POLITICS OF RITUAL SYNCRETISM: ISLAM AMONG THE NON-MUSLIM GIRIAMA OF KENYA

DAVID PARKIN

RITUAL SYNCRETISM AS CULTURAL BORROWING

Leach in his study of the Kachin interpreted disputes over claims to administer ritual or to recite myths as a means whereby politically opposed factions sought to assert their independence or their dominance (Leach, 1954, p. 278). He also showed that in this competition the Kachin made use of ritual and other cultural elements which they had adopted from the Shans and were using for political ends.

There are many examples throughout the world of the process of ‘borrowing’ from neighbouring but contrasting cultures. The result is a constant shifting of cultural boundaries. The ritual and symbolic syncretism described in the works on Melanesian cargo cults and African sectarian and anti-sorcery movements are examples of such cultural borrowing. The borrowing occurs in conditions of political change.

This kind of cultural borrowing may occur in very different situations and so be associated with varying consequences. Such new ritual elements can provide a focus for social and cultural integration but they can also serve as the expression of social and cultural opposition and diversity within a society.

Both these consequences may follow from claims made by members of a society. Sometimes they may also be shown empirically to have occurred. But I concentrate here on instances where cultural borrowing is claimed by members of a society but cannot easily be demonstrated by the anthropologist to have happened. The distinction is analogous to the conventional one between myth and history. Thus, a people may claim that they are now culturally homogeneous but were once culturally diverse, or that they have become culturally diverse but once were homogeneous. Both claims may exist in the same society and be made by different groups. Or either claim may be undisputed in the society, at least temporarily.

I deal here with a situation in which a people claim that their ritual system consists of both indigenous and foreign elements. They are in effect claiming that, in this

"Africa", the Journal of the International African Institute, is published by the Institute, but except where otherwise stated the writers of the articles are responsible for the opinions expressed. Issued quarterly. © International African Institute, 1970. All rights reserved.
ritual sphere, they have 'borrowed' from outside their society and have diversified their cultural forms.

Anthropologists have frequently described ritual syncretism as an ethnographic phenomenon observed by themselves but not claimed as such by the people of a society. But when such claims are made, and hotly disputed or defended, ritual syncretism may be said to be a form of self-professed cultural diversity. As I try to show, its sociological significance is that it facilitates a process of role change, in which persons or groups compete with each other in an attempt to legitimize or reinforce their social positions. Cultural borrowing thus becomes a technique in this process of role change, by which these competing parties draw upon more powerful and possibly legitimizing resources outside their society. The spread of religious belief systems and practices is a possible result of this technique.

The context of borrowing may be of two types: (1) when conflict is between competitors all of whom claim to draw upon outside ritual resources as well as inside ones—I call this undifferentiated borrowing; (2) when conflict is between those who claim to borrow from outside and those who claim to preserve what is indigenous to the society—I call this differentiated borrowing. These claims to borrow are based on ideal standards or cultural idioms current in the society. As such, either may be made by the same competitors at different times: claims based on ideals lend themselves admirably to duplicity (see Bailey, 1969).

**The Interrelations of Political and Ritual Roles**

By viewing ritual and symbolic syncretism as linked to either of these two kinds of claims, the concept of syncretism is employed in a limited attempt at role analysis. My point of departure is anthropologically long established: that an important problem in what is called social change is to understand the interplay between manifestly political and ritual roles.

There seem to be two general conclusions to be drawn from recent work on the changing interrelationship of political and ritual roles:

1. **Ritual is differentiated.** A role which combines both political and ritual aspects in its performances becomes differentiated into separately identifiable, specialized political, and ritual roles as the society moves along the continuum from 'simple' to 'complex'. As political roles become more formalized, less ritual is needed to support and validate them (Southall, 1954, 1959, 1965; Worsley, 1937; Gluckman, 1962). As a general proposition, this seems too well known to need amplification though variations in the process to which it refers are far from fully documented.

2. **Ritual is a resource.** The ritual aspects of political roles may be emphasized or minimized according to context, or according to degree of 'external' political impingement. Leach's study (1954) of the Kachin shift from autocratic gumsa to democratic gumlao and back to gumsa is an example of this: chiefs draw on more ritual resources and are politically more powerful in one system (gumsa) than in the other (gumlao); similarly, it can be suggested that a contemporary figure like Archbishop Makarios has been more powerful, by virtue of his ritual status, during political crises than he otherwise would have been. Ritual status, like the beliefs, practices, myths, and medicines on which it depends, is a resource which can be called upon
to strengthen authority, even in 'modern' society. This view has been suggested to me by a recent, stimulating analysis by Cohen (1969). He shows that the increased ritualization and thereby greater effectiveness of authority in a Hausa quarter in Ibadan is in response to a threat to the quarter's political autonomy.

These two conclusions are not incompatible. The first is valid usually for long, 'historical' periods of time as a response to progressively more efficient technologies; the second may be valid for shorter periods as a response, as in Cohen's example, to threatened disruption of the system of multiplex relations which underlie the society's relatively unchanging technology.

Thus, to use a metaphor, we may say that the second occurs as small episodes in an epic: the episodes are oscillating ritualization and de-ritualization of political roles subsumed in the long-term but inevitable increasing differentiation of political and ritual roles. We may speculate that the gaps between the episodes progressively lengthen until the episodes cease to appear or perhaps take the form of complex ceremonialism of a non-mystical nature.

In attempting to bring together these suggestions ritual syncretism will be analysed as a self-professed form of cultural diversity resting on two basic claims of borrowing, each of which may separately be used in struggles between persons or groups to strengthen their positions or acquire legitimate recognition. These struggles will also be viewed as an example of a long-term differentiation of ritual and political roles, which also encompasses interstitial instances of increased interdependency of ritual and political roles.

