“Muslims of the spirits”-“Muslims of the mosque”:

Performing contested ideas of being Muslim in northern Mozambique

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Drawing on ethnographic research focusing on a group of women in Nampula city, northern Mozambique, this article interrogates the role of spirit performances in their conversion to Islam. By embarking on mimetic practices of Muslim healers (*walimu*) during established ceremonies, a group of women, coming from the mainland regions and of traditional backgrounds, claim to become ‘Muslims of the spirits’, distinct from what they refer to as ‘Muslims of the mosque’. This article seeks to go beyond prevailing theories of mimetic practices as a ‘representation’, a ‘parody’ of Islam, or as a form of ‘self-reflection’ obtained through the depiction of the ‘other’. In line with a performative theory of ritual, I argue instead that women become Muslim by adopting Islamic clothing, linguistic and bodily practices. I expand this argument that performing is becoming by taking into consideration local historical experiences. Women’s spirit conversion replicates a modality in which Islam spread beyond the coast at the times of the Atlantic

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> slave trade. Conversion to Islam through the imitation of linguistic, material and ritual enactments was a common practice at the time of the slave trade, among people living in the hinterland regions. Furthermore, I argue that spirit possession exhumes older strands of Islam (Chiefship Islam) which came to be marginalised by the spread of Sufism and Reformist Islam in the 20th century. I then move to examine spirit conversion in the present Muslim context of Nampula. I interrogate the relationships between women's Islam and other Islamic discourses. Finally, I ask whether these women involved in spirit possession gain any benefits from becoming Muslim.

In the East African context, processes of ethno-religious 'belonging' and 'exclusion' have been widely analysed as embedded in social practices, whether in cultural performances,[1] or in more mundane practices.[2]

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[1] See examples from: Kelly Askew, "Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Performance in Tanzania," (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002); Laura Fair, "Identity, Difference, and Dance: Female Initiation in Zanzibar, 1890 to 1930," *Journal of Women Studies*, 17, 3, 1996, pp. 146-172; Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast 1856-1888* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996); Frank D. Gunderson, *Mashindano! Competitive Music Performance in East Africa* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publisher, 2000); Paolo Israel, *In Step with Times: Mapiko Masquerades of Mozambique* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2014). For spirit possession in East Africa: Linda L. Giles, "Sociocultural Change and Spirit Possession on the Swahili Coast of East Africa," *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68, 2, 1995, pp. 89-106; Linda L. Giles, "Possession Cults on the Swahili Coast: a Re-Examination of Theories of Marginality," *Africa* 57, 2, 1987, pp. 234-58; John M. Janzen, *Ngoma: Discourses of Healing in Central and Southern Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 29-35; Michael Lambek, *Knowledge and Practices in Mayotte: Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery and Spirit Possession* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); Janet McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam: Power, Personhood, and Ethno-religious Boundaries on the Kenya Coast* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). Kjersti Larsen, *Where Humans and Spirits Meet: The Politics of Ritual and Identified Spirits in Zanzibar* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008).

[2] For clothing see: Laura Fair, "Dressing up: Clothing, Class and Gender in Post-Abolition Zanzibar," *The Journal of African History*, 39, 1, 1998, pp. 63-94. For linguistic practices, see Janet McIntosh, "Language essentialism and social hierarchies among Giriama and Swahili," *Journal of Pragmatics*, 37, 2005, pp. 1919–1944; and McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam*, Ch. 5.

Examining processes of identity-making through the lens of 'performances' and/or 'performativity' is particularly revealing in a context like the city of Nampula, northern Mozambique, where ethnic and religious differences continue to carry significant weight. Centuries old trades, migrations, the spread of Islam, colonial occupation, a protracted civil war and economic liberalisations have all contributed to solidifying ethnic and religious boundaries rather than unifying the region.[3]

Situated as it is on the border between the Western Indian Ocean region and the matrilineal mainland, the population of Nampula is roughly divided into two main groups: the *Makhuwa*, from the mainland, who are generally peasants and have a Christian background, and the Muslim population, historically known as *Amaka*, those who come from the coast.[4] Both people of the coast and people coming from the inland are motivated to draw continuous distinctions between themselves based on variations in practices: ways of dressing, use of distinct verbal expressions, culinary dishes, and in religious and medical rituals. Looking closely then, at the local Muslim community, residents are roughly divided into three main doctrinal frameworks (Chiefship Islam, Sufism and Reformist Islam), along trans-local networks (those with Indian or Saudi Arabian connections), as well as ethnic and regional differences (African Muslims, Indian Muslims, Muslims of the coast/Muslims of the mainland).[5] More recently, tensions among Muslim residents have come to revolve around what is labelled as a 'modern' way of being Muslim versus 'old' and 'local' discourses of Islam.[6] Because most residents have limited or no knowledge at all of Arabic, these debates do not generally revolve around interpretation of Islamic texts, but around ritual performance, styles of worship, clothing and linguistic practices.

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[3] For similar discussion see Janet McIntosh's ethnography on the Giriama and the Swahili in Malindi, *The Edge of Islam*; see also: Kai Kresse and Edward Simpson (eds.), *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitism in the Western Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[4] The two terms were used at the time of the slave trade to denote people of the coast and those living in the mainland regions. The term Mmaka (pl. Amaka) refers to the vernacular version of the word Mecca, to denote the Muslim identity of coastal populations, in contrast to the non-Muslims inhabiting the hinterland and mainland of the region. During the slave trade, the term also came to be associated with those who 'bought slaves and were civilized.' The term Makhuwa was used in a pejorative way to denote those living in the bush that were not Muslim and could be enslaved. It derives from the term nikuwa, bush, and was used to roughly characterise people living in the terras firmas, the Portuguese name for the mainland of the northern coast. See Liazzat Bonate, "Traditions and Transitions: Islam and Chiefship in Northern Mozambique ca. 1850-1974" (PhD Dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2007); René Pélissier, *História de Moçambique: Formação e Oposição,* 1854-1928, 2 vols. (Manuel Ruas. Lisboa: Editorial Estampa Lda., 2000).

While Sufi and Reformist Muslims draw on the combination of ritual performances and secular practices to define 'correct' versus 'incorrect' ways of being Muslim, a group of local women might convert to Islam through spirit possession. These women, coming mostly from the non-Muslim mainland, stand outside the fold of Islam and, unlike their male counterparts, are unable to access Islamic education. This article examines a spirit ceremony (*dhikr*) during which a number of women afflicted by spirits coming from the Indian Ocean convert to Islam as part of a therapeutic process for reproductive problems and other disturbances.[7] Women participate in healing ceremonies during which they embark on mimetic practices (they dress as Muslim healers, speak Arabic-like language, perform Islamic prayers) in order to appease the spirits and restore health. After the ceremony, women will adopt some Islamic rules (for example, food prohibitions and not working on Fridays) and, in case they become healers, they will adopt some Islamic symbols and practices in their divinations and healing. They display their Muslim identity in specific ritual settings, such as during divinations and healing (in instances where they are healers), or during established performances, inside their secluded spirit huts, and in front of an audience composed of women who have gone through similar experiences of spirit possession, or with clients who are not Muslim but share a common ethnic background (they come from inland areas).

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[5] I will use the term "Chiefship Islam" in the text to indicate the strands of Islam which spread from the coast into the mainland of northern Mozambique during the 19th century and that was strongly associated with the tradition of chiefship. I am using this term as an equivalent of the historian, Liazzat Bonate's "chiefly Islam," which I prefer not to use because of the possible ambiguity with the word 'chiefly' as an adverb in its current use, Liazzat Bonate, "Matriliny, Islam and Gender in Northern Mozambique," *Journal of Religion in Africa,* 36, 2, 2006, pp.139-166; Bonate, "Traditions and Transitions: Islam in Northern Mozambique: A Historical Overview," *History Compass* 8, 7, 2010, pp. 573-593.

[6] According to the 2007 Census, 21% of the local population were Muslim, 17% Christians.

[7] In a city of about 500,000 inhabitants, there are about 3,000 women healers working on behalf of spirits. (The Association of traditional healers of Mozambique, Ametramo.)

In examining the role and the significance of spirit performances within the Muslim community, this article begins with identifying what kind of Islam women assume through spirit possession. I move then to analyse how women's conversion articulates with mosque-oriented Islam and, finally, I examine the implications of women becoming 'Muslims of spirits' in contemporary Nampula.

