This article explores transformations in gender relations along the Swahili Coast of East Africa through an historical examination of four domains of social life: politics, kinship, economics, and musical performance. By examining data about the relative social positions of women and men across a span of five centuries, I seek to counteract widespread tendencies to project assumptions of male dominance onto the past and to uncritically attribute current practices of gender segregation to the presence of Islam. Islam penetrated the Swahili Coast as early as the ninth century, yet gender segregation is a quite recent phenomenon dating back only to the last century. The data presented here cumulatively indicate: 1) that there have been shifts in Swahili society from a time when women occupied positions of greater power, prestige, wealth, and opportunity than is available to them today; 2) that this has entailed the cultural elaboration of an opposition between “African” and “Arab” designations; 3) that this opposition has a strongly gendered dimension; and 4) that musical practices play a central role in these historical and cultural processes.

They gathered in a circle under the makeshift tent swathed in matching kanga, the colorful patterned cloths that impart jewels of Swahili wisdom through printed proverbs. Nimestahamili tabu kupata si ajabu, read the saying on this particular kanga: “I have suffered much. To acquire [insert: wealth/success/a decent husband] is not surprising.” Women associated with the bride’s family raised money to offset the wedding expenses by purchasing this kanga pattern in bulk and selling them to those invited to the festivities. While singing, the uniformed women struck buffalo horns with wooden sticks, punctuating the rhythms intoned by the drums. They sang:

Kimasomaso mwanangu usimuone
Kimasomaso mwanangu usimuone
Kwa jicho la husuda we mwanangu usimuone
Ajae kwa ubaya mwanangu msimuone. Eeeee.
You with the evil eye, don't look at my child.
You with the evil eye, don't look at my child.
You with the envious eye, don't look at my child.
S/he who comes with evil intention, shouldn't look at my child.

In singing this song as they performed the *msanja* dance, these women warned away evildoers who would seek to harm or bewitch the bride. It was November 1993 in the coastal Tanzanian city of Tanga, yet the practice of gathering to sing and dance to drums and other instruments—musical events known locally as *ngoma*—had occurred for centuries in cities, towns, and villages all along the coast.

In the 1890s, a German linguist named Carl Velten asked villagers in the coastal town of Bagamoyo (approximately 200 km. south of Tanga) to write down their traditions and cultural practices. The collection, written in Swahili using the Arabic script, was reworked and refined by a local Islamic teacher Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari to whom credit for the lucid and elegant style of the manuscript goes (Velten 1903; Bakari 1981). In it, *msanja* is included in the section called *Ngoma za Furaha*, "Dances for Enjoyment," and described as follows:

The *Msanja Ngoma*

This is performed in the yard or in the house with no *zumari*. It needs a *dogori*, an *upatu*, and a *chapuo*, and the women have horns. Men and women circle around the yard, and the singer stands in the middle singing, "Salim, you boast that you are the sultan’s son," and the women reply, "Yes, by God," or "Eee nana." Then the singer sings:

I will sew my *kanzu* broad and long

See how thin it is, like the sultan’s tower. Two clothes, sir, and begging for soap.


The striking difference between *msanja* as performed in the 1990s versus the 1890s is that it is currently performed exclusively by women (with the exception of male drummers), whereas a century ago both men and women participated. A quick assessment of the other sixteen *ngoma* described by Bakari reveals that while four are designated as exclusively male, and one as exclusively female, no less than twelve are described as engaging both men and women.

Swahili scholars might look askance at this data because it runs counter to current models of Swahili gender relations. The literature on *ngoma* performance assumes the division of musical genres into gender-defined categories: women's music/dance (*ngoma za wanawake*) versus men's music/dance (*ngoma za wanaume*). The occasional mixed-gender *ngoma* are glossed as exceptions to the rule (Campbell and Eastman 1984; Franken 1994). Because East African coastal societies are predominantly Islamic, it is commonly accepted that this is simply another manifesta-
tion of the separate female and male subcultures that result from Islamic principles and practices of sex-based segregation. While it is indisputably true that today there are female and male subcultures characterized by various formal associations and informal networks (e.g., women's dance societies, initiation societies, and self-help organizations versus men's mosque affiliations, political organizations, and neighborhood coffee shops called *baraza*), there are reasons to doubt that the genders were as sharply divided years ago. There are also reasons to doubt that the current imbalance in power relations between Swahili men and women in favor of men existed to the same degree in the past as it does today. The error of assuming knowledge of the past based on evidence drawn from the present requires immediate correction, not only as it informs understandings of Swahili gender relations and the practice of Islam, but as it informs research on any of a multitude of social situations. Difficult though it may be to face the challenge of historical research and wrestle with our own assumptions of what the past ought to hold, it is important to do so and can yield fascinating and oftentimes unexpected results.

This is one such case. While the literature on Swahili women illustrates the considerable room available to them for maneuvering and pursuing their own agendas within the constraints of a heavily patriarchal system (Amory 1994; Caplan 1975; Fuglesang 1994; Hirsch 1998; Mirza and Strobel 1989; Strobel 1979), there are only spotty references to gender relations centuries ago. The silence on this topic inadvertently forwards the idea that Swahili society has always been patriarchal. The debate over “universal sexual asymmetry” that commanded the attention of Western feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Rogers 1978; Sacks 1979; Rosaldo 1980; Ortner and Whitehead 1981; see also Ortner 1996) was raging during the time Margaret Strobel, Pat Caplan, Carol Eastman, and Janet Bujra were doing their groundbreaking research on Swahili gender relations. The argument that men always and everywhere hold dominant positions vis-à-vis women has complex political ramifications but offers good cause for women to unite to fight their oppression. But if, following Ranger (1975), we employ musical performance as a “decoder” of wider social relations and societal transformation, then the data offered by Bakari and others may indicate that Swahili gender relations have undergone a significant shift. We can no longer blindly accept the idea that today’s gender-segregated *ngoma* reflect gender relations of the past, even if they accurately reflect gender relations in contemporary Swahili society. Instead, we must question the tendency to treat the division of Swahili society into two gender-defined subcultures as both a natural and deeply-rooted cultural given rather than a specifically produced historical construct.

In this article, then, I trace transformations in gender relations within Swahili communities of coastal and island Kenya and Tanzania by means of an analysis that explores connections between politics, kinship, economics, and musical performance. The latter constitutes my point of
departure and return. After examining these four social indices in historical context, I seek in good anthropological fashion to piece them together in order to reconstruct Swahili gender relations in a manner that reaches beyond the current static understanding of male and female subcultures perpetuated by Islam. All too often, analyses limited to one aspect of social life or, alternatively, analyses grounded in one time period (often the ambiguous “present”) carelessly project assumptions drawn from their conclusions onto other social domains or other time periods. In widening the lens both in terms of time and topic, I seek to paint with broad strokes a picture of how the positions of Swahili women and men relative to each other have changed over the course of the past five centuries. The evidence I will present is fragmentary but taken as a whole makes a strong case that: 1) there have been shifts in Swahili society from a time when women held more political, social, and economic autonomy than is available to them today; 2) that this has entailed the cultural elaboration of an opposition between “African” and “Arab” designations; 3) that this opposition has a strongly gendered dimension; and 4) that musical practices play a central role in this historical and cultural process.

Swahili Culture and Identities: An Historical Overview

Prior to the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (c. A.D. 570), sailors and traders from India, the Arabian Peninsula, China, and Southeast Asia exploited seasonal monsoon winds to navigate the Indian Ocean for travel to and from East Africa. The coastal strip and its off-lying islands were an integral component of the extensive trade network that subsequently developed, providing ivory, gold, spices, and slaves, in addition to markets for Indian and Middle Eastern products. The exchange of material goods facilitated an exchange of cultural practices and beliefs, most noticeably the Islamic religion. The term “Swahili” (derived from the Arabic sawahil meaning “coasts”) will be used here to refer to the culture region along the East African littoral that exhibits certain commonalities amidst tremendous diversity. The Swahili language (Kiswahili) in its many, varied dialects constitutes a binding force, as do a common value system, shared cultural practices (in particular, shared forms of expressive culture), and belief in Islam. Much paper and ink has been expended in efforts to determine whether or not “the Waswahili” constitute a “legitimate” ethnic group, being that they have never shared a common political or economic structure, nor fit any description of a corporate group, and the geographical area they occupy (from southern Somalia to northern Mozambique) is too extensive and variable to enable the development of feelings of group membership and identity (Allen 1972; 1993; Amory 1994; Arens 1975; Eastman 1971; Mazrui and Shariff 1994; Middleton 1992; Salim 1973; 1976; 1985; Swartz 1979; 1991).