There are four main social categories of the Girama of Kenya: these are (1) a few select old men, situated in the ancient 'capital', or kaya, of the communities discussed. In these men is vested in mutual interdependence the 'traditional' ritual and authority roles, which still have occasional political relevance today. The ritual aspects of their roles are emphasized during political crises. Ritual is then being used as a supporting resource. These old men claim to be, and are commonly regarded as, permanent custodians of traditional ritual, lore, and wisdom. They do not claim to borrow 'alien' ritual resources. They contrast strikingly with (2) a small number of younger, enterprising farmers, who are economically successful but are not looked up to in ritual matters. They cannot divine, or mediate with the ancestors, or provide prophylaxis against sorcery. Indeed, their emergence seems to have been paralleled by (3) an increase in the number of ritual practitioners who can do such things and on whom the entrepreneurs themselves may claim to depend. As in any profession, increase in numbers may result in competition, and it does seem that over the past half-century or so the most successful ritual practitioners to emerge from such competition are those who claim to have borrowed and combined Islamic elements in their ritual. At the same time the society which I describe has not become Muslim but adheres strongly to much of its traditional religion, some aspects of which have been particularly emphasized in recent years.

While wider-scale political roles have become much more dependent on the modern state system, there are at the day-to-day local group level, (4) prominent homestead heads who operate in traditional ritual contexts and continue to be politically significant. They even obtrude, in revivalist fashion, into modern politics, using not Islamic but traditional ritual techniques as important sources of their influence. They
nominally defer to the superior wisdom of elders of the first category, who are of the highest age grade (rika). In short, role and group differentiation are reflected in the use and non-use of distinctive symbols and ritual procedures, some claimed to be of Islamic but most claimed to be of traditional origin. The symbols and ritual procedures involve medicines, spells, charms, possession spirits, and particular styles of performance.

Islamic ritual apparatus and procedure are thus 'peripheral' to those of the central, 'indigenous' religion (see Lewis, 1966). The Giriama claim to have adopted these Islamic features: in specific cases of cure and sorcery, they may be regarded as more effective; 'Islamic' spirits are among the most powerful in possessing people; the 'language' of spirit mediums is frequently called 'Arabic'; pages of the Koran make potent medicines. For these purposes the people say that Islam sometimes has more 'power' than their own religion. I describe the conditions under which this peripheral borrowing seems to have occurred.

GIRIAMA SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Of the Mijikenda people of the Kenya coastal hinterland, the Giriama are often cited as those who most 'resisted' incorporation in the cash economy and refrained from labour migration. The Mijikenda used to be known as Nyika, a term that is now held in disrepute owing to its connotation of backwardness (the KiSwahili, nyika, means 'bush'). Mijikenda means 'nine towns' or 'tribes' in Swahili and refers to a single ethnic group of sub-tribes whose cultural affinities are strong and whose languages are mutually intelligible. There has been considerable intermigration among the sub-tribes and assimilation of both individuals and groups has occurred. At any given point in time membership of a sub-tribe may be defined by reference to clan affiliation and residence. Land boundaries are frequently disputed, even nowadays, between representatives of contiguous sub-tribes. On such occasions claims for membership in one or other of the disputing sub-tribes have to be made by persons who are otherwise marginally placed, both residentially and socially.

The Giriama number probably over 150,000. The Digo are another large sub-tribe who probably number well over 50,000. The other seven sub-tribes, who include the Chonyi, Rabai, Kauma, Jibana, Ribe, Kambe, and Duruma, together number about 50,000. The Mijikenda are said to originate from a semi-legendary settlement to the north, possibly on the mainland north of Lamu, called Shungwaya. It is difficult to trace their interrelations before the end of the last century, since when documents show in general terms the several ways in which they responded to British administration and to Arab and Swahili contacts.

I confine most of my discussion to the area around the trading centre of Kaloleni, some thirty-five miles north-west of Mombasa and twenty-five miles inland from the coast. Kaloleni is nowadays fully within the coastal coconut-palm belt. The Giriama have no villages in the sense of nucleated settlements of homesteads. Any boundaries drawn round an area of study must be artificial. Kaloleni location has

1 An interesting case-study of the believed ritual power of Islamic symbols, charms, and medicines among Swahili occurs in Prins, 1969.
2 Except where I state that my sources are exclusively oral life histories, references to past events occur in the Kilifi District Political Records, and the Kilifi District Annual Reports, dating from early this century. Where possible I have cross-checked documentary information with oral statements.
POLITICS OF RITUAL SYNCRETISM

some 11,000 inhabitants. Kaloleni trading centre has less than a hundred, while the homestead in which I lived has eleven. The individual homestead, the trading centre and the wider location and units beyond it provide contexts for clusters of social relationships. The homestead is the basic economic unit of production, consumption, and inheritance. The trading centre is the primary source of revenue and links the members of a homestead to the various middlemen who come from or trade in Mombasa. And the physically wider location, extending to the district, and ultimately to all Mijikenda, provides the routes along which relatives come on visits, sons leave in search of labour migration, and national political consciousness is fanned.

