



INTRODUCTION  
**THE EDGE OF ISLAM**

The elderly diviner Haluwa seats me on a wooden stool low to the ground under an enormous baobab tree next to my research assistant, Maxwell. We're about five kilometers from the heart of Malindi, a Swahili town with vast, whitewashed mosques and tarmac roads bustling with commerce on the Kenya coast. Haluwa's homestead, though, is located in a quiet, outlying Giriama community where there are no mosques in sight. Just a few banana plants and goats flank three mud-and-wattle dwellings for Haluwa, her husband, and one of her grown children. The only sounds I can hear are the chatting of a few young men outside and the rattle of the wooden cart laden with secondhand clothes for sale that they trundle along the dirt road.

I turn my attention to Haluwa, who has placed Maxwell's ten-shilling payment on the ground before her and sprinkled it with the ashes of sacralized herbs. Maxwell tells her he has been having chronic headaches lately; he suspects that someone has bewitched him and wants to know who it might be and why. Haluwa holds a battered pamphlet in her lap. She refers to it as her Quran, though as I look at the rows of individual Arabic letters, oversized print, and sketches instructing children how to pray, I recognize it as a text used in the Quranic schools in town. She wraps her faded *kanga* cloth a little tighter around her waist, then picks up a calabash full of dried seeds and begins to rattle it close to her ear. She closes her eyes in concentration as she summons her helping spirit, Pepo Msikiti, the spirit of the mosque. After several minutes her toe begins to twitch and she exhales rapidly, indicating that the spirit has arrived. She puts down the calabash and picks up her "Quran," inadver-

tently holding it upside down and opening it to a seemingly arbitrary page. Her eyes are fixed on the paper as Pepo Msikiti begins to read in stuttering syllables that are unintelligible to my ear and Maxwell's. We hear sound fragments with a family resemblance to Kiswahili, and here and there the spirit seems to insert a glottal stop into the syllabic stream, a sound that marks the language as Arabic for Giriama listeners, most of whom are not Muslim.

In the end the spirit's prophesy has nothing to do with Islam *per se*; when Haluwa translates it into the Giriama tongue, it turns out that Maxwell's tormenter may be a Giriama neighbor of his, jealous that he may have prospered through the help of a white employer (myself). But the ethnoreligious identity of the spirit and the diviner's professed ability to wield Arabic when possessed by him speak volumes about Giriama life in Malindi. The use of Muslim spirits and Arabic in divination is so widespread in the Malindi area that Giriama frequently remark upon it. Indeed, when I first arrived in this community and began to ask people about the skills of local diviners, countless individuals regaled me with stories of the mystical link between diviners and the high-status language they speak: "When those diviners are doing their work, I'm telling you, they speak pure Arabic! The kind spoken by the original Arabs!" Evidently the powers of prophesy are bound up with a particular ethno-religious group, and the Arabic language provides superior access to obscure knowledge inaccessible to ordinary Giriama.<sup>1</sup>

Closer to town, in the division known as Muyeye, which is dominated by Giriama, Maxwell and I seek out another well-known diviner and healer named Hawe Baya. Muyeye has become more and more crowded in recent years as Giriama flock to the fringes of Malindi in hopes of finding wage labor and other opportunities. Hawe Baya lives in a dilapidated mud dwelling cheek by jowl with the dwellings of other divorced or widowed Giriama women. We get to talking about the relationship between Giriama in this area and the Arabo-African Muslim group, the Swahili, who live in the center of town. Hawe Baya explains that the healers in the Swahili community have more power than Giriama healers "because the Swahili have the Quran." I glance with puzzlement at the Quran she holds in her hand, which she incorporates into her healing rituals by tearing talismanic strips from it or waving it in circles around an ailing client. "Giriama use the Quran too," I remark, "so why are

the Swahili more powerful?” “Because,” she says wistfully, “the Giriama doesn’t have his OWN Quran.”