One reason for the confusion lies in a characteristic trait of Swahili
society: the assimilation of newcomers. The international contact resulting from Indian Ocean networks created a cosmopolitan strip of urban maritime trading centers. Out of these grew independent city-states, including Lamu, Pate, Siyu, and Witu in northern Kenya, Malindi, Mombasa, and Vumba in southern Kenya, Tongoni, Kilwa, Lindi, and Mtwara on the Tanzanian coast, and the islands of Zanzibar, Pemba, and Mafia. At various points in history, these city-states offered safe havens to groups external to the coast—people from the Arabian Peninsula as well as from inland regions of Africa. For others, these coastal cities constituted the final African soil they would see before being sent abroad as slaves. Whatever the route and impetus that brought them there, every group of newcomers contributed to the development of Swahili town life and a semblance of unity was wrought out of great diversity.

A crucial aspect of the development of many coastal settlements was the persistent, frequent necessity of integrating groups of... newcomers (wageni) with the established social order within them. One thing, then, which characterized the coastal town was that it institutionalized change introduced by such immigrants and furthermore, the internal structures created to institutionalize such change reflected the fundamental ambivalence and continuity in town life while creating unity out of diversity, one society out of many. [Pouwels 1987:33, emphasis mine]

Ethnicity, along with status and class, became a vehicle for distinguishing the many groups that came to compose coastal towns and for ranking them in terms of how indigenous (wenyeji) or how foreign (wageni) they were perceived to be. “Arabs” (Waarakini) versus “Africans” (Waafrika), people of the coast (watu wa pwani) versus people from inland regions (watu wa bara), freeborn (waungwana) versus those affiliated with slave or servile ancestry (watumwa/washenzi)—these are a few of the ways in which distinctions between established residents, recently settled immigrants, and new arrivals were and continue to be articulated in local discourse.

Seemingly trapped in dual oppositions, both scholars studying Swahili communities and Swahili persons themselves have emphasized one or another pole in relation to reigning power structures and local politics. Colonial policies that discriminated between “natives” and “non-natives,” conferring economic and social benefits on the latter (e.g., exemptions from hut tax and compulsory labor, as well as admittance to educational, political, and other privileges; see Allen 1981b:214; Fair 1996: 150–151; Mazrui and Shariff 1994:36–40; Salim 1973; 1976; 1985), politicized ethnicity and hardened lines of identification. Coastal people who could document Arab ancestry in some manner could elevate themselves to “non-native” status and census figures show that many in fact did so
[Amory 1994; Fair 1994; 1996; Salim 1976]. Colonial-era scholars conceptualized the coast largely in Arab terms due to their inability to reconcile the sophistication and cosmopolitanism of coastal culture—its mosques, stone and coral architecture, women in purdah, elaborate carving and poetic traditions—with their evolutionist, racist frameworks. After independence, however, strong anti-foreigner sentiment developed in the new states as a reaction against colonialism. This environment encouraged coastal individuals to emphasize African ancestries and allegiances and provoked scholars of the 1960s and 1970s to rewrite their histories and identify the African roots of coastal culture [Abdulaziz 1979; Horton 1984; 1987; 1994; Nurse and Spear 1985]:

The Arab-Islamic component did not superimpose itself but acted as a strong cultural stimulus to the development of this urban form of African culture. Past historians have often failed to acknowledge the African initiative in the formation of Swahili culture. To them, it would appear, every aspect of urban living represented remnants of direct Arab presence. In any given period the Arab population element must have been very small, compared to the population of the local inhabitants. Indeed the trend on the Coast has always been the Swahiliization of the Arabs rather than the Arabization of the African Muslim inhabitants, in such facets of culture as language, and mode of living in general. This trend has been so forceful that most Arabs on the Coast, who have settled here within the last two centuries or so, have lost their original culture and language and completely adopted Swahili culture. [Abdulaziz 1979:8]

Dualizing discourses always condense difference and inaccurately represent social reality. In practice, a large variety of finer distinctions is articulated and takes precedence over African/Arab categorizations. The label “African,” for instance, ignores locally significant differences among Swahili communities based on locale and dialect—Wabajuni from the Lamu Archipelago, Waamu from Lamu town, Waunguja from Zanzibar, Wamvita from Mombasa, etc. It also ignores differences between Swahili and other coastal groups such as the Mijikenda [a term encompassing nine separate but closely related communities—Kauma, Giriama, Chonyi, Jibana, Kambe, Ribe Rabai, Duruma, and Digo], whose economic and political associations with coastal Swahili and Arabs stretch back into history [Kusimba 1999; Parkin 1989; 1991; Spear 1978; Willis 1993; Ylvisaker 1979]. Finally, it ignores distinctions between all these groups and non-coastal Africans—recent immigrants from upcountry, many of whom were brought as slaves to work on coastal plantations [Cooper 1977]. Similarly, the term “Arab” overlooks distinctions drawn between Omani Arabs [who came to the coast in large numbers in the early 1800s when the Sultan of
Oman established sovereignty over Zanzibar and the coastal strip; Hadrami Arabs (Washihiri) from South Yemen who came to the coast in two migrations—the first composed largely of Islamic crusaders on jihad in the 1520s (Pouwels 1987:40), the second of peasants, artisans, and merchants escaping chaotic conditions in southern Arabia following 1870 (Pouwels 1987:112–113); and Washirizi, those who claim Shirazi ancestry from Persia.11 These waves of successive migrations from both inside and outside Africa contributed to the aforementioned characteristic of Swahili towns—high rates of immigration, settlement, and assimilation. So, although on one level of local discourse there exist broad, clearly-defined binary oppositions, these readily shatter into a multitude of affiliations and sub-categories. As Michael Herzfeld explains, “The binarism belongs to the code itself; it does not describe the heterogeneous and shifting social world in which people [scholars included] nevertheless use it to establish their own claims to power and distinction” (Herzfeld 1997:14).

The dizzying array of identifying labels allows for considerable negotiation of social positioning in practice, yet this eluded scholars until very recently. Arguing amongst themselves for the essential Arabness or essential Africanness of the Waswahili led scholars down the wrong path in searching for a definitive answer to the question, “Who are the Waswahili?” (Eastman 1971). For some, the solution was to center the pendulum and define the Waswahili as neither one nor the other but rather as mixed offspring of Arab-African intermarriage, thus occupying, structurally, a mediating position between the two ethnic poles (Eastman 1971; 1994; Harries 1964; Prins 1961). In insisting upon an essence—albeit a polyglot essence—this interpretation did not move the discussion radically forward but did, at least, minimize emphasis on irreconcilable difference by conflating the two constitutive elements. That the debate has reached some resolution is more a reflection of strides made in recent social theory than anything else. Drawing on practice theory, discourse theory, and post-structuralism, scholars now emphasize the openness and permeability of coastal identity wherein oppositions constitute complementary elements, not conflicting essences (Amory 1994; Askew 1997; Fair 1996; Willis 1993). As Justin Willis notes,

There is no single “definition” of the Swahili. Different people, in different situations, may appropriate this ethnonym or apply it to others, according to their perception of their own advantage. The Swahili are not a discrete, enduring unit—but neither are the members of any other tribe. (Willis 1993:12)

Understanding Swahili identity as dynamic and always subject to negotiation and external politics frees us from the tautological ramifications of previous constructs. The “elusiveness” of Swahili ethnicity (Salim 1985), then, boils down to a fundamental precept of ethnicity that is simply made
obvious to a greater degree among coastal Swahili, namely, that “internal and external boundaries constantly shift, and ethnicity has to be constantly redefined and reinvented” (Yelvington 1991:165). The Swahili coast, therefore, presents an ideal case study for demonstrating the intangibility of cultural boundaries.

My purpose in this section has been to introduce the reader to the contested domain of Swahili ethnicity, especially the multiple meanings attributed to the labels “Arab” and “African” and how they have changed over time in response to varying pressures and politics. It is to the oftentimes linked opposition of male/female that I turn next.

**Female Circles and Male Lines: Theorizing Swahili Subcultures**

Basic to virtually every discussion of Swahili gender relations is the pervasive theme of gender segregation and gendered subcultures (Amory 1994; Bujra 1977; Caplan 1975; 1982; Eastman 1984a; 1984b; 1988; Fair 1998; Fuglesang 1994; Hirsch 1998; Le Guennec-Coppens 1981; 1983; Mirza and Strobel 1989; Shepherd 1987; Strobel 1979; Swartz 1982; Tanner 1962b). The Arab-African dichotomy haunting scholarship on coastal ethnicity surfaced in the literature on Swahili gender relations and evolved into a gendered one. Pat Caplan (1982) and Carol Eastman (1984b), working in different areas of the Swahili coast, both concluded that Swahili society is characterized by the existence of two contrasting ideologies/subcultures defined primarily on the basis of gender but also related to other identity constructs (e.g., ethnic, religious). Eastman writes, “the fusion of African and Arab cultural influences in northern Swahili society represents the differential and dichotomous influence of men and women in the society such that male : female = waungwana (“freeborn”) : wanawake (“women”) = Arab : African” (Eastman 1988:1), a reworking of the controversial Levi-Straussian thesis that female is to male as nature is to culture (Levi-Strauss 1969a; 1969b; Ortner 1974; 1996). This equation is elaborated by each of these scholars in slightly varied but structurally similar ways. Eastman, using data from urban Mombasa, posits the following (Eastman 1984b: 110; 1988):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waungwana (“freeborn [males]”)</th>
<th>Wanawake (“[slave] women”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabized</td>
<td>Bantuized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literate tradition</td>
<td>Oral tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent on religion [and wives]</td>
<td>Dependent on each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whereas Caplan, who worked in rural Mafia Island, suggests (Caplan 1982: 40):
Despite differing emphases—Eastman on expressive culture and Caplan on modes of production—their schemas overlap with regard to male: Arab: Islam :: female: African: secularism/paganism. Both also maintain that the attendant features of these gender ideologies can be utilized as indicators or measures of Swahili gender relations. For instance, Caplan posits that where one finds a cash economy one is likely to find stronger ties to Islam and a male dominant system.