We may start with the wider political community. In 1873 slavery was abolished and the nearby subtribe of Rabai was swelled by large numbers of freed and runaway slaves. They were ostensibly Muslim, bringing with them not only non-‘pagan’ dress but also a marked sense of cultural superiority. Called Swahili, they provided the impetus for the development of trade in copra in the area, while the indigenous Rabai continued in their increasingly lucrative trade of palm wine. Palm wine was carried inland north-westwards to where many Giriama then lived. In exchange for palm wine the Giriama gave the Rabai grain. The Giriama practised shifting cultivation which necessitated movement about every five years. Another type of movement, for which the Giriama are renowned, was the extensive migration caused by successive wars with a Masai-like group called Kwavi and the Galla. At the turn of the last century Kwavi were still raiding settlements within twenty miles of the coast. From the hinterland the Giriama also traded in ivory with the Mambrui and Mazrui Arabs. Though they were subject to periodic famines, the Giriama showed a resilient self-sufficiency in both subsistence and trading. Occupying a vast tract of land, they were mobile and difficult for either Arabs or British to subdue. Their self-sufficiency in trade, the ease with which they moved, and their defensive skills enabled them to resist integration with coastal communities.

The southern neighbours of Giriama, the Rabai, were not only obliged to settle in order to grow coconut palms in abundance, they also reached a very high density of population long before the Giriama, certainly by the turn of the century. They were among the first early in the century to respond to the call for labour by the British administration, the Imperial British East Africa Company, and the various coastal Swahili and Arab estate owners. In Rabai certain Swahili groups, principally the Jomvu, established control over the copra trade. The Rabai answered the challenge and by about the beginning of the First World War had themselves begun selling copra or whole coconuts to dealers in Mombasa. These Mombasa dealers were, and still are, Muslims, and, from an investigation of life histories, it seems clear that at least some Rabai middlemen found it convenient to adopt Islam as a means of sanctifying and strengthening relations with the dealers. Nowadays a number of Rabai and Giriama refer to this as a time when people recognized the frequent superiority of Islam over their traditional religion in creating ‘luck’ and combating misfortune in trade, health, and personal affairs. They make such statements in explanation of the fact that, today, some of their medicines, spells, charms, and spirits are of Islamic as well as Rabai origin. In parenthesis, it should be noted that the claim of Islamic ritual superiority does not apply in all empirical situations, a problem I hope to discuss elsewhere.
By contrast the Giriama refused either to settle or to supply their labour. In 1914 there was a Giriama uprising against the British, the main cause of which seemed to be the demand that they should supply labour and pay long-overdue taxes. The zeal of one particular British District Officer probably sparked off the revolt. The Giriama were defeated. Until their defeat, they seem to have repudiated any acceptance of Islam. While settled peoples like the Rabai, depending for a livelihood on coconut palms for their trade in wine and copra, accepted at least certain attributes of Islamic ritual, the Giriama had persisted in a belief in the efficacy of their own traditional ritual.

Consideration of ritual among Giriama is very important for understanding their military mobilization during the revolt and their political system prior to their defeat. A so-called prophetess and a male assistant, nowadays said to be a mother’s brother, utilized a whole range of Giriama beliefs and practices in an attempt to communicate the spirit of militancy over a wide area. It can also be speculated that during the nineteenth-century wars with Kwavi and Galla, the Giriama age-set system provided a means of military organization. But by 1914 this does not appear to have been significant.

Both during the nineteenth century and, apparently, until 1914, a select group of elders, who lived away from the rest of the population in the kaya or capital, would administer viraho or ‘oaths of ordeal’, by which whole local groups of men would pledge themselves to whatever was required of them: whether this was a straight battle with Kwavi or Galla, or whether it was participation in the Giriama Rising of 1914.

Until their defeat by the British in 1914, Giriama voluntarily remained outside the external economy characterized by labour migration to Mombasa and estates on the coast. Land had no exchange value, and their trade was restricted in scale, primarily consisting of grain given in exchange for palm wine which was brought to them by the settled Rabai, to the south. Rabai by this time not only used cash in many everyday transactions but also used it in bridewealth and in purchasing land and coconut palms. The contrast between Giriama and Rabai was striking. The Rabai interacted frequently with Swahili and Arabs, who lived among them. The Giriama had only the loosest of contacts with these groups.

From 1914 the situation changed. Now effectively subjugated by the British, many Giriama had little choice but to submit themselves or their sons as labourers in the Public Works Department or on plantations. With the First World War a number found themselves conscripted. The political leaders of the Giriama Rising had been imprisoned and few Giriama remained with either the will or influence to organize further resistance. Many now drifted into the region of the coastal palm belt where the population swelled very quickly. News soon spread of the advantages of coconut palms as a source of food as well as of wine, and even in Kaloleni, which up till the mid-twenties was still a cattle-grazing area of low population density, people began planting coconut palms. Under favourable conditions a palm bears coconuts within five years of being planted. In a short while palms had displaced cattle and other livestock as the primary form of subsistence in Kaloleni and the population had also increased. By the mid thirties copra was being bought in large quantities by the Hindu traders. By the thirties orange and other citrus trees had also been planted,
and in the forties cashew nut trees were being planted as the new lucrative cash crop. Thus, from the late twenties and thirties onwards Kaloleni farmers saw the value of planting trees for purposes other than mere subsistence. Wealth differences began slowly to emerge as some enterprising farmers accumulated more trees than others.

Giriama say that this is the point at which sorcery became rife. This is explained by the belief, expressed in similar situations in many parts of Africa, that a man who seeks to accumulate and possess trees in his own name runs a dire risk of exposing himself to the sorcery of jealous neighbours and relatives. There is no evidence to suggest that the rate of sorcery accusations did in fact increase. An examination of life histories does suggest, however, that (1) over-all increased wealth and the greater use of cash instead of kind in many transactions, brought about more opportunities in the professions of diviner and medicine man, as Goody has suggested may have happened among Ashanti (Goody, 1957), and (2) in the ensuing competition for prestige and clientele, diviners and medicine men claimed, and still do claim, to include Islamic skills and resources in their practice alongside ‘traditional’ Giriama ones. That is to say, they claim to have increased the efficacy of their practice.