Farther down the road in Muyeye, five young Giriama men, some of Maxwell’s best friends, sit under a tree drinking palm wine, leaning back in their chairs. It is almost noon; tourism is low this month, and most of the young men are out of work, though a couple of them have been contracted to repair the steps of a Swahili home in the next week or so. I initiate a conversation about the small handful of Giriama who try to ingratiate themselves into the Swahili community in town by converting to Islam in hopes that they might marry a Swahili and assimilate into a Swahili family. The men nod in recognition. “Those types don’t even speak Kigiriama [the Giriama mother tongue] when they come back into Muyeye. They pretend they never even heard the language.” One of the men jokes about someone he knew who was just such a zealous convert: “He had one of those big calluses on his forehead from hitting the floor so hard as he prayed.” He begins to rock his upper body forward and backward in mockery of violent supplication. The other men laugh at the image. Another one chips in, “They’re trying to get to the Muslim side, but they’ll never make it. They’ll find themselves sweeping cake off the floor of the mosque at the end of the day.”

The semiotic weight of Haluwa’s use of Arabic, the riddle in Hawe Baya’s claims about the Quran, and the cynicism of the young men, are all part of an array of complex attitudes toward Islam that circulate through the Giriama communities in and near Malindi town. As exemplified by these three stories, Islam is regarded as a repository of special spiritual and social potency. Indeed, although many Giriama in the Malindi area profess Christianity (perhaps as many as a third), Islam plays a distinct social and religious role in Giriama lives. Unlike Christianity, which has broad appeal across numerous ethnic groups in Kenya, Islam is closely associated with certain groups—most prominently, the several thousand coastal Arabs and the more sizable Arabo-African group, the Swahili, who populate the urban centers of the East African coast. Swahili have long been neighbors of the nine closely related ethnic groups known as Mijikenda, of whom Giriama are the largest. In the nineteenth century many Swahili patrons lived interdependently with their hinterland Giriama clients, often assimilating them into their religious, social, and kin networks (Cooper 1980; Willis 1993). Today, however, Giriama

apprehensions of Islam are shaped by the shift from older patron-client relationships between Giriama and Swahili to an ethnically based class system, while assimilation into Swahili society, in Malindi anyway, has become much more difficult. More subtle divisions also inform Giriama attitudes toward religion in general, particularly Islam and the indigenous Giriama practices of ritual divination, healing, and ancestor propitiation that I term “Traditionalism” (Giriama themselves refer to it as *dini ya kienyeji*, literally, “indigenous religion,” Kisw., Kigir.).<sup>2</sup> We can see from Hawe Baya’s words, for instance, that the Quran itself, a material embodiment of the powers of Islam, is thought by at least some Giriama to be more deeply, intrinsically tied to Swahili than to themselves. Meanwhile, the gossip and mockery of the young men on the fringes of Malindi town indicate that although Swahili may encourage Giriama to convert, their full acceptance into the *umma* (Islamic community) may be hard to achieve. Islam is therefore formulated by many Giriama as a mystified power yoked to a privileged people, with a sheen of Otherness that both beguiles and frustrates.

Taken together, these vignettes provoke a series of questions that inform the rest of this study: If Giriama were once able to assimilate with relative ease into Swahili society, what has transpired to make the boundary between these ethnicities more rigid in Malindi? Why do some Giriama identify a supposedly universal religion, Islam, as belonging more deeply to certain ethnic groups than to others? Why do Giriama use Islam in their rituals despite the fact that so many do not consider it their own religion? And how might Giriama appropriations of Islam subtly reinforce a distance between themselves and Islam, from both Giriama and Swahili vantage points? To respond to these questions I consider both Giriama views of Swahili and Swahili views of Giriama in Malindi, exploring along the way broad historical and economic forces (such as colonialism and capitalism) and subtler matters of discourse and practice (in ritual and patterns of code choice, for instance) that have given hegemonic weight to the ethnoreligious separations I describe. Central to my investigation is the concept of the person in each group. I argue that Giriama and Swahili systematically valorize and enact different, often oppositional kinds of personhood, differences that make themselves known in economic practices and the moral discourses that surround them and that are especially dramatically expressed in the

realms of conversion practices, spirit discourses and spirit possession, divination, ritual code switching, and other ritual forms. Ultimately, I suggest, these different forms of religious discourse and practice among Swahili and Giriama reinforce the widespread (albeit not unanimous) idea that Swahili and Giriama are essentially distinct categories and that Islam somehow belongs more to Swahili than to Giriama.