In examining the issue of what Muslim women refer to in their spirit performances, this article engages with some of the arguments developed by a performative theory of ritual. According to Stanley Tambiah, a ritual is performative in three ways. First, it is staged and deploys multiple media to prompt participant heightened experiences. Second, it is characterised by indexical qualities; for example, the choice of site and time, or the use of specific linguistic styles which present and validate a specific social and religious framework. Third, it *does* things.[8] Edward Schieffelin emphasises the role of the ritual in constructing social reality; "(...) performance deals with action more than text: with habits of the body more than structures of symbols, with illocutionary rather than propositional force, with the social construction of reality rather than its representation."[9] In this perspective, 'ritual is doing' through words,[10] and/or through the body and its senses.[11]

These insights are pertinent to analysing spirit performances, and women's conversion to Islam through spirit performances. The deployment of aesthetic media, bodily movements and sensory enhancers (such as incense) as well as the use of medicines that alter the psychological and physical states of the performer produces what Michael Jackson has called, in examining rituals of puberty, a 'disruption into the environment.'[12] According to this perspective, rituals trigger changes in bodily and mental disposition which enable women to adopt behaviours associated with Islam they would not be allowed outside a ritual context.In a context where Islam is strongly associated with ethnicity (the *Mmaka* migrants from the coast) and where scriptural versions of Islam are becoming dominant, so that conversion to Islam has become increasingly difficult, these women can reach Islam only through spirit possession and in a ritual context.

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[8] Stanley J. Tambiah, "A Performative Approach to Ritual," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 65, 1979, pp. 113-69; see p. 158. For a critical discussion, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[9] Askew, "Performing the Nation," pp. 23-24.

[10] John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

[11] Michael Jackson, "Knowledge of the Body," *Man*, 18, 2, 1983, pp. 327-345.

The point that spirit performances are not merely representing, but 'effecting something,' leads one to engage more closely with classical studies of spirit possession and, specifically, with those concerned with mimesis. The idea of mimesis as (corporal) epistemology has been pivotal in several classical works on spirit possession in Sub-Saharan Africa.[13] In examining mimesis in various spirit cults in Africa, Fritz Kramer regards mimesis as a process through which the strangeness is fixated so that it is absorbed into one's own local culture.[14] In a village in Niger, Adeline Masquelier analyses Baboule mediums' mimetic practices of the French colonisers in terms of corporal knowing and of mystical appropriation of the colonial power.[15] Appropriation often goes along with contestation and resistance. In western Niger, Paul Stoller suggests looking at the Hauka spirit possession as a form of parody and resistance. In rituals, the possessed, who ape and mock the French colonisers, are establishing a new relationship with their own history, while protecting their cultural identity from Western civilisation.[16]

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Much of the anthropological accounts of mimetic practices in spirit possession build on Michael Taussig's argument of mimesis as a form of corporal and sensuous knowledge. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[14] Fritz W. Kramer, *The Red Fez: Art and Spirit Possession in Africa* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 240.

[15] Adeline Masquelier, *Prayer has Spoiled Everything: Possession, Power, and Identity in an Islamic Town of Niger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), Ch. 5.

[16] Paul Stoller, "Horrific Comedy: Cultural Resistance and the Hauka Movement in Niger," *Ethos*, 12, 2, 1984, pp. 165-188.

Looking closely at the dynamics with Islam, spirit possession during which the possessed embark on Islamic behaviours or adopt Islamic symbols is analysed as counter-discourse, or as a form of parody to Islam. I. M. Lewis suggested that spirit possession should be regarded as connected to the core of Islam so that it helps to define what orthodox Islam is.[17] Lewis takes as an example the Pokomo women in east Africa, who every Friday, perform a ritual during which they sing the same hymns as men do in the services of the Muslim brotherhoods; Lewis argues that women *parody* the Islamic religious services which men dominate, and from which they are excluded.[18] In a similar way and in the context of the Mayotte islands, Michael Lambek sets women's spirit possession in opposition to mosque-centred Islam, describing the former as a 'mockery' of the latter.[19] Finally, mimetic practices have been examined as spaces of self-reflection. One example is the work of Janice Boddy who has examined *zar* possession in a village in Sudan. During possession séances, a woman's subjective reality gains a dimension that allows her to re-contextualise her world and to question the salient values that she has previously taken for granted.[20]

The material I examine in this article goes beyond analysing these rituals as spaces for self-reflection through the depiction of 'otherness.' Nor, I will argue, are these women parodying or mocking Islam. This article contends, on the contrary, that spirit possession, experienced as a disease, enables many women coming from a specific ethnic group and standing outside Islam, to reach Islam. In various contexts in East Africa, where Islam also spread through vernacular practices, such as magic, rituals and possession, cases of 'spirit- induced conversions' have challenged the view of possession as merely an appropriation of power, resistance or parody of Islam.[21] Several Mijikenda and Giriama men and women in Kenya have embraced Islam through spirit possession, although their conversion may not be recognised as such by other Muslims.[22] Even though women themselves present their spiritual experiences in terms of *becoming a mmaka*, I will argue that spirit possession in northern Mozambique claims a belonging to a specific local history: the coastal-mainland religious interface during the Atlantic slave trade. The attention paid to the material, linguistic and aesthetic practices which compose the ritual illustrates how women appropriate and revitalise Chiefship Islam which spread into the mainland region at the time of the slave trade. This is a tradition of Islam which was and is presented, unlike other local Islamic discourses, as being not at odds with the 'traditionalism' of the mainland cultures.[23] Furthermore, these women who are beset by Muslim spirits do not only bring to life a specific discourse of Islam. Their spirit conversion also replicates a modality in which Islam spread beyond the coast. At the time of the slave trade, conversion to Islam was accomplished by imitation: people of the mainland adopted dress, linguistic practices, as well as rituals (dance societies), healing and magic based on Islamic books in the fashion of the people of the coast.[24]

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[17] Ioan M. Lewis, *Religion in Context: Cults and Charisma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[18] Ioan M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: a Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession* (London, Routledge, 2003), pp. 97-98.

[19] Michael Lambek, *Human Spirits: A Cultural Account of Trance in Mayotte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 33.

[20] Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men and the Zãr Cults in Northern Sudan.* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 157.

The following discussion will explore spirit conversion in the everyday life of Nampula. I will examine the relationship between women's spirit Islam and other Islamic discourses, and the subsequent advantages of appropriating older versions of Islam. Do women accept or resist conversion to Islam, and how does conversion affect their previous identity? In what ways do women react to disdain from other Muslims? And, finally, are there any gains for these women in converting to Islam? The case of Nampula will show either some important original features, or similarities, with other examples of spirit-driven conversion to Islam in East Africa.

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[21] For the role of magic and healing in the diffusion of Islam, see: Ioan M. Lewis, *Islam in Tropical Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966); Ioan M. Lewis, *Religion in Context*, Ch. 6; J. Spencer Triminghan, *Islam in East Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

[22] McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam*; Janet McIntosh, "Reluctant Muslims: Embodied hegemony and moral resistance in a Giriama spirits possession complex," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 10, 1, 2004, pp. 91-112; David Parkin, "Politics of Ritual Syncretism: Islam among the Non-Muslim Giriama of Kenya," *Africa*, 40, 3, 1970, pp. 217-233; David Parkin, "Swahili Mijikenda: Facing Both Ways in Kenya," *Africa*, 59, 2, 1989, pp. 161-175.

[23] For northern Mozambique see: Bonate, "Traditions and Transitions"; Angoche Eduardo do Couto Lupi, *Breve Memória sobre uma das Capitanias-Môres do Distrito de Moçambique* (Lisbon: Tipografia do Annuario Commercial, 1907). For other examples in east Africa: McIntosh, "Reluctant Muslims"; Parkin, "Politics of Ritual Syncretism."

[24] Ibid.

Islam in northern Mozambique

As a way of providing some background, I begin by introducing local spirits, *Majini*. Similar to other ethnographic cases in East Africa and the Western Indian Ocean,[25] the kind of local spirit possession (*Majini*) occurring in Nampula brings to the fore memories of events that have deeply shaped the history of the region, such as the encounters between the coastal population (known as *Amaka*) and people from the mainland (referred to as *Makhuwa*).[26] Spirits coming from the mainland of the present Nampula province are described as black, African and are speakers of mainland dialects. They are summoned with rituals involving the scattering of sacred flour (*ephepa*), used to summon family ancestors. The *Majini Amaka* are the spirits of the Muslim healers (*walimu*) who travelled into the mainland regions along with the caravans of the slave trade in the nineteenth century.

These spirits are identified with objects and practices that locally distinguished the Muslim healers and teachers of the coast. Coastal spirits are attracted by the burning of incense (*udhu*) or by the Islamic chants healers sing while waving Islamic books.[27] They are also distinguishable by specific dress codes: they wear the Muslim tunic (*male'ia*) and the Muslim prayer hat (*ecofio*). They always arrive with books and signal their presence by speaking languages of the coast (Kiswahili, Mwaní, Ekoti; Makhuwa of the coast).[28]

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[25] For examples in East Africa and the Western Indian Ocean, see: Helene Basu, "Drumming and praying: Sidi at the interface between spirit possession and Islam," in Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse (eds.), *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitism in the Western Indian Ocean,* 290-321 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Giles, "Possession Cults on the Swahili Coast," pp. 234-58; Lambek, Human spirits; Kjersti Larsen, "Spirit possession as historical narrative: the production of identity and locality in Zanzibar Town," in Nadia Lovell (ed.), *Locality and Belonging,* 121-142 (London: Routledge, 1998).