Among Rabai many years earlier this apparent diffusion of Islamic charms and magic was easily possible since both Swahili and Arabs actually lived among them. Indeed, the initial economic dominance of these Muslims seemed to have become associated by some non-Muslim Rabai as superiority in ritual matters also. But among the Giriama of Kaloleni, co-residence and interaction with Muslims on this scale was absent. Ever since the proclamation of the East African Protectorate in 1895, which included under Arab administration the Kenya coastal strip up to a distance of ten miles inland, Giriama had known that Arabs and Swahili had political and economic power second only to the British. But they were never tied to them economically as were the Rabai. Even when they entered the external economy more extensively in the thirties, the middlemen with whom they dealt were Hindu Indians rather than Arabs, the reverse of the situation for Rabai. Certainly there were many individual contacts with Arabs and Swahili but these generally did not involve co-residence, competition for land, or even direct business relationships. Giriama did not therefore become Muslim, except for a very small number who worked for long periods in Muslim coastal communities. Yet it did apparently become important for persons in various spheres of activity to appeal to the believed, sometimes superior, ritual efficacy of Islamic medicines, spells, and charms.

Apart from the non-Giriama traders, Kaloleni society from the thirties onwards could be said to become increasingly divided into three categories, referred to earlier: the enterprising farmers, some of whom had had schooling and had been employed in Mombasa; diviners and medicine men, a distinction I shall explain, whose increase and specialization seems due to increased wealth in the society generally, though only a few made much money; and the bulk of the population who lived at subsistence level, but from whom were drawn the diviners and medicine men. These three categories emerged slowly. Since the Second World War they seem to have become more sharply delineated. For the moment I suspend consideration of the fourth category, the kaya elders.

The peripheral borrowing of Islamic ritual resources appears to have facilitated
further the differentiation and specialization of these three categories. I first distinguish within the second category between the diviner (muganga wa mburuga) and the medicine man (muganga wa mkoba). Diviners are in fact spirit mediums, the term which I shall use henceforth in this article. That is, they invoke their powers of divination by summoning and then questioning ‘their’ spirits. To become a spirit medium a person is first involuntarily possessed by one or usually more spirits and then must fulfil certain of the spirits’ demands. Only about one man to 200 women is possessed. Most of the women are possessed at special dances held to placate the spirits of male and female mediums. Men are never, to my knowledge, possessed at a dance, but are afflicted on private rather than public occasions. Most of the few men reported ever to have been possessed in the Kaloleni area went on to become mediums. By contrast, of the many women possessed, only a few become mediums. Female spirit mediums appear to be only a little more numerous than male mediums. Some of the mediums were originally possessed by the reputedly very powerful ‘Arabic’ or ‘Koranic’ spirits and so call themselves and are called Muslims.

A spirit medium differs in three important respects from a medicine man or ‘doctor’, as I shall now call him. First, a medium can only divine or diagnose, or ‘recommend’ a doctor, but cannot effect cures himself. Second, the medium charges only a fixed fee of E.A. 0/50 cts. (about sixpence sterling) and never more. A doctor charges according to his reputation and according to the nature and duration of the work at hand, from a few shillings to several hundreds. Third, a doctor is never a woman. There are a few rare instances of male mediums ‘becoming’ doctors. Giriama women do not question but tacitly accept this effective restriction on the extent of their ritual prowess. In this connection it should be noted that Giriama women are not normally believed to know the practice of sorcery, and are almost never accused of it. The concept of evil eye, or witchcraft, does not exist among Giriama. The differences between mediums and doctors and the implications of these differences may be summarized in a single sentence: mediums are subordinate to doctors and men surmount the hierarchy of ritual effectiveness and specialization.

Doctors do not usually become possessed by spirits. They simply buy their knowledge. Capital is needed to become a doctor, not only in order to buy the knowledge but also to acquire the equipment and apparatus which is often considerable. Another form of expenditure is that necessitated by the widespread travelling which doctors make in search of the leaves and roots of specially designated trees and bushes. Some men leave for distant parts of Giriama land, usually well inland, for weeks, even months on end. Alternatively, they go to Mombasa or other coastal towns and buy medicines, spells, and charms from Muslims there. The successful ones more than recoup such expenditure. Indeed, a few doctors are quite wealthy. The important point is that a number of doctors themselves profess to be Muslim, or claim that many of the medicines, spells, and charms they acquire are of Islamic origin and therefore powerful. Indeed, it is generally said that much knowledge pertaining to medicine, the use of leaves and roots, the reading of remedies and prophesies from the Koran, and some of the more powerful spirits, came to the Giriama from the Arabs via the Swahili and Digo. Traditional Giriama medicines and rites remain of central importance in most contexts. The point I wish to make here is that, in some cases of spirit possession, divination, and cure, there is acceptance of the superior
ritual efficacy of Islam among a people who have persistently rejected formal and widespread conversion to Islam.

Just as the limited adoption of such Islamic features can help establish a spirit medium or doctor or improve his standing, so a number of enterprising farmers and a few Giriama shopkeepers and traders claim to be affected by the irresistible power and will of 'Arabic' (or 'Koranic' or 'Islamic') spirits (pepo ya kiarabu; ya kikurani; ya kisamia).