While the focus of this book is ethnoreligious tension and division, I am mindful that, from one perspective, the anecdotes I have already presented point to an interpretation of Giriama life that highlights both ethnic and religious fluidity. In fact, the ethnographer who arrives among Swahili and Giriama in Malindi seeking evidence of boundary crossing will find it. Not only do some Giriama still occasionally try to Swahilize by converting to Islam and shifting their ethnic affiliation, but the very parameters of Swahili ethnicity are continually redefined from without and within, often in response to political contingencies (Askew 1999; P. Caplan and Topan 2004; A. M. Mazrui and Shariff 1994; Salim 1973). Religious identity in the multiethnic coastal context might also be construed as permeable and fluid, as some Giriama shift affinities between Traditionalism, Islam, and Christianity over the course of a single life span, and sometimes within a single ritual. The Giriama use of the Quran and Arabic in rituals that also contain Traditionalist symbolism could be interpreted as a form of syncretic hybridity. In the linguistic domain the observer seeking boundary crossing can find it in several forms, including the fact that Giriama sometimes use several languages in a single ritual, while in the secular domain languages do not always map neatly onto ethnic groups in spoken practice. After all, Kiswahili, the mother tongue of the Swahili themselves, is spoken as a lingua franca across East Africa and is widely spoken by Giriama in the Malindi area.

Themes of boundary crossing, fluidity, permeability, and syncretic cultural blending have been prevalent in recent ethnographic literature, and for good reason. Over the past few decades, historians and anthropologists have come to question the idea that tribes and ethnic groups, in Africa and across the world, are as sharply divided as colonial rhetoric and traditional social science have construed them to be. Much scholarly effort has been devoted to debunking the notion that ethnicities are intrinsically stable, bounded social groupings (Barth 1969; Chabal 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Fried 1966; Iliffe 1979; MacGaffey 1970;

Mafeje 1971; Ranger 1989; Thornton 1996; Vail 1989). Today, the notion of a timeless tribal entity, or of any “all purpose, unidimensional classification of sociocultural groups” (Southall 1997: 48), is typically rejected as a misconception unjustly applied to categories that are largely the products of political and economic influences and the modern imagination. Many scholars bring this point home by demonstrating the contingency and permeability of ethnic groups and other social categories that have been typically portrayed as rigid and static (cf. Barth 1969; Rosaldo 1989), an approach that has extended to scholarship on Swahili and Giriama identity. Indeed, earlier tussles over whether Swahili can be defined as a concrete ethnic group or whether they are “more Arab” or “more African” (concerns expressed both by scholars and the indigenous population) have been largely supplanted by a model that construes Swahili communities as paradigmatic embodiments of the incorporative, hybrid, and flexible qualities of ethnic groups more generally. Askew (1999: 73–74) explains the shift:

Drawing on practice theory, discourse theory, and poststructuralism, 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). . . . 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.