[26] The term Makhuwa was used at the time of the slave trade in a pejorative way to denote those living in the bush that were not Muslim and could be enslaved. It derives from the term *nikuwa*, bush, and was used to roughly index people living in the *terras firmas*, the Portuguese name for the mainland northern coast.

The description of the local spirit pantheon introduces the central chapter of northern Mozambique's history: the encounter between the world of the coast and the world of the mainland. As other regions in East Africa, the pre-colonial relationship between coast and mainland was rather fluid.[29] Intermarriage became fairly common practice and it is worth noting that the Swahili arriving from the northern coast of East Africa married local women, thus giving rise to societies based equally on Islam and matrilineal ideology; the latter being where ceremonies of ancestors and rituals of possession were common.[30] The economic and political relationships between the two regions intensified during the slave trade. At the end of the eighteenth century, a number of mainland areas were brought under the sphere of influence of the coast by means of a web of alliances between coastal and mainland chiefs. This network was established to facilitate the peaceful passage of caravans from the interior to the coast.[31] In this new context of political alliances, conversion to Islam was offered to the inland African populations (*Makhuwa*) to escape enslavement. Through conversion, the populations living on the mainland would have been assimilated into the culture of the coast, which did not entail the breaking of their previous traditions and religious practices.

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[27] The books utilised by women healers for divinations are generally reduced versions of the Koran and the Hadith.

[28] Mwaní: languages spoken among the population of Mocimboa da Praia (Cabo Delgado); Ekoti: language of Angoche (Southern coast of Nampula province).

[29] See for similar analysis in northern East Africa: McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam*, p.49; and Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*.

[30] For a historical discussion on Islam and matrilineality at the time of the slave trade, see: Bonate, "Traditions and Transitions," pp. 41-46; Bonate, "Matriliny, Islam and Gender in Northern Mozambique"; Nancy J. Hafkin, "Trade, Society, and Politics in Northern Mozambique, 1753-1913" (PhD Dissertation: Boston University, 1973). For a different case in the region, refer to Alpers' study of the Yao whose conversion to Islam determined the shift from matrilineality to a patrilineal system see: Edward Alpers, "Towards a History of the Expansion of Islam in East Africa: The Matrilineal people of the Southern Interior," in Terence O. Ranger and Isaria N. Kimanbo (eds.), *The Historical Study of African Religion*, 171-201 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

[31] Bonate, "Traditions and Transitions," pp. 50-53.

Chiefship Islam was the result of the assimilation of Islam from the coast into the tradition of matrilineal chieftainship in northern Mozambique.[32] Along the coast, Islamic authority was vested with local chiefs whose power and legitimacy, both on the coast and in the mainland, depended upon them being matrilineal lords of the land. Religious rituals, including funerals, were accompanied by dancing, music and drumming, often provided by 'dance societies' from along the coast and from the mainland.

The spread of Islam did not mean the marginalisation of women who continued to maintain a ritual and symbolic power. Liazzat Bonate contends that, in fact, the role of the *apia-mwene,* the female chief of a matrilineal clan, continued to be crucial, and, further, "the status of women in northern Mozambican Muslim societies during this time was not challenged to a great degree."[33]

In addition to dance societies and ritual activities, the figure of the *walimu,* Islamic teachers, Muslim medicine men, and Islamic magic played an important role in the expansion of Islam in the interior. As Parkin notes in the context of the Kenyan coast, Islamic teachers, who promoted Islam through practices such as healing ceremonies and divinations, may have worked locally as intermediaries between the coastal and inland worlds.[34] Their knowledge was a combination of the knowledge of Islam (*fakihi*), namely the study, transmission and interpretation of sacred Islamic texts, along with an esoteric expertise (*njulu*: from Arabic, meaning 'stars') based on cosmological, astrological and medical texts. At the time of the slave trade, several local Makhuwa male healers (*akhulukana*) imitated Muslim *walimu* practices by adopting clothing (*ecofio*, *male'ia*), Islamic books for divinations, or by manufacturing amulets (*hiriz*) as a way to enhance their practices.[35] In his colonial memoirs, the Portuguese governor in northern Mozambique, Antonio Enes, noted that people in the interior converted to Islam "by means of *imitation*": they wore the white tunic, adopted religious practices of those of the coast and abandoned the Makhuwa language to speak Kiswahili in the fashion of the *Amaka*.[36]

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[32] Bonate, "Traditions and Transitions," pp. 41-46.

[33] Bonate, "Matriliny, Islam and Gender," p. 143.

[34] Parkin, "Politics of Ritual Syncretism."

[35] Bonate, "Traditions and Transitions," p. 61.

Chiefship Islam came to be marginalised with the end of slavery and the spread of Sufi orders from the Indian Ocean during the colonial occupation.[37] This period saw the end of the slave trade, the economic decline of the coast and the beginning of migrations from there to the newly established city of Nampula, in the mainland. Created as a military outpost, the city began developing as an economic and administrative hub, with the construction of the railway and the colonial agricultural exploitation of the regions in the interior. It was in the nineteen-thirties that many Muslims of the coast settled in the city, continuing to spread Islam into the interior. However, these migrants brought Sufi Islam, a stricter version of the tradition that rendered conversion to Islam more difficult than in the past. Campaigns against 'dance societies,' drumming, possession rituals and ancestor cults were launched in the city, on behalf of Islamic sharia law.

The impact of Sufism in northern Mozambique was different from other regions of the area. Because Sufism spread later than in other regions of East Africa, the *dhikr* ceremony introduced in Mozambique by the two Sufi orders was more solemn; drums and other musical instruments such as shakers were not used.[38] The symbolic and ritual power of women came to be threatened by the spread of orthodox versions of Islam, although as Bonate contends, Sufi orders offered Muslim women new possibilities for religious power. New female branches emerged, and women, mostly Muslim migrants of the coast, then had access to Islamic education, which played an important authoritative role in the Muslim community.[39]

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[36] José Julio Gonçalves, *O Mundo Arabe-Islamico e o Ultramar Portuguese* (Lisbon: Ministerio Ultramarino, 1958), pp. 218-219.

[37] The Sufi orders, Qadiriyya and Shadhliyya, first made their appearance at the end of the nineteenth century at Mozambique Island in the north of Mozambique. They came from the Comoros Islands and Zanzibar. They later spread into the mainland, in the 1930s. For a more detailed discussion see Bonate, "Traditions and Transitions," ch. 2. See also Lorenzo Macagno, *Outros Muçulmanos: Islão e Narratives Coloniais* (Lisboa: Imprensa de Sociais Ciências, 2006).

[38] The first Reformist Muslims in Mozambique came to be known as Deobandis, having been trained in Deoband Seminars in India. The new movement did not engage, however, in direct confrontations with the Sufi leaders of the north. In the 1960s, a mestizo called Mangira returned from Saudi Arabia, where he had been studying at a university, and founded the Mozambican Wahhabi movement. For more information, see Bonate, "Traditions and Transitions"; and Macagno, *Outros Muçulmanos.*

The supremacy of Sufi orders in the region gradually began to be challenged during the last period of Portuguese colonialism and, later, after independence, when Reformist Muslims, who called themselves Wahhabis and had studied in India, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, began to proselytise throughout the country. Wahhabi Muslims launched fervent campaigns against *walimu* and the practice of Islamic medicine, as well as against spirit healers and their divinations and rituals. In addition to this, they campaigned against Sufi ceremonies such as *mawlid* and *dhikr*, and the days which are required for funerals and mourning (for example forty-five days instead of three, and with songs).[40]

In the aftermath of the war, as Mozambique was moving towards neoliberalism and multi-party democracy, new reforms signalled the progressive retirement of the state from religious affairs, which allowed greater religious freedom. This generally resulted in a personalisation of religious authority and a radicalisation of religious movements – not least because of scholars coming from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and India – as well as more scope for religious movements to intervene in society and in public morality issues. A new discourse of gender was also framed. The sharia's model of inheritance, marriage, and education deeply challenged and undermined matrilineal ideology in the city. As a result, many women have been relegated to more domestic roles and the private domain.[41]

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[39] Bonate, "Matriliny, Islam and Gender," pp.149-150.

[40] For a similar discussion about East Africa, see Kai Kresse, "'Swahili Enlightenment'? East African reformist discourse at the turning point: the example of Sheikh Muhammed Kasim Muzrui," *Journal of Religion in Africa,* 33, 2003, pp. 279-309; McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam,* pp. 133-5; Simon Turner, "'These young men show no respect for local customs' – Globalisation and Islamic Revival in Zanzibar," *Journal of Religion in Africa,* 39, 3, 2009, pp. 237-261; Felicitas Becker, "Commoners in the process of gradual Islamization: re-examining their role in the light of evidence from Southeast Tanzania," *Journal of Global History,* 2008, 3, pp. 227-49.