In contrast to those men and women who become mediums when possessed, the enterprising farmers and traders, and certain other persons whom I cannot discuss here, succumb to the demands of the spirits possessing them and become Muslim. This possession takes the form of an illness which, after diagnosis by a medium, obliges the afflicted man to adopt Islam and to obey the ritual prohibitions on food and drink. Failure to observe these prohibitions results in the man's eventual death. I call such victims 'therapeutic' Muslims because they are seen to be specifically bound to Islam for the sake of their health. Some Giriama shrewdly point out that, in becoming a 'therapeutic' Muslim, however involuntarily, a man can abstain with moral impunity from drinking alcohol (palm wine is drunk daily by non-Muslim Giriama) and from eating unblessed food with his fellows. The chances, presumed high for an enterprising farmer or trader, of being poisoned by a jealous neighbour or relative are thereby lessened and no one will ensorcell the man for breach of the norms of commensality. In spite of such observations people deny that a man can successfully feign possession in order to escape commensal obligations. The medium, at least, will see through the pretence. Successful pretence or not, economically successful Giriama do frequently express fear of eating the food and drink offered to them by neighbours, friends, and relatives, lest they be poisoned, and do acknowledge the usefulness of being freed of this almost daily obligation by becoming Muslim. The usefulness of involuntary or obligatory conversion to Islam in a society of decided non-Muslims, is to eliminate or lessen charges of 'treachery'.

It is perhaps clear that these various appeals to the use of Islam by mediums, doctors, and enterprising men help persons in these categories to further their own increasingly specialized pursuits and serve to mark them off diacritically from the category of ordinary people who are neither ritually powerful nor economically enterprising. There has to be a means by which people can believe that such claims to use Islam are legitimate. There has to be a referee whose judgement is commonly acceptable, even if it is tacit and assumed in most cases, and consists essentially of non-disputation of the claims.

The referee among Kaloleni Giriama takes the form of a local Swahili Sheikh, who represents the few Swahili in the area and organizes its one Friday mosque. A man who claims to be a 'therapeutic' Muslim or to incorporate Islamic elements in his ritual practice is supported in his claims if he is seen to associate at least occasionally with the Sheikh or with the Sheikh's Swahili followers. Only a few of the Giriama doctors and diviners who make use of Islam actually claim to be Muslim. They associate with the Sheikh and other Swahili on an inter-personal basis not by going to the mosque but by inviting them to their homesteads. The occasions which are

---

1 The term 'Swahili' here refers to long-established Muslim Mijikenda families as well as coastal non-Mijikenda Muslims.
most likely to publicize this relationship to a large number of people at once are funerals, wakes, and other events involving the sacrifice of cattle and goats. The main tasks of the Sheikh and other Swahili who are called to these ceremonies are to sacrifice the beasts and to read from the Koran. This enables the Muslim Giriama, including certain spirit mediums, doctors, ‘therapeutic’ and other Muslims, to participate in the feasting, since the food is now blessed and therefore safe. Commensality is thus extended to all categories. This is one ‘function’ of these ceremonies, especially funerals and wakes.

A second ‘function’ is to provide a basic mechanism by which land and trees are accumulated, wealth differences accrue, and differentiation and specialization of the social categories occur. By seeming to become indispensable in these centrally important ceremonies, the presence and role of the Sheikh and Swahili virtually ensure that the adoption of Islamic elements continues to play a significant part in this process of differentiation and specialization.

A Giriama first funeral includes the burial and lasts seven days and nights. A wake, or second funeral, held to terminate the period of mourning and to allocate the heritable property and widows, lasts three days and nights. It follows the first funeral after not less than one and not normally more than four months. A homestead head’s prestige is definitely measured by the amount of palm wine and meat he can provide on these occasions. For poorer men, that is the majority, this essential provision of ample food and drink is difficult. There are cases of men selling valuable coconut palms in order to raise the cash for these goods. Correspondingly, the few enterprising farmers and traders are in the best position to purchase the coconut palms and so to expand their holdings. It is no coincidence that these same enterprising farmers and traders are by far the most lavish in the provision of wine and meat at sacrifices concerning members of their own homesteads, or even of relatives living in separate homesteads. In other words, this conspicuously competitive activity encourages the circulation of cash by stimulating the palm-wine trade and the sale and purchase of coconut palms, other trees, and livestock. These conditions facilitate the accumulation of wealth by certain key individuals. Lavish ceremonies of this scale have the additional function of maintaining a following, who may well prove to be of support during disputes over tree or land ownership. In a society where there is still no official government land and tree registration, followings of this kind are frequently needed by the few accumulators of land and trees whose expanding property is subject to constant claims.

Those Swahili, especially the Sheikh, who are called upon to sacrifice beasts occupy an intermediary role between the numerically dominant Giriama and the few Swahili in the area. Giriama rights to their land and trees have for many years been safeguarded from Swahili encroachments. Kaloleni is not part of the area included in the former East African Protectorate. It is commonly assumed that Swahili throughout the coastal area dominated the Mijikenda. But in Kaloleni, Swahili could only offer the benefits of marginal trading facilities and were unable to alter the basic self-sufficiency of Giriama. They did not dominate and were in Kaloleni much more on sufferance than in areas such as Rabai, where economic interdependence seems to have been greater.

In Kaloleni, Hindu Indians controlled the most profitable trade as far as local
Giriama were concerned. The few Swahili in the location provided less essential trading services. There are a number of Swahili sub-groups. In Kaloleni trading centre itself, there are six Jomvu (one of the so-called twelve Swahili tribes) families who have their own fish market stalls rented from a wealthy Giriama. Every Friday at least some of the men attend the mosque and sometimes speak for many hours with the Kaloleni Sheikh. The Sheikh is also of the Jomvu Swahili tribe. Like most Swahili in the area, the Jomvu regard their true homes as in and around Mombasa. Yet, during Ramadhan, they bring any wives and children temporarily resident in Mombasa to Kaloleni.