Carol Campbell and Carol Eastman’s collaborative research on ngoma performance in Mombasa and the Lamu Archipelago further extended this delineation of Swahili subcultures by relating it to principles of musical form. They discerned connections between form and content, specifically between linear dance formations and male ngoma practice and between circular dance formation and female ngoma practice:

Ngoma are closely linked both in song-context and dance-form to Swahili social structure, particularly insofar as they involve the reaffirmation of appropriate gender-role behavior, status, and values. The male line-dance formations and the female circle formations and hip-rotations dance movement reinforce the respective messages of the ngoma songs. (Campbell and Eastman 1984:467–468)

In fact, Campbell and Eastman postulated such a tight congruence between form and content that they were unable to satisfactorily categorize the examples of ngoma that fell outside their interpretive framework. The famous lelemama ngoma researched by Margaret Strobel [1979], despite being well-known throughout the coastal region, received only footnote attention from Campbell and Eastman [Campbell and Eastman 1984:492, n. 4], possibly because as a female line dance it could not be accommodated in their model. They described the mixed-gender msondo ngoma as combining elements typical of male and female performance practice, its aberrance subsequently explained away as “likely to have been derived from ngoma-like performances in other, non-Swahili coastal cultures” (Campbell and Eastman 1984:491).
Equations such as female : male :: African : Arab :: circular performance practice : linear performance practice, which assume a background of male domination and female subordination, abound and have informed studies of Swahili ethnicity, gender, class, and expressive culture. Content to attribute the existence of distinct, gender-specific subcultures to Islam, scholars have not explored their history and development. The silence supports an impossible stasis epitomized by that familiar refrain in narratives throughout the world: “that’s the way it has always been.” But now that we recognize that the reductionism within dualistic models of Swahili ethnicity is incompatible with the politics, histories, and negotiations of everyday life, we must apply that same understanding to Swahili gender constructs.

Swahili communities place great value on musical performance as a form of cultural expression, and scholars place great value on it as a window onto social relations. An essential element in virtually every public and private celebration [weddings, female initiation ceremonies, male circumcision rituals, spirit possession cult activities, and political rallies], the centrality of music to Swahili social life is difficult to dispute. Yet beyond its role in the expression of self or group identity, musical performance constitutes a forum for the public display of patterned differences: status, gender, class, religious devotion, and ethnicity. Like the Greek dance-events described by Cowan (1990), it provides an arena as well as the mechanisms for struggles over prestige, reputation, and position.

Only recently amid growing theoretical concern with the construction and performativity of gender and the production of meaning has an interest in the dynamics between musical performance and gender emerged. The work of Koskoff (1989), Herndon and Ziegler (1990), McClary (1991), George (1993), Sugarman (1997), and Aparicio (1998) among others has greatly expanded our understanding of how music acts as a tool in the shaping of gender relations. Beyond merely calling attention to female forms of expression that had been only hinted at or altogether ignored in the literature, these scholars expose some of the ways in which gender is enacted, experienced, and expressed.

Musical performance constitutes a privileged medium for representing and articulating difference in Swahili society—whether between perceived foreigners and local inhabitants, colonizers and the colonized, or gendered subcultures [Askew 1997; Campbell 1976; 1983; Campbell and Eastman 1984; Eastman 1984a; Fair 1994; 1996; Fargion 1993; Farrell 1980; Franken 1986; 1994; Glassman 1995; Ranger 1975; Strobel 1975; 1979; Topan 1994]. The best known examples are the male beni ngoma, researched by Terence Ranger (1975), and the already-mentioned female lelemama ngoma [Strobel 1975; 1979], often considered the female equivalent of beni [Allen 1981a:241]. Both offered their participants a means of contesting and poking fun at colonial rule while claiming the prestige of creating something new and exciting. Both provided extensive networks that were subsequently employed to mobilize resistance to colonial rule and, in the
case of *lelemama*, to local patriarchy. In *ngoma* performance, participants use song lyrics to transmit gossip, cast public accusations, and stake out political positions in an indirect and socially-sanctioned manner. They gird themselves in preparation for these events, much like soldiers preparing for battle, by observing certain dress codes [recall the uniformed women of *msanja*] that display social rank or group solidarity/membership, learning the lyrics to new songs, composing new lyrics themselves, and recalling to mind the latest items of gossip that made the rounds. In short, they ready themselves physically, mentally, and socially. After an event has taken place, discussions about what transpired dominate local discussions for several days. These events engage people both as individuals and members of a community, and thus provide an analytic link between agents and social processes encapsulating the political, the economic, the social, and the personal in a single “bounded sphere of interaction” [Cowan 1990:4].

As Leroy Vail and Landeg White have pointed out, one can often sing what one cannot say thanks to the protective veil of poetic (or musical) license [Vail and White 1991:56–57]. History bears this out in numerous case studies of Swahili performance that all highlight the imbrication of musical performance and other historical and cultural processes: Margaret Strobel’s elucidation of how women in Mombasa used *ngoma* to articulate resistance to patriarchy; Susan Geiger’s analysis of the essential linkages between women’s *ngoma* networks and the birth of TANU in colonial Tanganyika; Jonathan Glassman’s discussion of the role of *ngoma* in staging rebellion against German rule in coastal Tanganyika; Laura Fair’s research on the use of women’s *ngoma* as vehicles for recasting relations between slave and free in colonial Zanzibar; and my own work on the shifting accommodations made of *ngoma* and *taarab* (“sung poetry”) performance in Tanzanian nationalist projects due to popular demands [Askew 1997; Fair 1994; 1996; Geiger 1987; 1997; Glassman 1995; Strobel 1976; 1979]. These studies demonstrate that musical performances often enable or evoke social change and, in Glassman’s words, constitute “important sites for the contestation of power” [Glassman 1995:163]. *Ngoma* performers past and present have successfully exerted enough pressure through their performances to force realignments of power and status in Swahili society. Performance thus constitutes a potent and potentially destabilizing force and should not be discounted as mere trivial entertainment.

The interactive and highly dynamic nature of *ngoma* performance is very difficult to reconcile with the suggestion by Campbell and Eastman that it serves primarily to demarcate the boundaries between mutually exclusive gendered domains. Performance is both product and producer of social relations. In the eloquent words of Bertold Brecht, “Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.” Although we cannot yet assume so, we can speculate that *ngoma* served as a similarly active force, a vehicle for contesting and negotiating social position in the distant past as it did in the recent past and does in the present. This appears to be one of its fundamental characteristics. We also need to question
the perceived timelessness of Swahili gendered subcultures and attendant assumptions of patriarchy and female subordination. Were gender relations of two, three, and five centuries ago identical to those of today? How can research on musical performance assist in answering this question? And from what other domains of social life can we glean evidence that might assist in fleshing out a viable representation of Swahili gender relations over time?

In reviewing the historical literature on the Swahili coast, I found that four domains offered data relevant to the reconstruction of gender relations: 1) musical performance, 2) politics, 3) kinship and postmarital residence patterns, and 4) economics. I will present the data in this order, and thus begin with a review of changes that have occurred in the performance of ngoma.

**Change in the Musical Domain**

The case of *msanja* with which I began this article—witnessed by myself as a female ngoma yet described a century ago as a mixed-gender ngoma—is not unique. Conflicting descriptions arise in part because with the many, many ngoma on the coast, "Not only are dozens listed under different names (one or two of which might turn out, on closer inspection, to be the same dance), but several that are listed under the same name are in fact quite different dances" (Allen 1981a:242). The contradictory evidence may also reflect the fact that all of the early scholars were men who may not have had access to all-female events. Nevertheless, I will present data in support of James de Vere Allen's speculation that "[w]e can also be reasonably certain that dances that retained the same name over a long period ... in fact evolved and changed considerably during that time" (Allen 1981a:243).