In the city centre (known as 'the cement city,' as opposed to the mud houses of the neighbourhoods), Reformist strands of Islam were gaining ground at the time of my research. Muslim groups belonging to different factions – such as the Islamic Council of the Reformists, and the Indian Sunni Muslim community's *Secta Sunni* – were engaged in campaigns aimed at eradicating what they referred to as *antigo*, 'backward' Islam.

"Muslims of the mosques" in the neighbourhoods of Nampula

"There is a war in the neighbourhoods. The problem is *osoma* (education). The Koran is unique, but there exist different ways of practicing it." Thus spoke Vincente, a member of a Sufi order. His words prefigure the importance of practices as the principal way of drawing boundaries between Sufi and *Ahl al-Sunna* Muslims. Significantly, in the neighbourhoods, these two groups are labelled with terms that emphasise the importance of behaviour, modes of worship, dress and linguistic codes as well as ritual performances, as the principal ways of drawing boundaries between local Muslims of different factions.[42]

Nacasaco identifies those who belong to the Sufi orders. Deriving from the Portuguese term *casaco* (jacket), *Nacasaco* denotes those who wear the *male'ia* (tunic) during prayers to cover their knees and elbows, and the *ecofio*, the Islamic hat, also when they are outside the mosque. According to local explanations, such clothing practices imitate the ways in which the Prophet prayed. Women Sufi members generally wear *capulana* (African fabric) to cover their heads.

Ahl al-Sunna adherents are often referred to as *Skutu* (from the Arabic *Sukut*, meaning 'silent') by Sufi Muslims and non- Muslims. However, they refuse to label themselves with this term, which they associate with local and old diatribes. As the term indicates, these Muslims eschew music and noise during prayers and religious rituals in favour of a direct and simple relationship with God.[43] "We are simple Muslims," a young man who defined himself as a member of *Ahl al-Sunna* explained to me during a conversation. This 'simplicity' entails a refusal of religious rituals such as *dhikr* and *mawlid*; the performance of three-day-long funerals. Furthermore, they distinguish themselves for not wearing the *ecofio*, which is regarded as an expression of older versions of Islam, and do not use the tunic for prayer. Because they attended the mosque without these garments, they were also identified with the Makhuwa term as 'those of trousers' (in Makhuwa, *na kaputtula*). Women's belonging to these groups was instead identified by wearing head scarves, refusing *capulana*, and by completely covering their bodies. Language is a further criterion by which *Ahl al-sunna* Muslims distinguished themselves from Sufi ones. The use of local languages (Makhuwa, Mwaní, Ekoti, or Kiswahili) as opposed to Arabic during prayers identified a Sufi member – part of a local Muslim community – from a member of *Ahl al-sunna*, who was instead a member of a global Muslim community.

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[41] Bonate, "Matriliny, Gender and Islam," pp. 151-153.

[42] For similar examples in East Africa, see Kresse, "Swahili Enlightenment?"; and McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam,* pp. 133-5.

The boundaries between Sufis and *Ahl al-sunna* Muslims were continuously drawn in conversations, especially by the latter, who were particularly eager to distinguish themselves from local and older expressions of Islam. The importance of such divisions was also highlighted by the attempts of many Sufis to cross them. The growing popularity of Reformist strands in the region was bringing about changes within the historical Sufi orders. Male members are beginning, for example, to stop wearing the Islamic hats outside the mosque. Another example is how women are now the majority of Sufi members. As male Sufi members are in charge of the Friday prayers and Islamic education, women members have come to be in charge of organising and participating in religious rituals such as *mawlid* and *dhikr*. Therefore, the ritual side of the Sufi orders has become almost exclusively the domain of women members, all coming from the coast, all descendants of Muslim families with an Islamic education and some knowledge of Arabic.

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[43] The two terms refer to an older dispute within Sufi orders in the 1960s in Mozambique Island. Before the arrival of the Wahhabis, a group within the Sufi orders split because of the use of the 'noisy' ways of performing funerals. See Bonate, "Traditions and Transitions," pp. 174-176.

During an interview in the yard of the Fatima mosque (the mosque of the Islamic Council situated in the city centre), Habibo explained to me: "We have to eradicate the *antigo* (ancient) Islam. Rituals such as *dhikr*, spirit ceremonies, Islamic medicine are all deviations from Islam. Women of spirits want to divert people from monotheism." To eradicate tradition and practices associated with older Islam, the foundation of schools and universities as well as the launching of cultural activities and the deployment of technology such as a radio station aimed at promoting Reformist ideas among local Muslims. Many claimed to have moved from the traditional Sufi orders to *Ahl al-Sunna* mosques after listening to *Radio Haq*, the radio station of the Islamic Council. *Radio Haq* broadcasts programmes daily on "proper Muslim behaviour," giving instructions on hygiene and clothing rules, how to deal with diseases, sexual behaviour, and gender rules. During an encounter with a group of women belonging to a local mosque, a woman wearing a head-cloth explained her decision to become a member of an *Ahl al-Sunna* group: "We listen to *Radio Haq* in the neighbourhoods. The radio indicates what is good and what is bad behaviour. One thing we have to do to become good Muslims is to dismiss tradition. I cannot undergo divinations anymore."

In addition to these new media, Reformist ideas were promoted through the proselytising activities of several *Ahl al-Sunna* groups. Some of these claimed connections with the Islamic Council of the city centre. They may receive financial support from the Council to build their mosques and they are often provided with goat meat and books. However, many of these groups mushroomed spontaneously and largely rely on the collection of money from members. The shift towards a more scriptural version of Islam is also the result of an increasing number of young people joining *Ahl al-Sunna* mosques in an attempt to break with what they call the 'Islam of our fathers.' In the words of Yussuf, for example, an elderly Sufi member who was commenting on how his children had joined an *Ahl al-Sunna* group in the neighbourhoods: "The reason is that they do not have patience. Things are easier and simpler; you can go and pray without *ecofio*, for example." His words were echoed repeatedly by young Muslims I spoke with over the years of my fieldwork, explaining why they had become *Skutu*. One young man said to me, “I moved to the *Ahl al-Sunna* mosque because there are less activities and commitment. You do less things to be a Muslim and it is an easy way of praying.” Others remarked on the greater flexibility and numbers of opportunities offered by these new groups. Knowledge gained through study was often advocated as the main criteria to reach a prestigious position in an *Ahl al-Sunna* group rather than age and the hereditary laws that regulate power and hierarchies within Sufi orders.

While many Muslim women and men are increasingly moving towards scriptural versions of Islam, older versions of Islam are seized by a number of women who stand outside of what is considered orthodox religious praxis in the local context.

Women of spirits

Until the recent past, spirit possession involved both men and women, mostly coming from the rural areas of the interior.[44] In the rural areas of the matrilineal mainland, possession by ancestral spirits afflicted a limited number of individuals with a family history of traditional healing. During the civil war, as many fled their villages for the city of Nampula, older forms of possession came to be replaced by *Majini* spirits, identified with larger formations (coast and mainland) who better captured the experience of these emigrants. In the years after the war, possession involved both men and women. A significant number of male emigrants became Muslim through possession by coastal spirits and began practicing as healers of *Majini* once they had settled in the city. However, over the last years of my fieldwork, several male traditional healers I worked with claimed to have rejected the ‘spirit side’ of their healing in favour of more Islamised practices. Nowadays, many attend local mosques; some study in provisional Koranic schools (*madrasa*), while others may hire foreign Islamic teachers to become ‘more’ Muslim and, thus, no longer ‘traditional.’

In the last decade, spirit possession has become almost exclusively the province of women. The proliferation of spirit attacks is connected to an increased insecurity many women experience in the city as the result of economic and social changes along with the decline of matrilineal values. In the past, these values have granted women in the rural areas some sort of social security and power, whereas they have increased women's insecurity in the city. However, not all the women living in Nampula were susceptible to spirit attacks. For example, rarely have any women coming from coastal cities that had attended Koranic schools and presented themselves as members of the Sufi orders reported being possessed by *Majini* or becoming spirit mediums. Like many Muslim men, women who attend Sufi and *Ahl al-Sunna* mosques regard spirit possession as *haramu*, a deviation, and as having nothing to do with Islam. Among women trafficking with spirits there was also a small number of those from Muslim backgrounds who had moved to the city from the coast. These women were however not members of Sufi orders, nor did they attend mosques, nor were they a part of any specific religious networks.

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[44] During, and in the aftermath, of the civil war (1977-1992), for example, thousands of men and women came to be possessed by spirits in the city.

The case of women in Nampula differs, for example, from Zanzibar, where female members of local possession cults come from highly respected, Muslim, educated and well-off families.[45] Here spirit possession involves women who generally stand outside, or at the margins, of the local Muslim community. Most of them migrated during the civil war or more recently from a very rural background of the non-Muslim, Makhuwa-speaking hinterland. In the city, their life is mostly confined to a domestic milieu. Their religious practices continue to be strongly traditional, consisting of ancestral worship, although many of these women converted to Christianity.