The Kaloleni Sheikh is fully accepted by Giriama, even though few accept his religion. He, or persons delegated by him, sacrifice beasts at Giriama ceremonies and not only thereby uphold the institution of what one might call ‘therapeutic’ Islam, but, by extension, also enable enterprising Giriama to capitalize on the extravagance entailed in these ceremonies. Just as allegedly Islamic charms, magic, and even the Koran are regarded as having become very important in divination and therapy, so the role of the Sheikh has become integrated in Giriama ritual life. Giriama can hardly accept the Sheikh and his deputies and not recognize the right of the Jomvu and other Swahili to live and work in the area. The position of the latter, who include other traders and farmers holding land in customary leasehold, is thus made secure by his presence and role. At the mosque he discusses with the Swahili community problems affecting them within and outside Kaloleni. He is in contact with other Swahili notables in other areas, some of whom occasionally pass through Kaloleni by bus. There is thus a mutually advantageous relationship between Giriama and Swahili: the Swahili are seen to set the seal of legitimacy on the use by Giriama of Islamic ritual resources; while, in return, the Giriama give them the right to live, trade, and even proselytize among them.

This process by which a non-Muslim people have adopted certain Islamic ritual techniques and beliefs has facilitated economic and political changes in their own society by: (1) establishing or increasing the legitimacy of, on the one hand, the ritual roles of spirit medium and doctor, and, on the other hand, the economic role of enterprising farmer; and (2) diacritically marking off these two categories from that of the more numerous homestead heads who have neither ritual nor economic power; and thus (3) specializing the sources of local-level political influence: with enterprising farmers moving into a position of greater control over the society, followed by spirit mediums and, to a greater extent, doctors who are indirectly dependent on their entrepreneurial activities but who themselves provide ‘essential’ ritual services for the total population.

To repeat the metaphor introduced earlier in the article, this is the epic of greater political and ritual role differentiation, in which, ultimately perhaps, the enterprising farmers and traders will play dominant political roles without the need or possibility of ritual support (see Southall, 1965, p. 125). The epic contrasts with the episodes of ritualization of authority, an instance of which I now describe. From the late fifties onwards, political nationalism in the wider Kenya society brought rapid changes in power relations between non-Muslim Africans, Swahili, Arabs, Indians, and Europeans. The changes were reflected in apparent changes in the religious syncretism with which Giriama and other Mijikenda operate. In the example discussed
below, the ritual power of Islam was for a time challenged by men proclaiming the virtues in one situation of ‘traditional’ Giriama religion, and in another situation of ‘modern’ Christianity. Political roles were temporarily highly ritualized. They advertised but did not appear immediately to bring about radical changes in the local-level ritual, political and economic systems (compare Bohannan, 1958).

**MODERN NATIONALISM**

Government district reports of the last two generations tell of the great hostility felt by Mijikenda for Swahili and Arabs. This is a generalization properly applying only to those Mijikenda who live in the coastal strip formerly under Arab administration. These Mijikenda are commonly the so-called squatters whose rights to land and trees were disputed. The Giriama of Kaloleni live well outside this strip and have inalienable rights to land and trees. The object of their hostility since the thirties has been the Hindu Indian community, referred to locally as Banyani.

Demands for political independence grew strong in the 1950s. Coastal Mijikenda directed their protests against Arab domination as well as British administration. The Swahili fell rather uneasily into an intermediary category. Many Swahili, including the Jomvu of Kaloleni, called themselves ‘Arabs’ before Kenya’s independence in 1963, though now the Kaloleni Jomvu and other Swahili publicly proclaim themselves to be ‘African’.

It was not until about 1958 that many Giriama in Kaloleni openly participated in the nationalist movement. Though the true objects of their resentment might have been Hindu Indian traders, they borrowed the political slogans and objectives of the coastal politicians and condemned Arab domination on the coast and Swahili exclusiveness. The militancy of the coastal movement became directed at British administration, Arab/Swahili domination and exclusiveness and, to a lesser extent somewhat later, Hindu Indian control of commerce. This resulted in a restressing of traditional Mijikenda customs and beliefs. This harking back to tribal culture is, of course, common in nationalist movements. It did not, however, result in a rejection in Kaloleni either of the borrowed Islamic beliefs and techniques or of the Sheikh and other Swahili.

However, from 1958 onwards there was a considerable increase in the activities of elders in the traditional kaya or capitals of Giriama and of other Mijikenda peoples. These, it will be remembered, are the fourth category of persons isolated for analysis. The revival of the traditional elders, and of their rights to administer the old Giriama ‘oaths’ were undoubtedly tied up with the increased activities of the nationalist movement. In Kaloleni in 1958 the then Kilihi African People’s Union held stormy meetings, while in the same year Giriama elders from the kaya started collecting money in Kaloleni and other trading centres to build a new kaya to replace that which had been burned down in the Giriama Rising of 1914. The elders planned to hold a large festival in Kaloleni to celebrate the ‘traditional’ Giriama New Year. The sentiment of tribal nationalism was now encouraged by young, educated, and dynamic Mijikenda politicians but was expressed through the kaya and other council elders. Such roles had lain effectively dormant for years. Now they were seen to be supported again by traditional ritual powers such as the right to administer certain ‘oaths’, and to hold rainmaking and other ceremonies.
POLITICS OF RITUAL SYNCRETISM

The awakening of Mijikenda to nationalism in the wider sense did draw attention to their economic subjection to Hindu Indians and Arabs and to their ‘backwardness’ compared with up-country people. Indeed, this was one of the differences between them and certain dominant up-country people such as Kikuyu and Luo which underlay the bitter opposition of KADU to KANU, the two political parties at Kenya’s independence: the large and powerful Kikuyu and Luo made up KANU, while the smaller, less powerful peoples, including Mijikenda, made up KADU. While the nationalist movement brought about a revival of certain traditional roles, it also exposed strains and cleavages in the society, not only between Arab/Swahili/Indian and Mijikenda, but also among Mijikenda themselves, between tribes and within them.