*Mdurenge* is an ngoma from the same region as *msanja*, the Mrima coast (Tanga and Pangani through to Bagamoyo in today's Tanzania). Sources greatly contradict each other in their descriptions of *mdurenge*. The earliest is again the indigenous Swahili ethnographer Bakari who described it in the late 1890s as a mixed-gender circular dance (Bakari 1981: 89-90; Velten 1903:132–133). It is a short description that offers few details but leaves no room for doubt as to who participated:

The *Mdurenge Ngoma*

This requires two *chapuo*, a *vumi*, an *upatu*, and a *zumari*-player.\(^{16}\)

It is danced in pairs of one man and one woman, holding each others' shoulders and circling round the yard. The piper sings:

My instructress' lover loves me,\(^{17}\)

Take a penny—he loves me.

Take twopence—he loves me.

or sings:
What will you do with two [wives]
At Mwavi and Shangani?
Let us set the coast on fire.

The two song texts reinforce the description of mixed-gender participation. Although Kiswahili does not have gendered pronouns making it very difficult to ascertain if a specific gender is being signified, other clues locate the gender of the referents. The term *somo* ("instructress") in the first song is only applicable to women, hence the rest of the song's meaning becomes apparent. And in the second song, although the number "two" is not linked to a specific object, an explanatory footnote in the Velten version of the text indicates that the intended meaning is "two wives."

Sayyid Ali Basakutta, a legendary *oud* player in Mombasa, provided me with another description of *mdurenge* [Basakutta 1987]. He dated it to the early 1900s in southern Kenya and described it as involving only men who danced holding walking canes (*bakora*). The participants would form a circle and two men would dance beside each other as a pair in the middle of the circle, moving forward and backward the length of the circle's diameter. It was only performed in the evening, and dancers wore *kanzu* (long white gowns) and *kofia* (embroidered caps). Because walking canes are associated with senior age, we can be reasonably certain that it was primarily older men who partook in this *ngoma*. One *mdurenge* song says:

```
Mgala simpe fumo      Mgala, don't give him a spear
Nyoka sieke nyumbani  Don't keep a snake in the house
Mlanaye hufinaye      You needn't die with the one you sleep with
Nikwando wanandiani   They are on their way
Asoweza kukupamba     The one who cannot adorn you
Hawezi kukupambua     Also cannot unadorn you
Mambo mtende ni Mungu  Only God makes things happen
Waja ni kuisumbua     You will only trouble yourself
```

Campbell and Eastman describe *mdurenge* as an all-male line dance still being performed in the Lamu archipelago. It is performed by young men for wedding and circumcision celebrations and victory celebrations after sporting events. "The drumming is fast and exciting, and the group of young men in a line sway back and forth and clap their hands . . . [and] there is some tendency for *mdurenge* songs proper to extol the need to beware of the dangers of the sea or of wild animals" [Campbell and Eastman 1984:481]. While we cannot be sure how these varied *mdurenge* performances relate to each other, we can take note that [like *msanja*] the dance appears to have evolved from a mixed-gender to a gender-specific form.

Similar discrepancies arise in descriptions of the *ngoma* called *goma*. According to Bakari, in 1890s Bagamoyo it was an all-male dance. Men
danced in a circle with walking canes \emph{(bakora)} while women looked on. In Lamu, it continues to be performed in similar fashion—elderly men with canes and wearing dark sunglasses—but they dance in straight, sedate, single-file lines \cite{Basakutta1987}.

A local observer in Tanga and Pangani named Bwana Idi, however, described it as performed by men carrying canes \emph{and} also candles \cite{Allen1981a}.

And even though Campbell and Eastman categorize it as a male \emph{ngoma}, Campbell commented in her \citeyear{Campbell1976} dissertation that "women sometimes provide rhythmic accompaniment to slow dances such as \emph{goma} by hitting a long piece of wood with small sticks" \cite{Campbell1976}.

Consider next a discrepancy in descriptions of the famous \emph{beni ngoma}. Ranger described it as a men’s \emph{ngoma} characterized by military style and formations. Bakari also indicated that significant attention was paid to rank and titled officers \emph{as in} military organizations, yet his description of the actual dance differs considerably from Ranger’s:

\begin{quote}
For the dance, some women sit on stools, and the \emph{wakuu} [elders or important persons] and the \emph{waziri} [lit. "ministers"; here titled officers of the dance society] and the male \emph{wakuu} and the members dance. For the dance, men and women are arranged, and they circle around singing. \cite{Bakari1981a}
\end{quote}

Bwana Idi, meanwhile, described \emph{beni} performance in Tanga region as composed of a circle of women with men dancing in the middle \cite{Allen1981a}.

\begin{quote}
And what of \emph{lelemama}, a female line dance by all accounts \cite{Fair1996, Franken1987, Franken1994, Franken1976, Strobel1979}? A potentially opposing account of \emph{lelemama} can be derived from a footnote written by one of the earlier anthropologists to study the coast, A.H.J. Prins. In his discussion of music and dance, Prins included the following footnote:

\begin{quote}
I participated once \citeyear{1957} in the \emph{lele mama} dance, an affair lasting for three hours, and made full notes about it. But this is hardly the place to publish the account. \cite{Prins1961}
\end{quote}

This passage indicates that a man participated in what has elsewhere been described as a strictly female \emph{ngoma}. It is conceivable that the participants—knowing he was interested in their traditions and practices—invited him to join as an exception to the rule. But it nevertheless remains unlikely that, as a colonial-era man committed to a social scientific paradigm that privileged objectivity and authenticity, he would have elected to partake in an all-women’s affair.

Of the seventeen \emph{ngoma} described in detail by Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari as performed in and around 1890s Bagamoyo, only two were described as a strictly female \emph{ngoma}. Five were identified as male \emph{ngoma},
but of these, one (mbenda) was characterized by transvestism with men dancing in female attire, and another (kigoma) included female musical accompaniment on buffalo horns. The remaining ten were performed by both men and women. Another Mswahili, Saada Sheikh, who wrote in 1978 but drew extensively upon archival materials, described ten Zanzibar ngoma of which six were mixed, one was male, and three were female (Sheikh 1978). The combined picture of historical accounts indicates that, contrary to popular opinion, mixed-gender ngoma were more the norm than single-gender ngoma.

Given the available data, there appear to have been two processes by which the prevalence of mixed-gender ngoma gave way to mostly single-gender ngoma. Many of the mixed ngoma that stop appearing in the record apparently dropped out of practice to be replaced by newly introduced single-gender forms. As well, one can also trace historical transformations within specific ngoma from mixed- to single-gender style.

The establishment of Omani control and the second migration of Hadrami Arabs, in the early and late nineteenth century, respectively, brought a stricter approach to the practices of female veiling and gender segregation than was previously the norm. It would therefore be easy to conclude that the decline of mixed-gender performances reflected this increased orthodoxy and leave it at that. This is, in fact, the conclusion that Allen draws (Allen 1981a:243–244). Further research, however, reveals that it relates to broader shifts in gender relations. Changes in the political and economic roles of women and in coastal kinship patterns indicate a more fundamental transformation of Swahili society than has generally been acknowledged.

Change in the Political Domain

After noticing a number of incidental footnotes referring to female Swahili rulers (Pouwels 1987: nn. 69, 70, 71; Gray 1961: n. 6; Stigand 1966: n. 1), I finally succumbed to my growing curiosity (and increasing irritation at the footnote status of such potentially important information) and began to document them. There are a surprisingly large number of references in both oral traditions and historical documents to titled females along the Swahili coast (especially in Portuguese documents from the seventeenth century). The title used for these women is Mwana, which translates alternately as “madam,” “queen,” or “child.” Male authority figures, conversely, are accorded a number of possible titles (Sultan, Bwana, Mwinyi, Jumbe, Mfalme, Diwani), but in general men are remembered by their names (e.g., Yusuf bin Hasan of Mombasa). While scholars admit (grudgingly, if only in footnotes) that these were indeed women in positions of authority, discussions of Swahili politics nonetheless always posit male rulers as the norm. One anthropologist, for example, commenting on “the nature of Swahili kingship,” wrote: “Each of the city states claims to have
had its own ruler and whether they were known as Jumbe, Diwan, Sultan or some more elaborate title as the rulers of Vumba, their manner of election and installation, the ritual which surrounded them, and the basis and extent of their power would, I think, place them as belonging to a particular type” (Wijeyewardene 1959a:6; see also Nicholls 1971; Prins 1961).

Yet even if male rulers predominated, an impressive number of sources document female leaders in Pate, Siyu, Ngumi, Luziwa, Takwa, and Kitau in the Lamu archipelago, in Mombasa on the southern Kenya coast, on the islands of Pemba, Tumbatu, Mafia, and Zanzibar, in various Tanzanian sites that no longer exist, and in Mikindani on the northern Mozambique coast. The ubiquity of these references—spanning the entire coast and at least four centuries—strongly suggests that women in positions of authority were not isolated, localized, or aberrant occurrences. On the contrary, it indicates that the well-documented existence of female rulers on Madagascar (e.g., the infamous Queen Ranavolana, Brown 1995; Sogno 1990; see also Piggott 1941:39) is not atypical of East African politics more generally.