The present widespread scholarly interest in ethnic fluidity, permeability, and boundary crossing also informs the study of religions and languages in Africa and elsewhere. Rather than accepting the missionary model that frames Christianity as either purified of native elements or contaminated by them, some scholars have turned their attention to the ways religious practices creatively blur the boundaries between religious typologies (see, for example, Comaroff 1985; MacGaffey 1994; Shaw and Stewart 1994). Scholars of Islam have described it as an often fluidly imagined religion that continually incorporates local traditions (Asad

1986; Varisco 2005). Linguistic anthropologists, meanwhile, have debunked the colonialist and nationalist assumption that ethnic or other social groupings are or have always been rigidly linked to a single, stable language (Harries 1988, 1989: 85; Hymes 1984; Irvine and Gal 2000; J. Jackson 1974; Southall 1997: 46; Woolard 1998a). Instead, languages have been reconstrued as potentially protean entities whose borders have been enforced, with mixed success, by political policies and ideologies (Fardon and Furniss 1994: 10–13; Irvine and Gal 2000; Mignolo 2000). Yet speakers of a language identified with one ethnic group in many cases turn out to be polyglot code-switchers whose creative uses of language vex efforts to classify and strictly define the relationship between languages and ethnic communities. One could attempt to fit the Giriama case in Malindi into these rubrics and to see within the Giriama religious and linguistic improvisations I have described the hybrid qualities of their identity.

But the current anthropological fashion for valorizing boundary crossing can too easily lead to a fetishization of it that is misplaced, given that ethnic fluidity is not a universal experience. Indeed, some scholars have turned their attention to the paradoxical dynamic by which the globalizing forces of free markets and easy mobility have created displacement and competition that often trigger movements of exclusion, compartmentalization, and ethnoterritoriality (Chua 2003; Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 39; Meyer and Geschiere 1999). In Africa, furthermore, political liberalization has been met with anxiety regarding resource distribution, leading to “a general obsession with autochthony and ethnic citizenship” (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2001: 159). At the same time, the essentialisms that were so central to colonial taxonomies continue to echo in the ethnopolitics of postcolonial states and the cultural and linguistic revivals of many indigenous groups, despite, in the latter case, the irrefutable evidence of their cultural permeability (cf. Coulmas 1988: 11; Vail 1989; Van Binsbergen 1994; Woolard and Scheffelin 1994: 60). It seems that for many, boundaries—however fictive, politically motivated, and pernicious they may be—are importantly and perhaps increasingly constitutive of social worlds and group identities and often become embedded in the social landscape as taken-for-granted premises about the way the world is.<sup>3</sup> Mindful of these patterns, Charles Stewart has detected a tension between popular scholarly approaches and the view

from the ground: “Clashes of perspective are apparent when avant-garde cultural studies and literary theorists celebrate the fundamental cultural hybridity of postcolonial communities at the very moment when these communities are engaging in strategic, essentialist claims of cultural authenticity” (1999: 55; see also Asad 1993: 264).<sup>4</sup> In this book I insist that the theoretical notion of ethnoreligious and ethnolinguistic fluidity poorly accounts for what happens in Malindi as Giriama interact with Swahili, with Islam, and with languages other than their mother tongue. From a distance their behavior may appear to be an easy kind of cultural mixing or creolization, but careful scrutiny of the discourse, behavioral nuances, and reported experiences of individual Giriama produces a much more complex picture.

A central argument of this book is that Giriama communities in Malindi town and its outskirts cannot easily cross boundaries, but encounter obstacles, perceived and actual, at every turn. To be sure, the evidence clearly supports a history of connection between and interpenetration of Swahili and Giriama communities, yet in the current context of Malindi there is an equally clear insistence on their social differentiation, a differentiation that is laced with inequality. As the title *The Edge of Islam* suggests, Giriama find themselves on the margins of a spatial and metaphorical geography, peering in at a life of greater privilege and sometimes cognizant that they are on the brink of access but not quite able to break through. The distance that Giriama feel from Islam is expressed indexically through their recurrent references to what they term “the Muslim side” (*upande wa Kiislam*; Kisw., Kigir.) in contrast to “the Giriama side” (*upande wa Kigiriama*; Kisw., Kigir.), an orientational metaphor that suggests a virtual spatial separation between Islam and Giriama. The alienation expressed by this pervasive idiom can be found in many other domains of Giriama life. In their fluid pantheon of spirits, for instance, many Giriama distinguish between “high” (*wa hali ya tzulu*) or “big” (*bomu*) spirits located on the Muslim side and “low” (*wa hali ya tsini*) or “little” (*thithe*) spirits on the Giriama side. Ritual practitioners frequently appropriate Islamic powers from a metaphysical distance, without attempting to “become Muslim.” And in healing rituals, most Giriama officiants address Muslim powers in the Swahili or Arabic language, further underscoring the notion that Islam is associated with ethnic groups other than their own.