It can be suggested that nationalist movements bring about an emphatic redefinition of leadership roles, and, in so doing, throw into relief the greatest sources of political influence. For example, wealth may provide one source of influence, ritual expertise another, and education yet another. Each source of influence may be harnessed in the ‘common struggle’. Yet persons without such influence are thereby more marked out as disadvantaged than they would be at other times. I have argued elsewhere that anti-sorcery movements are convenient cultural idioms in which such differences of influence and potential influence are advertised (Parkin, 1968).

During the nationalist movement and also after independence, a few anti-sorcery movements sprang up among Mijikenda, all headed by Mijikenda self-styled Muslims, usually Giriama. Since the kaya elders were also active, there coexisted two sets of personnel concerned with public ritual activity. On the one hand, kaya elders and neighbourhood or lalo elders became more influential. Kaya elders were responsible in a couple of cases for rejecting land registration and consolidation schemes proposed by the government. Much of their public support was based on their expertise in customary law and ritual. They exhorted people to rely on ‘tribal’ custom and helped provide a basic unity for the nationalist movement run by younger men. On the other hand, opportunist sorcerer-hunters operated from time to time. Previously these were often mere spirit mediums catering privately for people in their own small neighbourhood. Now they were able to head extensive anti-sorcery movements, which reached large numbers of people even though they were ephemeral. These sorcerer-hunters continued to use Islamic techniques of divination as well as supposedly traditional ones.

Most of the Mijikenda sub-tribes now had their own active kaya elders, while the anti-sorcery movements operated throughout the area of Mijikenda sub-tribes, constituting another, wider focus of unity and giving a useful base to the later Coast African Peoples Union. This regional party in turn provided many members of the later Kenya African Democratic Union, including its leader, a Giriama, who was to play a crucially important part in Kenya’s independence talks at Lancaster House in 1961.

Kenya achieved her independence in December 1963 under a government headed by KANU, with KADU in opposition. Under its Giriama leader, KADU disbanded itself and, ostensibly in the interests of national unity, its members crossed the floor to join KANU. This inevitably took a number of local Mijikenda ‘politicians’ by surprise. For a number of years they had used kaya elders’ activities and anti-sorcery
movements as convenient occasions for political protest and harangue. Their talents had been fully employed opposing Arabs, Indians, Swahili, and the British, exploiting to political advantage each new situation created by the supposed intransigence of one or other of these groups. Now they were redundant, as were the kaya elders. I will consider just one of a number of consequences of their redundancy.

In June 1966 an apparently unique anti-sorcery movement developed among Mijikenda. Mijikenda allege that it was unique in that, though one myth surrounding its leader was that he had been to Mecca and acquired the secrets of sorcery detection, he and his followers were not only strongly anti-Arab, but were also against Islam generally and against both traditional and Islamic medicines and techniques of divination. Its leader exalted the value of modern school education and the use of hospitals, including one of a famous local Christian mission. Nevertheless, he did promote the use of his own medicines and ritual beliefs. He gained the support of the government, who thought that this movement might at least rid the area of the intense belief in sorcery, blamed for hindering economic development.

The redundant local Mijikenda politicians had assisted in the nationalist movement before independence at the level of villages and homesteads. A new organizational role now presented itself. They were recruited by the government to organize a formal programme by which the sorcerer-hunter was to visit each area in turn. The kaya elders were brought in to administer traditional Giriama ‘oaths’ to all arrested sorcerers. The movement flourished under this organization for a couple of months but by the end of 1966 its leader and some of his close followers were accused of certain crimes and committed to prison. The series of crimes which specifically led to the leader’s downfall concerned members of the coastal Arab community. The leader and his followers carried their opposition to Islam to the extent of accusing all practising Muslims of being sorcerers and claiming that the Koran was a hotbed of sorcery. Apart from extorting money from certain Arabs and others, the leader on one known occasion urinated on the Koran. This cardinal sin swiftly mobilized large numbers of Arab notables, who contacted police in Mombasa and brought about his arrest on charges of illegally extorting money.

The government condemned the movement’s departure from the agreed programme of activities. The leader lost favour not only with the government but also with local Mijikenda politicians and kaya elders. The temporary calumny of Islam was ended. At the local level Muslim spirit mediums and doctors, and those mediums and doctors who were not Muslim but used Islamic ritual items in their practice, resumed their professions and the ritual syncretism remained basically unaltered. There had been an episode involving (1) ‘traditional’ ritualization of the kaya elders’ authority as against (2) first Islamic and then anti-Islamic ritualization of the roles of a succession of sorcerer hunters. The episode had passed while the epic of emerging entrepreneurs, ritual specialists, and ordinary homestead heads continued to unfold.

**Summary and Conclusions**

I suggest that we distinguish between ritual syncretism as a form of self-professed cultural diversity and as an ethnographic phenomenon observed by the anthropologist but not expressed as such by the people under study. This article has examined ritual syncretism in the first sense. The Giriama and some other Mijikenda distinguish
by word and deed the peripheral adoption of Islamic elements from the centrality of their traditional ritual and belief system.

Distinctions of this kind are commonly based on claims made by groups and categories in a society. We may analyse the part played by such claims in facilitating: (1) a long-term increasing differentiation and specialization of ritual, economic, and political roles, and (2) the different forms of ritualization of authority which competing, or at least mutually exclusive, interest groups may assume during political crises.