Women who are more prone to spirit incursions maintain a very rural identity in the city; many are still involved in farming on the outskirts of the city, while some still return periodically to their villages to work on the family lands. Many combine their agrarian work with the harvest of roots and plants for healing – knowledge the women received from their maternal forebears through dreams. In the city, it was mostly reproduction that continues to grant women social prestige and 'completeness.' The high value placed on fertility is confirmed by how women's bodies are prepared for child bearing from childhood. Girls are instructed by their mothers to enlarge their vaginal lips (*othuna*) by means of a cream from the leaves of a plant (*iphtxo*). In order to be sexually active, to conceive children and thus maintain the family and group identity, a woman's body has to be made 'open'. Instruction on reproduction and sexuality is stressed during rituals of puberty (*mwalí*).[46] More than in the past, failure of these expectations has augmented women's precariousness in a context which many lack the protection of their origin families, and where divorces have become easier to obtain.

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[45] Giles, "Possession Cults on the Swahili Coast," pp. 234-258.

When women fail to meet fertility expectations, they may initially resort to hospital medicine. Many women who are Christians and have recently joined African Pentecostal Churches may first consult their pastors and opt for healing through the Holy Spirit. If these therapies are ineffective, the conviction that the disease comes 'from outside,' or that it is a 'spiritual' one, is reinforced. *Majini* illness is a term that includes disorders such as infertility, complicated pregnancies, menopause, and menstrual troubles.[47] The framing of a diagnosis of *Majini* often exonerates a woman from personal failure, for it defers the responsibility from her to the spirits.[48]

Diviners generally distinguish between two types of *Majini* affliction. The spirits who are in the body are regarded as bad ones to expel by means of ritual baths (*orapa*), sauna (*baifo*), and healing sessions during which spirits are implored to leave the body of a woman. Often, trance sessions are a central part of the therapeutic path as they allow a sick woman to release tension and express her concerns and anxieties in front of relatives and her husband.[49] Spirits, who are 'in the head' are invited to stay in order to provide their hosts with the secret knowledge necessary to become a healer.[50] A diagnosis of *Majini* (good versus bad ones) depends on various factors that a diviner shrewdly assesses. Factors that distinguish a vocation of spirit healing from a simple disease may include a genealogy of healing in the family, moral support from a woman's family, as well as ambitions and personal charisma. Material capacity is important too. For example, impoverished and single women, or women lacking family connections in the city, are, for example, unlikely to be able to finance the expensive training and ceremonies geared to become a medium.

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[46] For female rituals of initiation and women's ways of learning in northern Mozambique, especially in the mainland, see the work of two missionaries: Francisco Lerma Martinez, *O Povo Macua e a sua Cultura* (Lisbon: Ministério da Educação: Instituto de Investigação Cientifica Tropica, 1989), Ch.3; for regions closer to the coast: Signe Arnfred, "Women in Mozambique: Gender Struggle and Gender Politics," *Review of African Political Economy,* 15, 41, 1988, pp. 5-16, and, Signe Arnfred, *Sexuality & Gender politics in Mozambique: rethinking Gender in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2011).

[47] Ulwele nchani wetu atunaulula kutibu? Which disease is this that we cannot heal?

[48] A similar point is made by Adeline Masquelier about Bori possession in Niger, see: "From Hostage to Host: Confessions of a Spirit Medium in Niger," *Ethos*, 30,1/2, 2002, pp. 49-76.

If a woman is diagnosed to be afflicted by strong *Majini*, she will undertake various trance sessions and ritual healing (*ekhoma*) to prove she has been called by spirits to embark on a healing career. A woman may be attacked in her reproductive functions either by *Majini* from the mainland (*Majini o'mwako*) or by the spirits of the coast (*Majini Amaka*). To become a healer, a woman has to prove to be beset by both *Majini* of the mountains, and the *Majini* of the coast, who force her to embrace Islam. There have also been women who were attacked by these spirits without manifesting any particular healing vocation. Possession by Muslim spirits can involve, for example, non-Muslim women who married Muslim husbands. Since *Majini* remains regarded as a disease, becoming a *mmaka*, a Muslim, is presented by healers as a necessary part of the healing journey.

In a manner similar to the mainland-*Majini*, those coming from the coast appear in the form of a disease generally involving reproductive problems and accompanied by psychological disturbances. During divinations, for example, some women reported to their diviner of dreams about men who were dressed in *male'ia* and *ecofio*, or started speaking dialects from the coast. Others mentioned a sudden refusal to eat pork, or not working on Friday in order to avoid falling sick. Some women reported that they experienced emotional disruptions such as accelerated heartbeat or sudden crying while walking near a mosque, when listening to *Radio Haq*, attending the funeral of a Muslim neighbour, or starting to dream of having married a Muslim man. A woman will be diagnosed with having *Majini Amaka* during a divination set by a woman healer (*funti*) who has suffered the same disease, has been healed by other healers of *Majini*, and undergone religious transformation. To appease these Muslim spirits, a ceremony, known as *dhikr,* is set in the spirit hut of the healer. In the attempt to restore their health, most women who are divined as afflicted from spirits decide to participate. Yet experienced as a disease, some women seize the chance offered by spirit interventions to reach Islam.

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[49] For an example of possession as a form of communication in the household, see Lambek, *Human Spirits*, Ch.5.

[50] Parkin mentions a similar division between spirits in the head and in the body among the Giriama in Kenya in David Parkin, *Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama in Kenya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.168-170.

The Spirit-*dhikr*

The ceremony takes place in the hut of a master healer and in front of a group of women who have experienced the same affliction and, in most instances, have been healed by the same healer.[51] The *dhikr* spirit ceremony is always scheduled on Fridays. The assistants and the healer leave their shoes outside and enter the hut, greeting the master healer with "salaam ale chum." The healer and the women dress in the white Islamic tunic (*male'ia*) and Islamic hat *(ecofio*). Next they both handle a brown *surbi* (Islamic necklace) and put on a pair of glasses, while carefully displaying all their Islamic books on the floor. The spirit hut will have been converted into a small mosque for the occasion, filled with the smoke of Indian incense. Black and white flags with a half-moon and Arabic writing will be on display at the entrance to the hut.

A woman's body needs to be opened (*otthukula)* in order to summon the spirits: the patient is given a drink made of herbs gathered in the bush, aimed at opening her heart, head and body to spirits. The opening of the body is also achieved through songs and prayers. The women begin an Islamic prayer (*fatiya)* and Islamic ablution; they whisper "La ilaha illa

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[51] I also heard women and healers referring to the ceremony as mascheia from *mashehes:* "those *shehes*," referring to spirits of the coast (also called *mashehe*).

Allah" and begin singing an Arabic litany, followed by songs in Kiswahili aimed at calling the spirits from the coast.

> *Dawa yangu iko katikati ya bahari*
> (My medicine is in the middle of the sea)
>
> *Mwana amekya na kitabu Kweli baba na mama nipeleka niende wikasmee*
> (The child has already come with the books, my father and my mother, to take me to the school)
>
> *Mwalimu anakwenda kuleta dawa karibo na mlima*
> (The *mwualimo* goes and picks medicine close to the mountains)

The reiteration of these songs, the incense wafting in the room, the darkness of the hut and the synchronised movements of the women's bodies are generally effective in triggering a woman's trance. The arrival of the spirits is signalled by stylised physical actions such as the movement of her shoulders, sobbing and crying.

Once the patient's behaviour has changed, a master healer declares that the spirits of the coast have arrived (*Ava vakuuballi vapali*,'the persons of the coast are here'). There is a distinction between the possessed woman and the spirits throughout the rituals, and the master healer can engage directly with the spirits. The following is example is taken from a ceremony I attended in 2010 when the *funti* tried to appease the spirits taking hold of her patient with these words in Kiswahili:

> *Tulia, Tulia (Calm down, calm down)/*
> *She is waiting for money to buy books (kitabu)/*
> *To buy her an ecofio so she can become a teacher (maulana).*

These words also introduce a focal point: the importance of material and bodily practices in making a new Muslim healer. As the ritual proceeds, the possessed woman transforms from being a medium of spirits into a new converted Muslim. Here linguistic acts play a crucial role in the making of a new Muslim. If the spirits are called in Kiswahili, the woman will start speaking a different cryptic language: an Arabic-like idiom. What is known as the language of *Majini* consists of guttural sounds or some Arabic words such as: *Allahu Akbar; Salama; Kitabu.* In order to be effective, as Austin puts it, there must be an audience who understands the language.[52] In elaborating upon this point, Tambiah calls for the consideration of the social context and of specific conditions under which "saying is doing" and ritual becomes a mode of social action. In other words, verbal acts have to conform to established cultural conventions.[53] Yet, as Janet McIntosh has explained in her discussion of linguistic essentialism along the Kenyan coast, the transformative power of the words does not only depend on the semantic content. The medium (the linguistic code) can be as transformative as the message.[54] If speaking in Kiswahili makes a woman a medium of spirits, speaking a version of Arabic makes a woman a Muslim. Interestingly, colonial memoirs have stressed the importance of linguistic practices in promoting Islam in the region.[55] In 1905, for example, the colonial governor Ernesto Jardim de Vilhena observed that many, along the coast and the hinterland, were turning away from the use of Kiswahili – the prevailing lingua franca during the slave trade – towards Arabic.[56] After the possessed woman begins uttering the Arabic words, she will perform ablutions, for example, and Islamic prayers signalling she has become a Muslim. This process is completed by further bodily and material practices, such as placing an Islamic hat on the possessed woman, giving her Islamic books, or by performing Islamic prayers.