The earliest records of titled females on the Swahili coast identify Mwana Mkisi as the first ruler of Mombasa circa 1500 [Berg 1968:42–44; Pouwels 1987:218, n. 69; Strobel 1979:76].

The existence of a Swahili community at Mombasa antedates the Thenashara Taifa (“Twelve Tribes”) by several centuries. Three or four principal phases in its development—possibly even three quite different cities—are distinguishable. The first is associated with a queen, Mwana Mkisi, whose city was known as Kongowea, sometimes called Gongwa. . . . The bare memory of Mwana Mkisi and her town of Kongowea survives to this day among Mombasa Swahili, probably because it has been immortalized by the oft-quoted poetry of Bwana Muyaka. Old men in the Miji wa Kale or Old Town, however, can point out her town’s traditional location in Mtata (Quarter) Mzizima, somewhat to the north of the present Old Town. (Berg 1968:42–43)

Oral and literary traditions of Mombasa hold that she subsequently transferred authority to a male “Shirazi” ruler, Shehe Mvita, and some analysts relate this history to continuing ethnic identity claims leveled by Mombasa’s self-proclaimed indigenous “Twelve Tribes” communities against what they portray as foreign “Shirazi” immigrants.22

Mwana Mkisi apparently was not the only female monarch in the sixteenth century, if Portuguese sources are to be believed. Records indicate that the Governor of Monomotapa, Francis Bareto, paid a state visit to and bestowed a number of privileges upon a “queen” of Cambo (a now undetermined coastal site) in 1569 (Gray 1961:129). When a Portuguese fleet set out in 1587 to punish Swahili cities that transferred their allegiance to Turkish forces (who had begun laying claim to coastal trade and
tribute), the king of Lamu was deposed and "A wife of the previous King was ceremonially enthroned in his place after she had sworn eternal allegiance to the Portuguese King, and after she had bound herself to pay an annual tribute of 100 crusados" [Strandes 1961:149].

In the seventeenth century, a plethora of references identify female rulers along nearly the entire coast. According to two sources, an unnamed queen in Pemba had by 1686 converted to Christianity and donated her kingdom to the Portuguese crown [Gray 1961:129; Strandes 1961:234–235]. Several more queens of Pemba merit mention in Portuguese sources as well as in oral tradition, namely Mwana Mize binti Muaba, Mwana Fatuma binti Darhash, Mwana Hadiya, and Mwana Aisha [Gray 1961:121]. Additionally, in the Lamu archipelago, there was Mwana Inali of Kitao (a city on Manda Island) who committed suicide rather than suffer defeat at the hands of the people of Pate [Stigand 1966:42], and Asha binti Muhammad, ruler of Ngumi [also in the Lamu archipelago], of whom it is written:

Some few years previous to [the Portuguese destruction of Ngumi] occurred the death of the chieftainess Asha binti Muhammad, or, as she is usually called, Asha Ngumi. She was apparently not only queen in her own little island, but possessed general authority over all settlements as far as Port Durnford. She is reputed to have first supplied iron to the Garreh, who at that time were settled on the Deshek Wama, and were unacquainted with its use. In this way iron spears soon replaced their older weapons made of oryx horns mounted on wooden shafts.

She was succeeded by a man of little merit. . . . The date is probably about A.D. 1686. [Elliot 1925/26:254]

Asha Ngumi is also reputed to have organized a force of 1000 men to launch a successful attack on a neighboring chief at Port Durnford [Elliot 1925/26:338].

A considerable amount of data exists to substantiate the existence of Mwana Mwema, queen of the Wahadimu on the northern part of Zanzibar Island [Bennett 1978:12; Gray 1961:129; 1962:51,83,159–160; 1977:138; Prins 1961:97]. In 1652, when Oman's Yarubi dynasty raided the Portuguese stronghold in Zanzibar, Mwana Mwema quickly transferred her allegiance to Oman. However, the Portuguese emerged victorious and destroyed her town in retaliation. Not long afterwards, the Omanis returned and laid siege to the Portuguese in Mombasa for the period of 1696–1698. The then-reigning queen Fatuma, granddaughter of Mwana Mwema, remained loyal to the Portuguese, possibly in remembrance of what happened to her grandmother. Unfortunately for her, however, the Omanis prevailed, and as punishment they exiled her to Oman from 1700–1709 after which they allowed her to return. Fatuma is the last recorded queen of the Wahadimu.
In eighteenth century Pate, Mwana Khadija ruled from 1764 to 1773, and Mwana Darini, though not a ruler, played a significant role in Pate politics (Freeman-Grenville 1975:265; Nicholls 1971:72; Stigand 1966:61; Tolmacheva 1993:66–68, 76–77, 177, 180, 231–236, 260–265, 304–308, 353–356, 398–402, 445–49). Dating to about this same time are reports of an Arab named Aidarus who traveled to Kua on Mafia Island where he found the ruler to be a Shirazi woman (unnamed in the record). She was succeeded by her daughter, Queen Mwanzuani, who married Aidarus but remained in Kua when he returned to the Hadramaut, where he subsequently died (Freeman-Grenville 1975:299; Saadi 1941:25).

Finally, well into the nineteenth century there were still titled women. On Tumbatu Island, Fatuma binti Ali and Mwana Kazija binti Ngwali ruled in the early part of the century (Gray 1961:129; Ingam 1931:160). In the mid–1800s, the first recorded sheha (“headman,” or in this case “headwoman”) of Tumbatu was a woman named Mwana wa Mwana. By this time, the neighboring Wahadimu were no longer governed by queens but rather by a Mwinyi Mkuu, a titled position that women were not allowed to occupy (Gray 1977:146). Interpreted by some as an Arab diplomatic coup, Mwana wa Mwana was pressured to marry Hassan bin Ahmed, the Mwenyi Mkuu of the Wahadimu (Bennett 1978:12, 40; Gray 1961:163–169). Their son Ali succeeded his father as sheha of Tumbatu but did not succeed his father as Mwinyi Mkuu. Ali’s daughter Fatima succeeded him, and Ali’s granddaughter Mwana Kazija binti Ngwali bin Kombo held the position later on. But in 1865 Tumbatu self-rule ended with the death of Mwinyi Mkuu Hassan bin Ahmed, and subsequent shehas were appointed by the Sultan of Zanzibar (Gray 1977:151).

The latest reference I found for female rulers was: “As late as 1886 Sabani binti Ngumi of mixed Swahili and Makonde blood was recognised as the chieftainess of Mikindani and her daughter was recognised as her successor” (Gray 1961:129). Other assorted references exist without dates for Mwana Aziza (Gray 1961:129; Mulokozi 1982:31) and Mwana Mveni (Pouwels 1987:218, note 69) of Zanzibar, Mwana Masuru of Siyu (Gray 1961:129; Nurse and Spear 1985:72–73), Queen Maryamu of Yumbwa (Pouwels 1987:218, n. 69), and an unnamed queen of Luziwa (Prins 1961:99, n. 391). It may be significant that two of the towns identified as having had female rulers occupied positions of great importance several centuries ago:

According to older accounts Luziwa was once a town of the first importance which ruled the whole coast, but even by the time the Portuguese arrived in East Africa it had sunk into insignificance. The Kings of Malindi traced their descent from the rulers of Luziwa and based upon this fact their claims to rank and power. Quitao is also mentioned as being a town which had formerly dominated the whole coast and as the original home of the Malindi ruling family; this town which is said to have been some eighteen Portuguese miles
north of Malindi has also completely disappeared. (Strandes 1961:218)

Thus, possibly as late as 1886, women rulers existed along the coast (see Appendix). After that point, however, titled political positions remained the exclusive domain of men. While we cannot reconstruct what power if any these women wielded, the mere fact that they are reputed to have existed—as many and as geographically dispersed as they are—is not insignificant. Some scholars dismiss these many references as little more than myth, a narrative ploy to grant agency to local communities faced by the wealth and might of foreign immigrants (Middleton 1992:99). While I accept that groups occupying a less powerful and more marginalized position in relation to other groups often fall subject to a process of feminization, I think the data, in this case, are too many and too diverse to discount. It certainly invites more discussion than the occasional footnote. When related to other indicators of female status such as kinship and residence patterns, economics, and the realm of expressive culture, the decline of women in authoritative positions gives us something else to consider in our evaluation of the changing relations between Swahili women and men.