As regards the long-term process of role differentiation, the Giriama of Kaloleni and the Rabai may be compared. Until 1914 the Giriama were economically self-sufficient. Even thereafter, in Kaloleni, they retained a high degree of economic self-sufficiency, especially when from the 1930s land and trees achieved and markedly increased their exchange value. Stated simply, this development involved the introduction of more specialized role activity into the multiplex nature of social relations. Enterprising farmers and traders, and spirit mediums and doctors, increased in number and became more clearly distinguished from other members of the society. For some of them Islam provided useful distinguishing symbols: enterprising farmers and traders might ‘involuntarily’ become ‘therapeutic’ Muslims and thereby escape certain traditional obligations; and spirit mediums and doctors claimed to improve their skills by incorporating Islamic ritual items. Very few Giriama, however, became Muslim.

A Swahili group who live in Kaloleni and have their own Sheikh and Friday mosque, sanction this claimed use of Islamic techniques, symbols, and the Koran. These Swahili are mostly petty fish and vegetable sellers, few of them own land and trees, and they are not economically powerful in Kaloleni. Their usefulness to the Giriama is in providing additions to a ritual system.

Among the Rabai, whom I have only touched on, Swahili and Arabs resided and traded, and acquired more land and trees, much earlier than among Kaloleni Giriama, certainly before 1914. They played an important part in providing Rabai with direct economic ties with Mombasa and other trading areas outside Rabai. Islamization among Rabai went further than among Kaloleni Giriama, partly due apparently to the need of Rabai middlemen to acquire the confidence of Swahili and Arab traders both in Rabai and Mombasa and to become Muslim as a means of achieving this. A Mijikenda sub-group of Kwale district, the Digo, are nowadays almost entirely Muslim. Other Mijikenda sub-groups claim that, of all Mijikenda, the Digo have had the earliest and closest economic and political relations with Swahili and Arabs. This appears to be generally true historically, though the extent and nature of the connection between this and their almost total conversion to Islam has not yet been investigated.

The ritual syncretism facilitating the long-term process of role differentiation can be analysed at the level of enduring face-to-face small groups and relationships. By contrast, the leaders and followers in short-term, ephemeral, wider-scale anti-sorcery and similar movements are not bound to each other in a permanent face-to-face community. There is more scope for the rejection of ‘alien’ religious elements without disrupting the local moral community. The sorcerer-hunter of 1966, whose movement I briefly described, claimed that he rejected both Islamic and traditional Giriama techniques of divination and therapy and expressed a markedly anti-Islamic
sentiment. Conversely, the kaya elders re-emphasized their traditional roles as ultimate authorities on indigenous ritual and custom. Because the movement was ephemeral like other anti-sorcery movements in Africa (see Douglas, 1963; Ward, 1956; Willis, 1968), it did not immediately effect ritual changes at the Kaloleni local level: after the death of the movement, Islamic and traditional ritual categories continued to be used much as before.

By contrast, a less 'activist' and more 'passivist' movement (Worsley, 1957), such as a Christian sect or Islamic order, might be expected to take root in the society and thereby to effect immediate ritual changes at the local level, only if the ideology and ritual activities of the movement fitted the society's need to be reorganized along new principles of recognizing authority (see Cohen, 1968, 1969). As I have shown in this article, at present among Kaloleni Giriama the emergence of enterprising farmers and traders is greatly helped by strong adherence to traditional Giriama beliefs and ritual practices and by only peripheral adoption of Islamic ritual items. Widespread conversion to Christianity or Islam would not at this stage necessarily provide a system of beliefs and practices which better suited this process of change.

REFERENCES


Kilifi District Political Records and Kilifi District Annual Reports, lodged in the Kenya National Archives, Nairobi.


Résumé

**POLITIQUES DE SYNCRÉTISME RITUEL: L'ISLAM CHEZ LES GIRIAMA NON MUSULMANS DU KENYA**

Cet article étudie le syncretisme ritual chez les Giriama du Kenya. Les Giriama, ainsi que beaucoup d'autres 'tribus' Mijikenda, admettent le syncretisme ritual et en font usage. Ils sont résolument non-musulmans bien qu'ils prétendent avoir dans une certaine mesure de l'Islam à leur système religieux.
POLITICS OF RITUAL SYNCRETISM

Conséquence du développement économique agricole, deux minorités sociales assez importantes se distinguent clairement du reste de la population. Ce sont les spécialistes du rituel comprenant les medium et les docteurs traditionnels d’une part, les fermiers et les commerçants particulièrement entreprenants d’autre part.

Le cérémonial rituel de la religion traditionnelle Giriama a été enrichi. Il entraîne des dépenses considérables qui obligent couramment les fermiers à vendre terres et arbres à ces hommes entreprenants qui deviennent immensément riches. Le volume de liquidités en circulation ayant augmenté, les spécialistes du rituel en tirent profit et rivalisent entre eux. Leur principale arme dans cette compétition est leur aptitude à ajouter à leur répertoire traditionnel des procédés rituels empruntés à l'Islam. Les fermiers et commerçants entreprenants sont aussi aidés par l'Islam : ils tirent avantage de la croyance selon laquelle certains peuvent être possédés involontairement par des esprits islamiques qui les obligeraient à adopter les règles rituelles de l'Islam, ce qui les libère de certaines obligations traditionnelles Giriama. Dans ce cas, le syncrétisme rituel est compris comme un facteur facilitant à long terme la spécialisation et la différenciation des rôles politiques et rituels.

Les mouvements combattant la sorcellerie font également appel au syncrétisme rituel. Ils sont un exemple de ritualisation du pouvoir à court terme. Parfois les leaders insistent sur le pouvoir rituel de l'Islam, bien que, en une occasion, un leader ait contesté le pouvoir et la valeur de l'Islam. Cette mise en question de l'Islam n’a pas affecté le syncrétisme rituel au niveau local, qui se compose, comme auparavant, de la religion Giriama comme élément central et d’éléments islamiques prétendus périphériques.