In spirit ceremonies, women become open to possibilities of behaviours – which they, coming from the non-Muslim regions, are not allowed to express outside a ritual space; these include dressing as *male* Muslims, handling books, and undertaking Islamic prayers and ablution. Janice Boddy makes a similar point for women involved in *zâr* spirit possession in Sudan where, she argues, possession provided local women with expressive possibilities they would not enjoy in ordinary life.[57]

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[52] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words.*

[53] Tambiah, "A performative approach," pp. 119-122.

[54] Janet McIntosh, "Language essentialism and social hierarchies," p.1941; see also McIntosh, The Edge of Islam, p.224.

[55] Gonçalves, *O Mundo Arabe-Islamico,* p.220.

[56] Ermesto Jardim de Vilhena, Companhia do Nyassa: relatórios e memórias sobre os Território (Insitituto Ultramarino: Lisboa, 1905), p.56.

It becomes clear, at this point that the *dhikr* ceremony is not the ritual occasion at which women parody or exaggerate the behaviours of Muslims. Thus, the Muslim spirits embody, rather than subvert the values of Islamic piety, similar to the example of the Mayotte Muslims' behaviour against Islam.[58] The women's behaviour during these ceremonies is indeed solemn and less aggressive than during the noisy sessions held for the land spirits.[59] Ultimately, women healers and patients regard these ceremonies as conversion and religious change. As a master healer explained to me, "during the *dhikr*, we *show* God (*Muluku*) we have *become* Muslim of *Majini.*" What kind of Islam do they refer to in their performances?

Islam of the spirits

Excluded from scriptural versions of Islam, women assume a specific discourse of Islam during spirit performances that resonates with their experiential worlds. Becoming and being a "Muslim of spirits" is primarily a corporal and material experience. A woman healer, for example, emphasised her physical experience of becoming a Muslim through spirit possession in contrast to the experiences of other Muslims. "We feel ill; we suffered. This is how we study to be Muslim. These men stay in the mosque to write." In her work on Giriama spirit-converts, Janet McIntosh discussed a similar process. This way of becoming and being Muslim underscores a different concept of religiosity at odds with the rational and intellectual ones of the Swahili Muslims.[60] Conversion is grounded in the body (illnesses) and in materiality (acquiring books and clothing).

Besides re-inscribing Islamic symbols, practices and objects in familiar cognitive, bodily and sensuous codes, women who are possessed claim belonging to a particular local history: the spread of Islam during the time of the slave trade.[61] The reference by women to older versions of Islam is substantiated by several aspects within the ritual. Women's *dhikr* entails the use of songs and dances as it was performed before the arrival of the Sufi orders.[62] They display objects such as necklaces, glasses, and clothing, which are prohibited, for example, by Reformist Muslims for use during prayers. The *Majini Amaka* are the spirits of Muslim healers (*walimu*), depicted in songs as engaging in therapeutic practices, wearing tunics, hats and handling books; finally, spirits are summoned by using languages of the coast (Mwaní Kiswahili; Ekoti; Makhuwa of the coast). Moreover, women perform a historical modality of conversion to Islam. Various historical accounts and colonial memories have described in some detail how conversion to Islam was accomplished by imitation, in other words the adoption of clothing, linguistic, religious and magic practices from people of the coast.[63] The women were aware of the kind of Islam to which they were referring to in these performances and understood how being a "Muslim of spirits" differed from other strands of Islam. Take, for example, the words of a woman who described to me what it meant to be a Muslim of spirits: "My spirits are neither *Nacasaco* nor *Skutu*. They are A*maka*. Their mosque is inside the sea. A*maka* are those of the sea, they are healers who come here, from the coast." A diviner explained to me that she could not buy the ink for Arabic writing in the market of the city; this was because the spirits wanted only the one from the coast, or the one used by healers of Tanzania. Another woman explained to me that her Muslim spirits "brought back the *antigo* Islam (ancient Islam), the one of my forebears," a tradition of Islam distant in time and distinct from the present Muslims. There is a further aspect, which seems to confirm the women's appropriation of an older version of Islam. As the term "Muslim of spirits" implies, spirit possession performances claim that there is no contradiction between 'Islam' and 'spirits,' and therefore conversion to Islam will not mean a break with the past and previous cosmologies.

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[57] Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits*, pp. 156-9.

[58] Lambek, *Knowledge and Practices*, p. 64. For a contrasting case to Nampula, see McIntosh, "Reluctant Muslims," p. 105.

[59] When a woman is possessed by spirits of the mountains, she begins shouting, sometimes undressing and inveighing against the audience.

[60] In her work on Giriam spirit-converts, Janet McIntosh discusses a similar process (McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam*, p. 160-1).

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[61] For literature on the importance of history and memory in spirit possession, see: G. P. Makris, "Slavery, Possession and History: The Construction of the Self among Slave Descendants in the Sudan," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 66, 2, 1996, pp. 159-182; McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam*; Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa* (London: Routledge, 1995); Tobias Wendl, "Slavery, Spirit Possession and Ritual Consciousness. The Tchamba Cult among the Mina of Togo," in Heike Beherend and Ute Luig (eds.), *Spirit Possession and Power in Africa,* 111-123 (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1999); Michael Lambek, *The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga, Madagascar* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Linda Giles, "Spirit possession & Symbolic construction of Swahili Society," in Heike Beherend and Ute Luig (eds.), *Spirit Possession and Power in Africa*, 149 (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).

[62] The *dhikr* as performed by women in Nampula differs from the *dhikr* described by Giles along the Swahili coast. The former displays clear Sufi influences. See Giles, "Spirit possession & Symbolic construction," p. 149.

[63] To make this point, my discussion draws on colonial ethnography and memoirs. See for example, *Gonçalves, O Mundo Arabe-Islamico;* Lupi, Angoche; De Vilhena, *Companhia do Nyassa.*

This is in contrast to other studies of spirit possession in East Africa where conversion to Islam often implies a break with the past. David Parkin illustrates that the Mijikenda in Kenya rejected their former cultural background in order to assimilate with the coastal cultures of the Swahili and to be regarded as 'proper' Muslims.[64] More recently, Janet McIntosh has documented similar experiences among some of the Giriama spirit converts living in Malindi, who tend to distance themselves from their ethnic background to become 'more' Muslim. On the contrary, in Nampula, a woman who becomes a Muslim of spirits will continue to worship her maternal family ancestors and perform family rituals, in contrast to the Sufi and Reformist Muslims who instead label these practices as anti-Islam.

This combination of traditional cosmologies and Islam becomes clearer from studying the experiences and practices of diviners and healers. Diviners and healers of *Majini* are known for holding a type of 'double' identity and for working with two systems of knowledge which they combine and mix in their cosmologies and practices: traditionalism of the inland culture and Islam of the coast. In spirit divinations, women may use Islamic books to summon the maternal family spirits of their patients. Protective amulets are made of herbs, incense and sometimes of copied pages of Islamic books. Healers may dress in Islamic hats and white tunics while they scatter sacred flour to thank ancestral spirits. In divinatory and ritual formula, spirits of the coast, of the inland, ancestors and the Arabic God (*Arabe Muluku*) are all summoned together.[65] If the divisions between Islam and spirit possession are reversed by the extraordinary qualities of spirit possession performances, we will see how these divisions are strongly reinstated in the women's everyday lives when they leave their spirit huts and engage with Muslims of other orientations.

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[64] Parkin, "Swahili and Mijikenda."