The notion of an intrinsic and fundamental separation between ethnoreligious groups appears to provide a kind of premise or conceptual backdrop to a great deal of Giriama and Swahili discourse and practice. Yet in the complex social landscape I describe this ethnoreligious boundary work is not without its internal tensions. Giriama and Swahili identities are still entangled and contested, as are the various forms of Islamic practice on the coast. Two key theoretical concepts, *hegemony* and *personhood*, which I return to throughout the book, help to explain the dynamics of ethnoreligious separation in Malindi.

*Boundary Work and Ambivalence:*

*Ethnic and Religious Identities on the Kenya Coast*

Giriama life at the edge of Islam is not merely about feeling religiously excluded; it is simultaneously about feeling ethnically marginalized by Swahili. Although Swahili and Giriama (along with other Mijikenda) lived for many years in a relationship of interdependence and intermarriage, with Giriama converting to Islam, assimilating into Swahili kin networks, and “becoming Swahili” in the process (Willis 1993; see also Kusimba 1999; Parkin 1991a; Spear 1978), most Giriama in Malindi today do not see the category Swahili as so incorporative. This change in viewpoint can be explained by the enduring influence of colonial efforts at administrative control that also helped to shape aspects of African self-identity and the African economy. For instance, some of these efforts involved partitioning complex and often socially fluid populations into tightly bounded tribes, ranking them and stereotyping their characters along the way. Such modes of categorization guided the administrative and political allocation of resources and left their mark on African infrastructure and the narratives that many in Africa tell about themselves. These processes continue to inform Giriama politics and Kenyan ethnopolitical strife. In Malindi, furthermore, all sides feel anxiety over their access to resources. Swahili have been marginalized from national politics and increasingly reach out to their Middle Eastern connections for economic support and social identification. Giriama grumble bitterly about their impoverishment and alienation from the land they say was once their own. These historical and economic forces have given rise to ethnic divisions that have shifted Swahili and Giriama relations. Eastman (1994: 85, 94) writes that under recent pressures “participants in a Swa-

hili pattern of culture” have increasingly distinguished between “insiders” and “outsiders” while enhancing the “boundary mechanisms” that reify the idea of their ethnic distinctiveness, which they attach in part to their Arab connections. Meanwhile Giriama living on the fringes of Malindi increasingly resent their structural role as petty wage laborers in a steep class hierarchy and sometimes politically agitate in ways that pit them directly and deliberately against Swahili.

In Malindi today ethnic divisiveness makes itself known in the emotional lives and the ontological claims of Swahili and Giriama alike. Middle-class Swahili women sometimes express revulsion at the prospect of marrying a Giriama, while many Giriama harbor moral antipathy toward Swahili, whom they tend to see as self-serving elites. They also mock or scorn those few Giriama who attempt to assimilate into Swahili communities. And although the possibility of ethnic upward mobility lives on in a residual (if rare) form for Giriama in Malindi, powerful prejudices and essentialisms circulate among Malindi’s Swahili and Giriama communities, shaping their discourses about their own ethnic identity and the alterity of the other group. The term *essentialism* is defined by Gelman (2003: 3) as “the view that categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly but that gives [category members their] identity.” Social scientists often use the term to designate scholars’ harmful and misguided homogenization or naturalization of a social group. But while ethnicity is always historically contingent and often contested, it is nevertheless the case that certain social and political formations, as well as certain religious and linguistic practices, encourage *folk* essentialisms that reinforce ethnic boundaries.<sup>5</sup>

