position of Islam on magical practices, then the ordinary Swahili Muslim is even more uncertain of the issue. This assumption is supported by forty five percent (45%) of Muslim clerics who were irresolute. These Muslim clerics failed to answer the question preferring to leave it blank. This denotes some degree of uncertainty to the clerics concerning this realm of occult sciences. The clerics did not want to commit themselves to any view. This is because they shift their practices and belief whenever the need arises, which necessitate consulting a diviner. This explains why the practice of divination is persisting to date.

The Muslim clerics were directly asked whether Islam allows the practice of divination. In their responses, sixty (60) answered that Islam does not allow the practice of magic. The responses given in this question will be seen to many as a contradiction to that discussed. Earlier in this paper, we discussed that belief and practice of divination is associated with superstition, hence no one wants to be linked with it. This kind of mentality developed after the series of *mihadhara* that largely

**Table 1.** Estimated the percentages of Swahili Muslims who consult diviners.

Estimates Responses (%)	Over 75%	Over 51 - 70%	Over 25 - 50%	1 - 24%
	25	37	32	6

Source: Field data.

**Table 2.** Estimated age brackets of Swahili Muslims who consult diviners.

Age bracket Responses (%)	Over 75 years	Over 51-74 years	Over 25 - 50years	1 - 24%
	11	37	50	2

Source: Field data.

condemned magical practices and encouraged people to burn their amulets and charms. In the first question, we can deduce that some of the Muslim clerics were not aware of the implications of their responses especially the ones engaged in the practice as diviners or clients. In this response, the Muslim clerics tried as much as possible to depict conformation to Islamic dogma. Therefore, almost all agreed that Islam does not allow divination. They advanced several reasons. 75% of the respondents said that the practice of divination is a form of shirk (associating partners with Allah).

Some respondents asserted that most diviners are liars. This is an opinion expressed by other African people who consult diviners (Evans-Pritchard, 1976; Mbiti, 1969). Due to statement that some diviners are liars, the Swahili Muslims consult more than one diviner before they are certain of the prognostication. Again, others opined that it is only Allah who has the knowledge of the unseen and the act of consulting diviner leads to lessening Swahili Muslims' reliance on Allah. To them, what is permitted is what is called *Ruqya*- reciting passages from the Qur'an to a patient. These sentiments show the disparity between practice and dogma. People are somehow aware that divination is forbidden in Islam, yet some still practice it. Kim (2004) observes that to some Muslims, there are certain aspects of Islam that may not be practical to their social milieu, especially, articles of faith. Out of the sixty (60) respondents to this question, 93% are aware of the teachings of Islam on divination, while 7% said they were not. The awareness of the teachings of Islam on divination meant to know exact Qur'anic verses and Hadith dealing with the subject. The verses they, however, mentioned were verses of *ruqya* other than those dealing with prohibition of divination.<sup>5</sup> There is a tendency of religious people to see miracles in their practices and to see magic and superstitious behavior in other religions. Medicine and therapy of most Africans who are neither Muslims nor Christians, is seen to be superstitious. *Ruqya* may be

seen as magical by known Muslims and hence not something good either.

The Muslim clerics were also asked to estimate the percentages of Swahili Muslims who consult diviners. The following category of responses was given as illustrated in Table 1.

In Table 1, percentages depict that many Swahili Muslims still consult with diviners for their various needs. Divination plays an important role in their lives and it is the indeed part of their traditional worldview of the Swahili. The clerics were also asked to estimate age brackets of those who consult diviners. The most active ages of Swahili who consult diviner is between the ages of 25 - 74 years. This depicts the most active years in a person's life span. This is the time when an individual faces a lot of life challenges, which are shrouded in mystery. The Swahili in their attempt to find out the unknown resort to divination. They, therefore, consult diviners to safeguard themselves from malice and other misfortunes (Table 2).

Divination is a practice that epitomizes humankind's yearning to access knowledge that is hidden from human beings. It shows humankind's attempt to acquire both prior and past knowledge. In Islam, it is believed that this can only be attained through the assistance of fallen jinns (Al-Ashqar, 1998: 162-163). There are some jinns who are rebellious hence the ones that are used by diviners as agents of divination, magic, sorcery and witchcraft. To the Swahili people, divination is not the work of fallen *jinns*, but the work of benevolent spirits who want to assist the afflicted human beings. The benevolent spirits are perceived to be ever around people, keeping watch over them and are able to detect if malice has been inflicted on their human associates. That is why at times there is no need to consult a diviner, as house spirits may possess a family member to unveil a mysterious ailment of a family member. There is a belief that such an attempt is not an evil, but simply to bring back harmony where it is lost and that there are always ways to find out the unknown. Here, aspects that validate the practice of divination among Swahili Muslims are presented. This is especially so in what is termed as popular Islam.