"Muslims of the spirits"/"Muslims of the mosque"

After the ceremony, a woman will generally adopt some Islamic rules and habits, such as not working on Fridays, not eating pork and rats (food identified with mainland people) and not performing ceremonies during Ramadan. Although the women regard themselves as Muslim after the ceremony, other Muslims, from both the Sufi and Reformist groups, refuse to consider them as Muslim and label possession as 'non-Islamic' (*haramu*). Like other cases in East Africa, conversion to Islam through spirit possession is looked upon with suspicion in a context where Islam is strongly associated with an ethnic group (people of the coast), and often with literate sensibility and rationality. A man who identified himself as an *Ahl al-sunna* Muslim explained during an interview: "We cannot have any relationships with these women healers. The Prophet teaches us. They are *shirk* (polytheists). I can respect these old women healers, but not what they are *doing.*"[66] One of these Muslims might resort to the women for their herbal knowledge, just as they go to the hospital, but they eschew any ritual and spiritual practices within this form of healing. Ikbar, a Reformist intellectual, disdained spirit possession as anti-Islam during a conversation. When I asked how he viewed those who had come to Islam by spirits, he explained: “A good Muslim will never be attacked by spirits. If you read the Koran you can see how to keep your body pure. In the sacred book, there are some verses you recite to avoid attacks from bad Muslims.” It would be misleading to think of Sufi members as more tolerant towards spirit practices, especially given the history of Sufism in the region. Sufi members tended to dismiss the idea of possession as being a medical option. Hamid, a Muslim Sufi, had to tackle the spirit affliction of his wife, a woman from the mainland. “This is the religion of women,” he remarked during a conversation, “These women are not Muslim. *Majini* are evil, this is just sickness. People with spirits speak their own language, which is not Arabic.”

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[65] An example from a divination I attended in 2009 where the diviners summoned different cosmological beings for her divination and healing: *Xonte Arabu Muluku, minepa, Majini maka, Nakuru, Germani (Please Arabic God, ancestors, Muslim spirits, Nakuru and Mjermani (spirits from the inland)).*

[66] See also Bonate for a discussion about Reformist Muslims towards healing and women's possession in Mozambique: Bonate, "Matriliny, Islam and Gender," p.151.

Spirit women were also belittled by those men who had turned to Islam through spirit possession or through other magic practices, such as drinking ink which had been used to write verses from the Koran (*nikombe*). An example was Perequito, a healer from the interior who had been beset by Muslim spirits and had converted to Islam once he had settled in the city at the time of the civil war. In the last years, however, he dismissed what he called “the traditional side” of his healing in the efforts to become a ‘good’ Muslim. He had hired a Tanzanian teacher and had become a member of a new mosque established on the western side of the city. In commenting on women healers during an interview, he explained: “It is good that spirits drive many people to embrace Islam. But one cannot be lazy. One has to study to become a good Muslim. These women are ignorant, they do not [know] anything of Islam.”

Women’s reactions to the disdain from other Muslims range from self-abnegation to rebellious statements. Most of the women of *Majini* with whom I worked openly displayed symbols and adopted behaviour that identified her as a Muslim only in a ritual context – divinations and healing – and in front of an audience sharing similar experiences and a similar ethnic and religious background. There were some mediums and healers who, when asked about their religious identity, tended to downplay their conversion stressing they were Muslims “only when spirits come,” or “just inside the spirit houses.” Others defined conversion as a part of their spiritual 'disease.' There were also some women who even concealed or denied being Muslim outside their huts or when interacting with other Muslims. A woman Muslim healer with whom I worked closely, denied, for example, being a Muslim during a conversation we held in the presence of her neighbour, the *shehe* of a Reformist mosque. Some women belittled themselves and their knowledge defining, for example, the *dhikr* ceremony at the end as a 'joke' when asked to confront other Muslims. As one woman commented, "Muslims do not pray like we did, with glasses, necklaces and singing." A woman healer offered this explanation about her being a Muslim of spirits: "I am *Mmaka* only in *my* spirit mosque, when the spirits from the coast come to me."

This situation of being *partially, not fully*, Muslim seems to emerge in their commentaries. It resembles the experience of some of the Giriama converts who hesitated to define themselves as Muslim, for they had somatised in their spirit experiences the ontological incompatibility between Islam and Giriama-ness.[67] Here, women seem to have internalised instead an Islamic discourse which is both Sufi and Reformist, to the effect that spirit possession is antithetical to the Islam of the mosque. This point can also be encountered from the ways in which those women from Islamic backgrounds who had fallen prey to spirits described the impact that the presence of spirits had on their previous religious life. For example, Alima, an elderly woman from a village near the coast, described how spirits forced her to quit the mosque. She presented herself, now, as a Muslim of spirits, which differed from her being previously a Muslim of the mosque. Conversely, another woman, Ancha, from the coastal city of Angoche, described herself as a Muslim and attended a Sufi mosque with her husband, despite having suffered from spirits years ago after she lost her baby. "I am Muslim; my spirits are not. They come from the bush. I go to the mosque. But in my divination I am not using books. Just roots." While practicing herbal medicine is tolerated by Muslims of any perception, trafficking with spirits is certainly not. Those women healers and diviners, who are more publically identified with spirit possession, tended to avoid participating in religious occasions with other Muslims. For example, I was often told that spirits prevented women from attending Sufi and *Ahl al-sunna* funerals of their neighbours, or walking near a mosque on Fridays. By avoiding meeting with other Muslims, women mediums might protect themselves from the risk of disapproval by others.

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[67] McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam*, Ch.3; see also McIntosh, "Reluctant Muslims."

Some women reacted fervently to the belittlement by other Muslims. For example, in conversations, some women presented themselves as 'better Muslims,' or accused the others of witchcraft. A woman healer explained during a conversation what it meant to be a Muslim of spirits with these words: "If I go to a mosque, spirits will force me to destroy everything. There is a lot of witchcraft there. That's why I cannot go to the mosque. I have built my own spirit-mosque here in my yard and I better pray here." Similarly, another healer explained to me that being a Muslim of spirits entailed the refusal of the mosque's structure of power and involved different ways of acquiring and transmitting knowledge: "These Muslims learnt with other teachers. *Our* Islam (Port. *Mahomettano*) comes from the sky, from God. We are taught directly by spirits." Another woman who had recently converted to Islam, stated defiantly, "these *shehes* teach how to read, how to write in the madrasa. I started reading at night while I was sleeping. When I woke up, I was crying and started reading and writing. If I go to a madrasa, I fall ill." Similarly, a healer named Alima refused to attend the funeral of her neighbour, an *Ahl al-sunna,* because, "There are all the chiefs of the mosque," she said. "If I go, my spirits come and I will start destroying everything. Spirits allow me to pray to Allah in my spirit mosque. I cannot understand these *Sukutu*. These people are witches. They are spoiling all the traditions of our family. The family of the dead should wash the body of the man, not these strangers of the mosque!" It seems probable that Alima avoided the funeral because she feared the judgment of other Muslims, but she explained her decision by accusing the Reformist Muslims of witchcraft.

It is important to cast these commentaries in a broader context. Women's resentment, in fact, was not solely directed against attacks by Muslims. Their way of being Muslim deeply resonated with their experiences and knowledge, and did not clash with their traditional background. Instead, their reactions can be read rather as a form of rebellion, although often private, against the Islamic expansion that contributed to the marginalisation of matrilineal ideology, traditional systems of knowledge, and structures of power; values that had historically assured local women a prominent role in their society.

Becoming/being a "Muslim of spirits" in Nampula today

Various accounts have shown that spirit conversion can be a rewarding path.[68] In his studies among the Giriama, for example, David Parkin showed how spirit conversion allowed the especially enterprising and wealthy youths to move away from the authority imposed by their elderly kin and family and, by adopting new dietary customs, these youths avoided the danger of being bewitched.[69] Conversion to Islam, and embarking on the Swahili-like behaviours helped these individuals to rise in the economic sense.[70] Parkin notes that spirit-forced conversions also involved women. Although they did not gain the economic prestige of males converting to Islam, the special identity of these women involved in possession by Muslim spirits led to them receiving particular attention in the homestead. Parkin notes how their Islamic distinctiveness became the pretext for a quarrel with their husbands, and with their fathers, worried that they would have to give back bride-wealth. Because of their new identity, these women were more inclined to migrate to the coastal cities to gain some personal autonomy.[71]

Decades later, in the coastal city of Malindi, Janet McIntosh questioned the strategic nature of conversion. She shows that although some individuals may benefit from conversion to Islam, such conversion to Islam through possession is more a burden than an advantage.[72] The majority of the Giriama live with deep resentment at their becoming Muslim, and some have even sought to resist Muslim spirits and forced conversion.

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[68] Lewis, *Religion in Context,* p. 98.

[69] Parkin, "Politics of Ritual Syncretism."

[70] Ibid.

[71] Parkin, *The Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.187.

[72] McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam,* pp.148-154.

Giriama bodies, beset by Muslim spirits, embark on Islamic behaviours and practices and subject themselves to Islamic hegemony, while at the same time vomit Giriama foods. Many of these new converts will later decry, rebel against and eventually reject these religious experiences. McIntosh makes sense of this ambivalence, or "appropriating while rejecting," as the somatisation of a regional discourse: the claim of religious and ethnic essentialism between the Giriama and the Swahili, that Giriama ethnicity is unfit and polluting Islam.[73] In addition, many new converts seemed not to benefit economically and the majority of them remain marginal in a coastal community dominated by the Swahili.[74]

In Nampula there were some women who complained about contracting Muslim spirits after having married a Muslim man. During a divination, Claudia, a woman suffering from Muslim spirits lamented that her disease had started when she married "this man of the coast ... When I attended the church," she said to the diviner, "I was fine."