Boundary work plays an important, if inconsistent role in the ethno-religious hierarchy between Swahili and Giriama. As I explain in chapter 1, about half of Swahili and a strong majority of Giriama I spoke to in Malindi contend that it is not possible for a Giriama to “become Swahili.” They sometimes adduce such intrinsic characteristics as “blood,” “birth,” or inborn, ethnically linked “temperament,” and sometimes merely insist upon the ontological impossibility of such a change without offering a clear or consistent reason.<sup>6</sup> In Malindi, furthermore, Swahili and Giriama claims about natural ethnic boundaries, when they appear in discourse and practice, seem to be impervious to empirical counterclaims, including the widely known fact that Swahili and Giriama have a history of kin

ties that, in principle, ought to obviate the straightforward notion that their blood is different.<sup>7</sup> With such essentialist notions in circulation, conversion to Islam does not beget the ethnic fluidity that it apparently once did. In today's Malindi, for example, some imams' ledger books compel new Giriama converts to indicate their tribal membership alongside their confession of Islam, suggesting a static model of ethnic identity. Many Giriama themselves concur that a Giriama convert becomes a Giriama Muslim (Mgiriama Mwislam) rather than a Swahili. Yet these discourses that function to create boundaries do not thwart Giriama mobility, for they are also occasionally enlisted by Giriama in their efforts at self-empowerment. Giriama sometimes stake a defiant claim to a timeless, independently potent ethnoreligious and linguistic identity.

Evidently, converting to Islam no longer leads a Giriama in a straight line to "becoming Swahili." How, then, do Giriama in Malindi relate to Islam, and how do Swahili interpret these interactions? The answers to such questions can be understood only by examining them against a broader religious backdrop. In principle, Giriama in Malindi may align themselves with any one of three religions: Islam, Christianity, or Traditionalism (*dini ya kienyeji*). In practice, however, religious alliance is bound up with ethnic identity politics. Christianity enjoys perhaps the most straightforward status of the three religions. Just as its Western advocates bill it as a universal religion that welcomes all converts, so do Giriama generally feel free to convert to Christianity. Perhaps as many as a third of Giriama in Malindi have converted, though these alliances are often partial and shifting. Islam and Traditionalism, however, are framed in more ethnically focused terms. Giriama tend to consider themselves deeply linked to the forces of Traditionalism in an ethnically exclusive fashion. The notion of an outsider converting to Traditionalism would seem odd to most Giriama because they accept that this stigmatized system of powers is yoked to their basic identity rather than being a universal religion. Islam brings with it powerful ethnic associations as well, for many Giriama seem to believe that both the Arabs and the Arabo-African Swahili groups are proprietors of the religion. Giriama certainly invoke the symbols of Islam in their divinatory and healing rituals, but some Swahili express skepticism at the ways Giriama convert to and practice the faith, while Giriama themselves, in ways both stark

and subtle, sometimes hold at arm's length the very Islamic powers on which they draw, as though such powers were not really theirs.