<sup>5</sup> Verses on *ruqya* include chapter 112, 113,114, 2:255, 2:284-286, chapter 36, while the verses on divination are Qur'an 4:51, 5:90, 52:29

## The use of Qur'an in divinatory methods

One method of divination employs the Arabic form of geomancy. The reason that these forms of divination have been branded Islamic is that they require one to have knowledge of Arabic language. This in the past had been possible to only those individuals who were able to have advanced *Madrassah* education. The Arabic forms of divination were imported from Arabia alongside Islam. This form of divination is mainly practiced by individuals who have either inherited it from their parents or they learnt Arabic at *Madrassah* and at the end they are able to read these divination books. Among the famous books used for divination include the following: *Abu Ma'shar al Falaki*, *Satrikhabari*, and *Kitab al fasl fi usul 'ilm ar-ramli*. Of the three books, the most widely used book by most diviners is *Satrikhabari*.

This method is also seen as stemming from Islam because the diviners normally camouflage their work with incantations drawn from verses of the Holy Qur'an. They normally recite the verses as they instruct the client to write down his/her particulars. Thereafter, the diviner makes calculations and evaluations of each case from the *Satrikhabari*. In the *Madrassah*, there is a distinction between religious knowledge taught there (*'Ilmu diin*) and education of this world (*'Ilmu Dun-yaa*). There are several colleges along the coastal strip where one can gain knowledge of Arabic languages. They include training centers in Mambui, Lamu, Kisauni, Maganyakulo and Zanzibar among others. Apart from students having trained at the *Madrassah*, the same training may be received by studying independently under a *Shehe* or *Mwalimu* or a medicineman who has himself acquired the knowledge and is willing to teach it to others.

Apart from relying on the divination books, there are also liturgical incantations often read during the divination mostly being verses of the Holy Qur'an. Among these verses of the Holy Qur'an include, *Suratul Fatiha* (The Opening Chapter), *Suratul Falaq* (The Day Break), *Suratun Naas* (Mankind) and *Ayatul Kursiyy* (The verse of the Throne). Other famous verses of the Holy Qur'an include the verses, which elucidate the encounter between Moses and the Pharaoh in Egypt. They explain the story of Moses and when he received his mission to go and rescue the enslaved Israelites in Egypt. In the encounter, when Moses showed the signs that he was a prophet, the pharaoh called him a sorcerer and a magician. These verses are used to treat and exorcise victims of magic. These are *Suratul Anfaal* (Qur'an: 7: 117-122), *Yunus (Q; 10:79-82)*, and *Surat Twahaa (20: 65-70)*. These verses are said to be very efficacious on the treatment of sorcery, witchcraft and the evil eye. Islam enriched the Swahili culture by its enculturation of Islamic medicine.

Yet others include the supplication made by the Muslim army in the early era of Islam when they were faced by the Makkan polytheists at the wells of Badr. This is

known as *Ahl al Badr* in Arabic meaning the people of Badr, While in Swahili, it is known as *Hali badiri*. There are certain apparatus used when reciting *halibadiri*, which some scholars term not to be Islamic. These are dried coffee beans, salt, razorblades, a red cock, incense, needles and limes. This is part of the blending between Swahili culture and Islam. The readings include part of the Qur'an, such as *suratul Ikhlas*, *Nas*, *Falaq*, and *Yasin*. Recitation of *halibadiri* concludes with the special supplication of Prophet Muhammad and his companions at the well of badr. Other books used by diviner include *Dala ilal Khairat* and *Burdat*, which are used in connection with the treatment following the divination (O.I, Mohamed, Seif., Jomvu, 11.08.2005).

In this type of divination, when a client comes to the diviner, he begins by noting the day, month and hour. Then he asks the name of the person for whom the divination is to be done. It should be noted that it is not necessary for the troubled individual to be present in person. A friend or a relative can visit the diviner on the behalf of the patient. The names are written with either a piece of chalk on a slate or with ink on a piece of paper. Then the letters in each word was counted and the numbers assigned to each according to the number values of the letters. Having done this, he subtracts or adds the numbers from each other until he gets a number between 1 and 9. He then takes his divination book *Satrikhabari* and compares the number with the time of the client's visit as well as the type of weather outside. It is said, by looking outside, the diviner is determining which angel is in charge of the sky at that moment (O.I, O.I, Mohamed, Seif., Jomvu, 11.08.2005). After this, the diviner explains to the person what the trouble is that brings the client to him, be it sorcery, witchcraft, theft, business, sickness, and love among others. Finally he looks for treatment procedures, be it medication or simply specific recitations to remedy the situation. The purpose of writing names and converting it numbers is a bid to know the star (Horoscope), of the client. The diviners explain that every human being has his or her own stars of luck and life must be looked at cautiously during divination.