Change in the Realm of Kinship

The data on Swahili kinship systems vary considerably. Some scholars proclaim them indisputably patrilineal, others argue for a cognatic system, and a few hold out for matriliney (Caplan 1969; 1975; el Zein 1974; Knappert 1979; Landberg 1977; Lienhardt 1968; Middleton 1961; 1992; Nurse and Spear 1985; Prins 1961; Strobel 1979; Tanner 1962a; 1962b). Once again, the terms of discussion illustrate the same desire for wholeness of structure, unambiguous essence, and social stasis that characterized the debate over Swahili ethnicity and, once again, the African-Arab dichotomy makes its appearance. The error, as before, lies in the assumption that one system can or should characterize the entire coastal region and all time periods. As with Swahili ethnic, gendered, and musical identities, the boundaries distinguishing one type of kinship patterning from another are quite fluid. Individuals exploit the variety of options available to them, defining and redefining their kin in relation to the necessities of the moment but within some overarching principles that may or may not always be recognized. As one scholar wrote,

The Swahili kinship system is an ordering of relationships between individuals and not between groups. The statement of relationships between an individual and a group in kinship terms is a secondary characteristic of the system and derives from the relationship between individuals. This prin-
principle of individual responsibility is, I think, the basis of Swahili social behaviour. [Wijeyewardene 1959b:1]

This is not to say, however, that we cannot draw some conclusions as to what those variety of options are now and what they may have been in the past.

The variation in how Waswahili organize their families and communities derives from a number of factors, including region, residence [urban or rural], and social status. Writing in the late colonial period, A.H.J. Prins concluded that "two distinct kinship systems exist; one northern, the other south-central . . . the southern type is definitely more Bantu [read: African], the northern one more Semitic [read: Arab] in character. This, however, does not invalidate the fact that both are Swahili and as such closely akin" [Prins 1958:15]. He reached this conclusion after comparing kinship terminology across the coastal region and finding two significant patterns corresponding to geographical location: Lamu District and the Bajun Islands constituting the "Northern" region, and Mombasa southwards constituting the "Southern" region. That he found the northern region to be more "Semitic" in character coincides with other research from that region. Arab kinship patterns are characterized as patrilineal, whereas Bantu communities range from matrilineal to patrilineal [Prins 1956; 1958].

John Middleton employs two other markers in distinguishing between Swahili kinship patterns: residence [urban vs. rural] and social status. He does not cast his argument in terms of regional difference, but his data are drawn nevertheless from two distinct areas of the coast: Lamu patrician town-dwellers and Hadimu rural communities in Zanzibar [Middleton 1992: chs. 4 and 5]. Patrician families advocate patrilateral parallel-cousin marriage [marriage to father's brother's daughter] as the preferred form of marriage, a strategy for protecting their elite status. This also happens to be the common preference among Arab communities elsewhere in the world [Anderson 1959; Levy 1957; Rosenfeld 1983; Tringham 1964] because it keeps wealth and property within the patrilineage. Middleton found this to be the ideal and common practice for first-born daughters. The vast majority of marriages of women other than first-born daughters within patrician families, however, occur with cross cousins [mother's brother's daughter or father's sister's daughter], who are termed binamu. This is in keeping with data from the rest of the coast [Caplan 1975; Prins 1958:15]. The etymology of the term binamu contrasted with the way it is used today offers a major clue to the shift in ideal and practice. It is derived from the Arabic bint amm [lit. "daughter of paternal uncle"). In Arabic kinship terminology, bint amm is a patrilateral parallel cousin, yet when adopted into Kiswahili its meaning changed to denote cross not parallel cousin, while retaining its signification of the preferred marriage partner [Caplan 1975; Lienhardt 1968; Prins 1961]. Thus, although patrilateral parallel-cousin marriage does occur in a limited portion of marriages within
an elite sector of Lamu society, the data reveal a predilection for cross-cousin marriage and thus support Prins’ statement that “The occurrence of preferential mating of the type to be expected under Arab influence is hardly borne out by the material” (Prins 1961:87).

Another significant aspect of kinship patterns is postmarital residence. While Middleton’s Lamu data indicates patriliny in all of the usual aspects (mode of descent, use of descent names, forms of marriage and succession, group membership), he admits that the common practice of uxorilocal residence distinguishes it from the typical patrilineal model (Middleton 1992:99). He found this preference among patricians and non-patricians alike, which parallels data from Mombasa (Allen 1979:17; Strobel 1979:91). In Mafia, Caplan found that after marriage men were as likely to settle their new families on land owned by their mother’s descent group as on that owned by their father’s descent group (Caplan 1975:39–58), in keeping with the cognatic principles that guide kinship patterns there.

Matrilineal principles are reputed to have influenced political succession in some areas of the coast. In Kilwa, records document that male rulers inherited their position through their maternal kin (Nurse and Spear 1985:76–77) and in the Tanga/Pangani region, “As a general rule, succession was permissible through both males and females . . . the deciding factors were acceptability and wealth” (Wijeyewardene 1959a:6–7). Oral tradition lends support as well. The story of the iconic Swahili folk hero, Fumo Liongo, ends in a dispute over accession to the throne. Writes one historian, “The epic quarrel of Fumo Liongo and his half-brother, Mringwari, . . . centred on the opposition between Islamic patrilineage and an older Bantu tradition of matrilineal inheritance” (Knappert 1979:67–68 in Pougels 1987:28). Middleton, however, argues that the vast majority of cases represent matrification rather than matriliny due to the dearth of recognizable matrilineages (Middleton 1992:99–100).

Even if matrilineages were not common, some scholars have argued that they were not completely absent either (Shepherd 1977). One account claims that control over land outside the village was held by corporate matrilineages and that rights to settlement were determined through matrilineal ties (Nurse and Spear 1985:24, 76). Prins would not rule them out either: “In a description of the typical household, it may be as well to start from this core of descendant-ascendant . . . whether in the patri- or matriline [both occur]” (Prins 1961:79). And regarding inheritance of arable land, Prins argued that patrilineal rules prevail but

Women also belong to this category of owners, and in case a man contracts for some reason an uxorilocal marriage he, as a husband, has rights of usage and building. In some areas, though the husband cannot inherit, children can through their mother, thus making a breach in an alleged patriline of succession to land rights. Where the influence of the Sharia
Islamic law] as against customary law has been strong, a husband too becomes heir to his deceased wife. (Prins 1961: 62)

A final point worthy of consideration is the coast-wide aversion—documented in Kilwa, Mafia, Mombasa, Pangani, and Lamu—to matrilateral parallel-cousin (mother’s sister’s daughter) marriage (Abdulaziz 1979; Caplan 1975; el Zein 1974; Lienhardt 1968; Middleton 1961; Tanner 1962b; 1964). This is a stricture that makes perfect sense within a matrilineal framework, but not necessarily within a patrilineal or even cognatic one. In Kilwa, this is considered tantamount to incest and the rule extends to mother’s sister’s daughter’s daughter as well. There, the only acceptable spouse from the matriline beyond the matrilateral cross cousin is the mother’s half-sister’s daughter if mother and half-sister were born of different women (Lienhardt 1968). This strongly implies that prohibition lies in the link through mothers. Moreover, Shirazi families in Kilwa oppose patrilateral-cousin marriage. They apparently are worried about the possible consequences of such a marriage if it ended in divorce after both fathers died, for in such a case, the former husband would technically be the guardian of his ex-wife and she would have to go live under his protection (Lienhardt 1968). Finally, there is a curious statement from Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari that gives cause for wonder: “If a free man marries a slave woman, their child is a slave; but if a free woman marries a slave man, their child is not a slave, because free birth is matrilineal” (Bakari 1981: 175).27

I will not go so far as to claim that matriliney was a dominant kinship pattern in the Swahili past, but there are enough matrilineal-like practices to undermine easy appraisals of the coast as strictly patrilineal. As with ethnic labels, Swahili individuals draw from a variety of options in familial organization, rules of inheritance, marriage, and residence that are readily exploited in practice. Of particular interest here, however, is that this range of options seems to have narrowed over the past century. Data from Mombasa indicate that a century ago, marriage was discouraged between parallel cousins and encouraged between cross cousins (Abdulaziz 1979). By the 1960s, however, parallel-cousin marriage (primarily patrilateral, but interestingly for the first documented time, matrilateral parallel-cousin marriage albeit with considerably less frequency) was on the rise and occurred at a rate nearly equal to that of cross-cousin marriage (Tanner 1964). The above quote from Prins also indicates change by stating that increased application of Islamic law in certain areas enabled husbands to inherit from their wives, a practice without basis in prior custom. In excavating another domain of social life for information relevant to the historical reconstruction of gender relations, I suggest that the realm of kinship offers additional support for the idea of societal transformation in Swahili gender relations that would not be sufficient if evaluated on its own. When placed alongside shifts already noted in other domains, however, a more
complete picture emerges that will be brought into clearer focus through
an examination of coastal economics.