Although Claudia's continuous disease highlights her discomfort at being a Muslim, the majority of women afflicted by Muslim spirits seem to experience conversion without resistance. Apart from being identified as part of a therapeutic process, the appropriation of this version of Islam through spirit performances granted some benefits. Firstly, it is worth remarking that the majority of these women come from rural backgrounds, are illiterate, often confined to a domestic setting, and exist on the margins of a market economy. Therefore, converting to Islam through possession provides a unique opportunity to expand the boundaries of their rural identity. A woman who converts to Islam though spirits gains some prestige, especially if she becomes a healer in her non-Muslim family and community of origin.

Matteus, the nephew of a Makonde healer named Maria, explained to me her respect for her elders: "my *avo* (grandmother) knows things from spirits and she had studied Islam." All the younger members of the family would have followed the old woman: they dismissed Christianity and began attending the mosque in the neighbourhood. The youngest one, Alejandro, was studying hard in the madrasa hoping to become "an important *shehe*" one day.

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[73] McIntosh, "Reluctant Muslims" and *The Edge of Islam*, Ch. 3.

[74] McIntosh, "Reluctant Muslims," p. 103.

The prestige of a woman healer also depends on economic benefits deriving from her conversion to Islam. Many women healers welcome the presence of spirits as they endorse not only their therapeutic and magic prestige, but also provide the possibility of a higher income. Muslim spirits are generally regarded as more 'ambitious' and hardly appeaseable materially: one woman had to have imported items, clothes, books, which are rather expensive for local standards. Therefore, these kinds of ceremonies are generally an important source of income for healers and their families. Spirits of the hinterland evoke peasantry heritages and are summoned with sacred flour and worshipped with produce from the fields: chickens, beans, millet and rice. However, spirits from the coast stress their urban character: they ask for *mushurukhu* (money), clothes (*ecofio* and *male'ia*) and books purchased in the local market. For many women who are outside the market economy, the presence of Muslim spirits may grant access to cash and to that market economy. A few even become women of independent means living in the city.

Nevertheless, these women are often marginalised and despised by local Muslims. The older versions of Islam they evoke in their divinations and healing practices combine the use of the Koran with herbs, and mix Arabic-like languages with the languages of the inland. These practices continue to be ingrained in the collective imagination and memory of many people living in Nampula. In a city where almost all of the residents are non-Muslim, a number of women diviners and healers working with both traditionalism and Islam are regarded not only as Muslim, but also as 'potent' or dangerous, because they know both the local tradition and the medicine of the coast.

For some women, conversion to Islam through spirits mean conforming to the religion of their husbands. As such, becoming a Muslim of spirits has often worked as, in Lewis' words, "oblique strategies of attack" against husbands and male power in the household.[75] On the one hand, there are Christian husbands who do not want their wives to become Muslim. In this case, women may begin refusing to pray or to go to church. I met women who told me that when they had started being possessed by Muslim spirits, they destroyed or spat on Christian symbols, such as the Bible and the crucifix. On the other hand, some Muslim men, especially those who are members of Sufi orders or Reformist groups, might support their wives in the healing process, but they try to obstruct women's conversion to Islam through spirits. The adoption of this specific Islamic discourse by women entails adopting behaviours which are regarded by other Muslims as antithetical to orthodox Islam: for example, erecting a spirit hut in her yard, which some women call defiantly the "mosque of spirits"; continuing to worship the ancestors; and in case they have become healers and diviners, using the Koran and other Islamic symbols and prayers to call upon and talk with spirits.[76]

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[75] Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, p. 27.

In a Christian household the presence of Muslim spirits could prompt similar conflicts. The refusal of these women to attend church and their adoption of Islamic rules and habits puts their husbands in a position where they are obliged to pay for spirit therapy and to accommodate women's requests. An example is another woman named Alima, a woman in her early thirties from the coast who had married Alejandro, a Christian man from the mainland. For months, she had annoyed her husband intensely because of the possession by coastal spirits, which forced her to disobey rules in the compound. Besides avoiding domestic tasks, Alima refused to follow her husband in their Pentecostal church. At night, she would wake up speaking Arabic and ask to go to the mosque. Alejandro finally took her to a spirit healer to appease the spirits. Weeks later, Alima terminated the healing process and did not become a Muslim. Significantly, the healer commented, "The problem is not 'spirits.' The problem here is *sumiento* [jealously]. She fears her husband is cheating on her." Other examples illustrate how women afflicted by Muslim spirits have challenged their pious Muslim husbands or other kin, and obtained, although only temporarily, some power in the compound. Take the story of Ajida, a young, severe woman from a Sufi family, who began being possessed by Muslim spirits after several miscarriages and a divorce from her husband. The family decided to take her to a *Majini* healer. In order to appease the spirits, the divination revealed the young woman had to build a small "mosque of spirits" in her uncle's yard, where she would perform ceremonies to spirits. The uncle looked at me with resignation during our conversation as he indicated the small cement house decorated with Islamic symbols: "this is not Islam. This is the religion of women!"

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[76] Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, p. 126.

These examples illustrate how spirits, and in this specific case the Muslim ones, continue to be a valuable resource women draw on to alter, sometimes to even subvert, power relationships in the household and gain a role in the local community as healers and diviners. It is worth reiterating that spirit possession occurs in a context of deep uncertainty, social insecurity and religious change. It affects mostly women who exist on the margins of economic and religious power, and who are often lacking, as in the past and in the rural areas, the support from their families.

Conclusion

This article has examined the role of possession by Muslim spirits and the significance of this among a group of women living in the city of Nampula. Similar to other examples of spirit-driven conversion in East Africa, this article has suggested the need to rethink mimesis, and more generally spirit possession, as *becoming*, rather than merely as an epistemological system; i.e. knowing, self-reflection and appropriation of power. The analysis of possession as an epistemological system risks overlooking, on the one hand, historical experiences and emic interpretations, while on the other, the pragmatics of possession.[77] I have framed my discussion within a performative approach[78] that has helped me explore ritual as *doing*, or as affecting something through words, body and senses. I have first described how, through aesthetic media, possessed women who exist on the margins of Islam and who are unable to access Islamic education, are enabled to reach Islam. The ritual as a set of conventional linguistic, symbolic, and aesthetic acts – orchestrated by an expert and in front of an audience sharing the same world view, experiences and knowledge – validates ritual as a form of social action; in this case, women's religious conversion. I have developed this argument further by framing these ritual practices in a wider historical context. I have suggested that spirit-induced conversion to Islam through the imitation of linguistic, material and ritual enactments was a common practice at the time of the slave trade, especially among people living in the hinterland regions. Besides the fact that women themselves regard possession by Muslim spirits as a specific form of conversion, or as *becoming* Muslim, the main argument of this article is that women do not imitate Islam in their spirit performances. Instead, being possessed by the spirits of Muslim healers (*walimu*) they bring to life, through performance, older discourses of Islam (Chiefship Islam). This version of Islam, which resonates better with the experiences and world view of these women, has been cast aside by Sufi and Reformist discourses.

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[77] This point is made very clearly in Lila Abu Lughod's review of "Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan. JANICE BODDY," *American Ethnologist*, 20, 2, 1993, pp. 425-426.

[78] Tambiah, "A performative approach"; Austin, *How to do Things with Words*; Askew, *Performing the Nation*, and Jackson, "Knowledge of the Body."

I then interrogated the significance of spirit conversion in the present context. If these women, who come from the non-Muslim interior and who are often illiterate and maintain a rural identity, are allowed to access Islam through possession, their being Muslim outside a ritual context becomes uncertain. I have discussed the relationships between the 'spirit Islam' of these women and other Muslims who not only misunderstand these conversions through spirit possession, but who label these practices as *haramu,* that isanti-Islamic. Women's reactions to the belittlement from other Muslims range from downplaying their experience of spirit conversion to Islam, to accusing other Muslims of being ignorant and witches. I have shown in this article that possession in the community, or at the level of the household, this 'Islam of spirits' evokes older discourses of Islam based on corporal experiences. This can also be viewed as a form of implicit rebellion against scriptural versions of Islam and against ideals surrounding being a 'good' Muslim in the city.

Finally, I have showed how, regardless of the accusations and the tensions with other Muslims, women may gain some advantages from revitalising these versions of Islam. Processes such as urbanisation, migrations from the village to the city, economic change and the diffusion of scriptural Islam have all contributed to the erosion of matrilineal and traditional values, which have historically granted many local women social security, as well as some degree of symbolic power and influence in the local community. In the city, many of these women of rural identity who are confined to a domestic milieu and exist on the margins of economic power, may turn to conversion to Islam as a way of re-balancing domestic power, to access the cash economy, enhance their healing knowledge, and, ultimately, to rethink their values and identities in a more cosmopolitan fashion without breaking from their traditional background. Reframing their world, values and themselves within the language of this particular version of Islam ultimately gives these women a way to defend who they are, where they come from, and their history, while, at the same time, claiming a role in the Muslim community of the city.