Apart from the aforementioned method, some advanced diviners have books, which have methods of divination used by Prophets. For instance, the ones the prophets mentioned include Musa, Idris, Ayub, and Suleiman among others. When a client visits the diviner, he is told by to recite *Bismillah* (In the name of Allah) fourteen times while he/she has closed eyes. Then he points at a house with the eyes still closed. The diviner then will proceed to read the explanations written about that house. The recitation of *Bismillah* alongside the mentioning of prophets names to a lay person, may be interpreted to be proper Islam and they are not committing any form of shirk. The diviners also state at the beginning of any work that their intention is to provide therapy and restore health by the will of God. They are

not committing any form of *shirk* (O.I., O.I., Mohamed, Seif., Jomvu, 11.08.2005)

### **The practitioners of divination**

The other things that legitimize divination to the Swahili Muslims is that some of the diviners represent the elite among Muslim scholars. Again some of these elites were deemed to be from the lineage of the Prophet. These people are popularly known as *masharifu*. Swahili people like other Muslims elsewhere relied on the charisma of these special people. Francois Constantin also notes this in his article on "Charisma and Power in East Africa" (O'Brien and Coulon, 1988: 67 - 90). Among the charismatic power that these *sheikhs* possessed was therapeutic power. In all the four divisions of Mombasa District, there are these famous *masharifu* and at least each has a member of family practicing medicine of which divination is part of.

### **The belief in Jinns**

Islam accepts the existence and the works of jinns. They are creatures created from the flame of fire long before the creation of Adam. *Allah* says in the Qur'an, "Verily We created man of potter's clay of mud altered, and jinn did say, we create aforetime of essential fire (Qur'an: 15: 26-27). The word jinn is derived from the root word *janna*, which means to be hidden or covered (Quraishy, 1987: 13). This means that they are hidden from human kind. The *jinns* contain both good and bad ones. The good jinns do not disturb human kind. It is believed that the bad jinns bring all sorts of malaise to people.

This belief seems to have taken well with the Swahili worldview in that they also believed in certain spirits that pervade the universe. This seems to have given the Swahili people the mandate to seek divination whenever suspected of having been seized by an evil jinni. This is because all sickness may be cured by herbal medicine or gong to the hospital. It is the afflictions of the Jinns that are difficult to diagnose except with the help of the diviner.

Again, some diviners have testified that they divine with the assistance from spiritual beings who are jinns (O.I., Mohamed, Seif., Jomvu, 11.08.2005). There is positive interaction between human beings and jinns in the field of divination. This symbiotic interaction gives the jinns body and identity when they possess human beings. Larsen (2004) notes:

"By inhabiting the bodies of humans- both male and female –spirits have a physical presence in the human world". Once in this position, there are social players influencing and participating in human activities. By asking for special sacrifices and offerings, they unfold to human beings the hidden knowledge".

### **Conclusion**

Divination is a practice that expresses humankind's desire to gain knowledge, which is hidden from human beings. It shows people's attempt to acquire prior, present and future knowledge. Human beings have utilized various ways in a bid to uncover the unknown.

Diviners, who are the experts in foretelling the future, use mediums, oracles, possession, divination objects, common sense, intuitive knowledge and insight, hypnosis and other secret knowledge (Mbiti, 1969: 177). In conclusion, Islam teaches complete submission to the will of Allah. Muslims are to rely on Him both in good and bad times and have an unshakable belief that all things happening to an individual is the will of Allah. Resorting to other beings to help a person in problems is disbelief in the power of Allah.

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**APPENDIX****Oral interviewees list**

Kibwana Kombo, Mwagosi, 13.08.2005  
Omari Mataka, Changamwe, 13.08.2005,  
Kibwana Kombo; 13.08.2005,  
Mohamed, O. Chamunyu, 18/08/2005  
Saumu, Mastura Mikanjuni 10.08.2005,  
Mohamed, Seif., Jomvu, 11.08.2005,  
Ukumbini Mwinyihaji, Jomvu, 12/12/05,