Change in the Economic Domain

In addition to changes in their political and social positions, Swahili wom-
en experienced change in their economic position. Related perhaps to the
preference for uxorilocal residence discussed above is a complementary
preference for women to own their own houses in town. Edward Steere, a
cleric in late-nineteenth-century Zanzibar, noted (once again in a footnote)
that:

the bride’s father or family should find her a house and that
the husband should go to live with her, not she with him.
(Steere 1890 cited in Strobel 1979:91)

Strobel has argued that ownership of their homes offers women security in
a culture where marital ties are fragile and often sundered and, moreover,
that this “weakened the reality of male dominance” (Strobel 1979:91; see
also Mirza and Strobel 1989:10; 125, nn. 18, 19). She quotes colonial ob-
server Charles New who recognized the leverage this afforded women:

the woman provides house and furniture. In her house she is
queen. Should her husband dare to offend her, she at once
reminds him that she is mistress; that the house and furni-
ture are hers; and that if he is not satisfied with the treat-
ment he receives, he can leave and make room for someone
else. The insulted and indignant man seizes his stick, or his
sword, and flees from the termagant to seek a home else-

In 1977, Janet Bujra noted that an astonishing 86.5% of the houses in
her field site in the Lamu archipelago were owned by women who often
inherited them from their mothers or other female relatives (Bujra 1977:
29–30; Mirza and Strobel 1989:10; see also Strobel 1979:64, 67, 91–93). Men,
conversely, have traditionally owned agricultural plots (mashamba) in
the adjacent countryside. Town homes, often built of stone or coral, have
always been one of the hallmarks of Swahili coastal life. Virtually every
description of Swahili culture makes reference to the stone houses that
define a city as truly “Swahili” and various scholars have analyzed the
structural features of these homes, which facilitate their categorization
as a single type (Allen 1979; Allen and Wilson 1979; Donley 1982, 1987;
Donley-Reid 1990; Middleton 1992). Historian Randall Pouwels argues that
ownership of agricultural land was a necessary counterpart for urban
town-dwellers (Pouwels 1987:77–78). I wish here to draw attention to the
gendered aspects of land tenure and how these have been affected by wider economic shifts along the coast.

The brutal imposition of Portuguese rule in the sixteenth century and their attempts to consolidate their power and break the hold of the Swahili merchant class over the lucrative gold and ivory trades pushed coastal economies into a spiral of decline. The Portuguese exacted stiff tribute in gold from every conquered city-state and instituted a pass system designed to control sea traffic. In the words of Abdul Sheriff, “All these measures helped to kill the goose that had laid the golden egg” (Sheriff 1987:16). The coastal trade in which Swahili had played a crucial role as middlemen revived briefly under the reign of Sultan Seyyid Said bin Sultan who established himself in the early 1800s as ruler of Zanzibar and the coast, but it never fully recovered its previous glory.

In light of the decreased importance of coastal trade, the importance of agricultural production in Swahili economies increased. A corollary of this change is that the economic value of the town houses so often owned by women decreased in comparison to that of the agricultural land so often owned by men. As markers of Swahili identity and havens of security, town houses still retain cultural value. But few can deny that in the move away from an economy based on a combination of trade and agriculture to an economy weighted more heavily toward agriculture and migrant labor, the importance of male land holdings relative to female land holdings has changed. With the focus of economic activity shifting away from trade in the coastal towns to agricultural production in the surrounding rural areas, women were adversely affected. It is for this reason, argues Bujra, that women of her field site were forced to find other means of income, with prostitution a widely chosen option (Bujra 1977).

Conclusion

In his discussion of Swahili ngoma, the late James de Vere Allen noted that in Bakari’s ethnography, there is “a much higher proportion of male-and-female dances than would be found in any list of Swahili dances drawn up today and certainly reflects the freer status of women in the Swahili world in the era before the Zanzibar- and Lamu-based sharifs tightened up the rules of gender segregation” (Allen 1981a:243–244). Ranger analyzed the beni ngoma to examine not only the ngoma itself but how it constituted a “decoder” (Ranger 1975:141) of wider social processes [namely, colonialism, industrialization, secularization, increasing cultural autonomy, and decolonization]. Strobel studied the lelemama ngoma in order to chart its relationship to processes of decolonization and women’s political mobilization. Similarly, I relate change in ngoma practice to broader shifts in Swahili gender relations over several centuries as evidenced in multiple domains of social life. I fully agree with Middleton that “it is a simplification to assume that male and female areas in Swahili society are sepa-
rate from each other: they are complementary and neither has ideological or religious existence or meaning apart from the other" (Middleton 1992: 119). But I also propose that the perceived separation is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back only to the last century.

One would not reach this conclusion by reading the available literature. Because a vaguely conceived Islam is the perceived cause for gender segregation, and because the coast has been predominantly Islamic for more than seven centuries, the conclusion that pervades Swahili studies is that gender segregation has been around a very long time. The attendant assumption is that women have lacked social autonomy and political/economic strength for an equally long time. I hope to have demonstrated that this simply is not so.

The data I present here reveal a marked change in Swahili musical practice from a time when mixed-gender ngoma were the norm to a time—after the establishment of the Omani court in Zanzibar in the 1830s and the arrival of the second wave of Hadrami immigrants in the 1870s—when single-gender genres predominated in ordinary practice. Just as Ranger rejected what could have been read as a relationship of cause and effect between the onslaught of colonialism and the rise of beni on one hand and decolonization accompanied by beni's demise on the other, so too have I tried to look beyond the obvious for processes relating to the rise of separate gender-specific subcultures on the Swahili coast. Having noted the changes from mixed- to single-gender ngoma, I looked to see if any evidence of parallel social processes existed and discovered that major changes were taking place in the political and economic status of women as well as in the domain of kinship. It appears that women of the coast have weathered a significant shift in status. Considered individually, no one criterion—the musical/cultural, political, social, and economic—is strong enough to support the overall argument. Nominal rulership does not necessarily carry with it the exercise of power nor the possession of authority. Matriliney does not automatically translate into greater freedom for women. The ownership of homes means little when men own the productive land. And yet the composite picture is significant. That the status of Swahili women changed in all the respects outlined here indicates societal transformation far broader than musical practice alone. Pouwels notes in passing:

There is strong evidence that women in northern "Shirazi" (pre-1600) towns enjoyed much higher status than what increasingly became their lot in later centuries. Coastal traditions, dating from as far back as the sixteenth century, and Portuguese sources are awash with stories of influential women and queens who played prominent parts in the public affairs of late medieval and early modern towns. They helped oversee important events concerning their kin groups, participated in public celebrations like the "New
Year" ceremonies, attended mosques with their men, and were encouraged to become literate and to study the formal Islamic sciences (elimu). They wielded greater social and economic power than was possible later, apparently having rights of inheritance and the enjoyment of property equal to those enjoyed by men. There also are some scraps of evidence that governing authority in some "Shirazi" locations was inherited through female members of ruling lineages. (Pouwels 1987:28)

Thus as women were denuded of political authority, as the institution of purdah became an integral component of coastal life, as they were denied entrance to local mosques,28 as descent came to be traced patrilineally and inheritance determined by Islamic sharia, and as women lost control over economic resources and access to education, the historical record reveals related developments in the realm of musical practice. Certainly, musical practice should be interpreted within broader socio-cultural processes and can be used as a vehicle for locating those same processes, but can it also be a source of influence on broader social processes? Can it be both product and producer of social relations?

The idea explored earlier, that one can sing what one cannot say, that performers are accorded a certain degree of protection through "poetic license," speaks to the power of performance. In Strobel’s history of the lelemama ngoma, she delineates how lelemama associations radically integrated women from all social classes and strata. Speaking of the first half of this century, she suggests that they “constituted the most important arena of public activity for women at this time” (Strobel 1979:180), offering an avenue for the expression of rebellion against their restricted lives and frustration at their subordinate position, specifically their exclusion from political associations and mosques. Yet Strobel shows that beyond providing a mere outlet for expressing angry, rebellious sentiment, ngoma associations spawned the repoliticization of women. These preexisting organizational structures were transformed into a political movement that successfully lobbied for women’s voting rights in 1958. A similar pattern can be seen in the transformation of many beni dance societies into communal welfare associations (Ranger 1975:101–103).

In her analysis of Tanzanian nationalism, Susan Geiger (1997) explores the ngoma roots of TANU (Tanzanian African National Union) and shows just how reliant early nationalists were on women’s ngoma networks for mobilizing popular support. Ngoma associations offered ready-made vehicles for the distribution and dissemination of political ideas and actions. Their songs communicated political messages, sometimes overtly and other times camouflaged in the subtle wordplay and metaphors typical of the genre. Because these associations nurtured and maintained close affiliations with sister associations in other cities, the wide-ranging networks enabled the spread of nationalist consciousness and breathed life
into a weak and struggling TANU by more than tripling its membership over a six month period.\(^29\)

Victor Turner locates the power for social change in liminal moments. In these periods when structure is suspended, new social configurations can be imagined. Performance is often considered liminal practice, an activity set off from daily affairs, an “extra-ordinary” event. While I prefer to view performance as fully incorporated within and not categorically distinct from ordinary social life, I do not dispute its potential for evoking change. Like Anthony Seeger, I seek to “examine the way music is part of the very construction and interpretation of social and conceptual relationships and processes” (Seeger 1987:xiii–xiv) not merely show how it reflects these relationships and processes. The nature of the relationship between forms of cultural expression and the society that produces them is one of reciprocal determination. The position of women relative to men along the Swahili Coast underwent a striking transformation resulting in a loss of female autonomy. Musical practice offers evidence of this process, but equally importantly, it constitutes a means through which Swahili women have reclaimed and are in the process of reclaiming some of their lost autonomy. Women sing their praises, their sorrows, and their politics. As a mother sings for her daughter the bride, so too do Swahili women sing for themselves:

\[
\text{Hongera mwanangu eh hongera} \\
\text{Nami nihongerehongera} \\
\text{Mama uchungu, Mama uchungu} \\
\text{Nyamara mwanangu} \\
\text{Nyamara mwanangu tumbo la udere linauma mno eh} \\
\text{Oye linauma mno eh}
\]

Congratulations, my child, congratulations!
And I should be congratulated—congratulations!
The bitterness of motherhood
Silence, my child, stop crying
The womb that bore a daughter pains terribly
It pains terribly

NOTES

1 I have pursued research on Swahili performance, identity, and politics since 1987 in Mombasa, Kenya (summer 1987), Mombasa and Zanzibar (summer 1989), Zanzibar (summer 1990), and in Tanga and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania from August 1992 through July 1995. Follow-up visits occurred in 1995, 1997, and 1998. My thanks go to Pauline Peters, Michael Herzfeld, Kenneth George, Bruno Nettl, Tracy Luedke, John Hanson, and Hanan Sabea for reading and offering comments on earlier drafts. Additionally, I thank the Northeast Chap-
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2 *Ngoma* translates as “drum,” “music,” or “dance,” and is also commonly used in reference to performance events that include all of these plus song.

3 Double-reed wind instrument, similar to the oboe.

4 *Dogori* and *Chapuo* are varieties of drums, while *upatu* is a metal tray hit with woven sisal switches.

5 Long male gown, generally white in color.

6 Although I tend to follow J.W.T. Allen’s (1981) translation of Bakari, I will sometimes modify it based on my own translation of the original text presented in Velten 1903. All other translations (i.e., of texts from my own research) are my own.

7 Eileen Ruth Farrell, who did research on *ngoma* in the Kenyan coastal town of Vanga, briefly describes *msanja* as danced in a Digo village near her field site as people “shuffling around in a circle, singing and beating on cow horns with sticks” (Farrell 1980:86).

8 Archaeological research has shown that Islam reached the coast by the ninth century as evidenced by the excavation of mosques dating from that time period; it has been suggested that it may have spread even earlier (See Horton 1987; 1994).

9 One notable exception is Ann Biersteker’s (1991) re-reading of Mwana Kupona’s famous poem on wifely duty in which she locates sarcasm and irony within a discourse on wifely submission to male authority.

10 Tanganyika received its independence in 1961, Kenya in 1962, and Zanzibar in 1963. The union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar occurred in April 1964, four months after the Zanzibar Revolution.


12 In a similar fashion, Franken (1986; 1987) argues for consonance of form and content in upper-class or freeborn (*waungwana*) *ngoma* versus that of lower-class or slave-related (*watwana*) *ngoma*.

13 Perhaps they excluded it from their analysis because it is not frequently performed these days. In 1987, however, I was told that it is still performed on occasion (Basakutta 1987). See also Franken (1987; 1994), who, like Campbell, did her research in the Lamu archipelago but witnessed a performance and therefore lists it as a current *ngoma* form.

14 Campbell (1976) even locates a musical element in funerals, although I have not taken note of this myself.

15 TANU, the Tanganyika African National Union, was the political party that brokered Tanganyika’s independence. It failed to raise a significant membership, however, until women’s *ngoma* networks were tapped.

16 Once again, these are the drums, metal percussive dish, and oboe-like instrument that accompany the *ngoma*. 
A *somo* is a female family member or close friend who instructs a young girl in personal hygiene upon her first menstruation and in sexual matters and how to maintain her husband when she is preparing for marriage.

This is further substantiated in current *ngoma* performed by senior men holding walking canes, e.g. *goma, chama,* and *ndonge/ndongwe* (Basakutta 1987; Campbell 1983; Campbell and Eastman 1984).

One of the songs Basakutta provided is also documented by Campbell and Eastman: *Maua yenu* (Campbell and Eastman 1984:478–480).

It is also known as *banji ngoma* (Allen 1981a:241).

Today the term is restricted to two usages. It can be used to refer to a child irrespective of the child's gender (*mwanang"*, lit. "my child"; *mwanao*, "your child"; *mwanaawe*, "her/his child"), and it also appears as part of exclusively female names (e.g., Mwana Hawa or Mwana Kombo). Any suggestion that the *Mwana* title could have referred to males in the sense of "child of ..." is dismissed by the appearance of decidedly female names and the frequent inclusion of the female marker *binti* (lit. "daughter of . . .") in many of these rulers' names (e.g., Mwana Mize binti Muaba and Mwana Fatuma binti Darhash of Pemba).

Not surprisingly, Mwana Mkisi does not appear in Shirazi traditions of the history of Mombasa, which instead claim Shehe Mvita as the city's founder (Berg 1968:42–44; see also Hichens 1938:3–33; Taylor 1924:80–83).

Mwana Mwema's brother Yusuf ruled in the interim, and according to two sources Fatuma was his daughter (Gray 1977:138; Prins 1961:97).

The last Mwinyi Mkuru was Hassan's son Ahmed bin Muhammad, who died of smallpox in 1873 and whose sisters were not allowed to assume the title of Mwinyi Mkuru.

While there are no dates for the union, it is known that Hassan bin Ahmed was Mwinyi Mkuru when Sultan Said of Oman transferred his capital to Zanzibar in 1828, and that he died in 1865.

There is also a dubious and vague reference to a Mwana Mtoro of Kilwa whose house was used as a fort in the resistance movement against the Portuguese. The original record, however, refers to this "native sultan" as "Manna Mtoro," which was understood by Sir John Gray to be a corruption of "Mwana" (Gray 1952:27).

This, however, contradicts evidence from other parts of the coast, notably Zanzibar, that had a larger percentage of immigrants from Arabia. Writes historian Laura Fair: "Children born of *suria* ('slave concubines') and fathers from the Hadhramout (Yemen) and Oman, however, were rarely scorned because of their mixed heritage. The combination of Islamic law and East African customary practice afforded these children status as the social equals of any children born by the father with a free mother. Each inherited his or her father's ethnicity and social position and had equal rights to inheritance as well" (Fair 1996:150).

Archeological excavations of early mosques display a bi-partitioned structure that has been interpreted to mean one side for women and the other for men (Pouwels 1987:218, n. 70). Today, women are not allowed in mosques and instead fulfill their daily prayer obligations at home.

Geiger (1997, 1987) documents the registration campaign initiated by Bibi Titi Mohamed in March 1955 that increased the existing TANU membership of 2,000 by an additional 5,000 female members by September of that same year.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Sources</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>n.d.</td>
<td>Yumbwa</td>
<td>Pouwels 1987</td>
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<td>n.d.</td>
<td>Luziwa</td>
<td>Prins 1961</td>
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<td>Mwana Mkisi</td>
<td>Early 1500s</td>
<td>Kongowea, Mombasa</td>
<td>Berg 1968, Strobel 1979, Pouwels 1987, Sacleux 1941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1560s</td>
<td>Cambo</td>
<td>Gray 1960</td>
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<td>1680s</td>
<td>Pemba</td>
<td>Gray 1960, Strandes 1961</td>
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<td>1690s–1720s</td>
<td>Zanzibar</td>
<td>Gray 1962, 1977</td>
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<td>Mwana Darini binti Bwana Mkuu bin Abubakar</td>
<td>1670s–1700s</td>
<td>Pate</td>
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<td>Pemba</td>
<td>Gray 1960</td>
</tr>
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<td>17th century</td>
<td>Pemba</td>
<td>Gray 1960</td>
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<td>Mwana Hadiya</td>
<td>17th century</td>
<td>Pemba</td>
<td>Gray 1960</td>
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<td>Mwana Aisha</td>
<td>17th century</td>
<td>Kitoa, on Manda Island (a.k.a. Takwa?)</td>
<td>Stigand 1966, Pouwels 1987</td>
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<td>17th century</td>
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<td>17th century</td>
<td>Ngumi (near Lamu)</td>
<td>Elliot 1925/26</td>
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<td>1764–1773/4</td>
<td>Pate Island</td>
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<td>Early 1800s</td>
<td>Kua, on Mafia Island</td>
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<td>Early 1800s</td>
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<td>Ingram 1931, Gray 1960, Prins 1961</td>
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<td>Tumbatu Island</td>
<td>Bennett 1978, Gray 1960, 1962, Prins 1961</td>
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