Giriama orientations toward Islam, and Swahili reactions to these, speak to the broader question of how various communities have imagined Islam and its boundaries. As Varisco (2005) has eloquently demonstrated, in the past scholars tended to essentialize Islam, representing locally inflected versions of the faith as if they instantiated a singular, organic religion. Others too have challenged the notion that Islam has any consistent identity, given the manifold ways in which cultures strategically appropriate and manipulate its terms (Al-Azmeh 1993; Asad 1986; El-Zein 1977). The ethnographic literature on Islam in sub-Saharan Africa has increasingly focused on the ways Islam is locally imagined (see, for instance, Boddy 1989; Brenner 1993a; Holy 1991; Kresse 2003; Lambek 1993; Launay 1992; Masquelier 2001; see also Kriteck and Lewis 1969; Lewis 1966/1980). Different African societies, for instance, play up or down specific aspects of the faith, such as the role of the Prophet, the calendar feasts of Islam, and male and female circumcision. In some locales the Islamic pillar of almsgiving (*sadaqa*) is translated into animal sacrifice to petition God for assistance (Lewis 1966/1980: 73); in others, prayers may be directed “for or through” (though not to) ancestors (62). Spirit beliefs, mediumship, and possession figure heavily in the lives of Muslims in many African societies (Giles 1989a, 1989b; Lambek 1993; Masquelier 2001). Some of these local ways of imagining Islam pose no significant religious dilemmas for their practitioners. Boddy (1989) has demonstrated that in the Sudanese village of Hofriyat, Islam and indigenous elements have been reconciled to the point that Zar spirit possession practices are seen as compatible with the principles taught by the Quran. Accordingly, tropes of *syncretism*, *adaptation*, *indigenization*, and even *symbiosis* have figured heavily in discussions of African Islam, emphasizing the assimilative, permeable qualities of the religion (Holy 1991; Launay 1992; Lewis 1966/1980; Ryan 2000; Van Hoven 1996).

At the same time, however, Islam's heterogeneity is often a source of anxiety and controversy within Muslim communities. Across sub-Saharan Africa Muslim scholars have positioned themselves as arbiters of Islamic ideals. Often such community experts find a conflict between traditional customs and what the Quran, the Hadith (the record of the Prophet's actions and speech), or sharia law seem to recommend (cf.

Lienhardt 1966/1980). According to some local experts, practices such as divination and witchcraft must “derive their validity from a Muslim source,” for if they are regarded as sources of power in their own right they threaten the supremacy of the Muslim God (Lewis 1966/1980: 65). These tensions have been particularly acute in the domains of spirit beliefs and possession, for while the Quran concedes the existence of angels, demons, and *jinn* spirits, many community authorities regard these and their ritual invocation as potential threats to piety. Such debates are alive and well on the Kenya coast. Many Swahili acknowledge that practices such as spirit belief, divination, and ritual healing are customary (*mila*) in their communities, yet they also evince great uneasiness about whether and when these practices are acceptable (*halali*) or forbidden (*haramu*) in the eyes of Islam (see Middleton 1992; Parkin 1985b: 235).

The landscape of judgment is further complicated by the rise in recent decades of Wahhabist adherents (who sometimes call themselves Ahl al-sunna [Brenner 1993b: 60] or, as it is often pronounced and spelled on the Kenya coast, Ahlul Sunna), who look to Middle Eastern reformists for guidance about proper Islamic practice. While Wahhabism has been diversely interpreted across space and time (DeLong-bas 2004), reformists generally wish to see stricter interpretations of the Quran and Hadith, firm implementation of sharia law, and elimination of so-called innovations (*bid'a*) in religious practice. Across Africa Wahhabist movements have tensely coexisted with versions of Islam that are informed by indigenous spiritualism and by Sufist traditions such as ecstatic forms of worship (Brenner 1993a; Kane 2003; Kresse 2003; Launay 1992; Rosander and Westerlund 1997). In Malindi a vocal and influential minority of Swahili (perhaps one in five or six, by my informants' estimates) are self-professed Ahlul Sunna who object to such Swahili ritual traditions as the ecstatic celebration of the Prophet's birthday (Maulidi).

Clearly, Islamic practice in Africa is both heterogeneous and contested. Scholars have tended to focus on two aspects of this heterogeneity: the interpretation of Islam through preexisting cultural categories and the tension between custom and the judgments handed down by Muslim authorities and reformists. Less explored, however, have been the ways Islam is negotiated *between* ethnic groups in a context of socioeconomic hierarchy and tension. Islam in Malindi is complicated not

only by the debates about *mila* and the presence of reformism, but also by the presence of Giriama, many of whom live on the geographic and economic margins of areas dominated by Swahili in the core of town and who maintain an ambiguous and difficult relationship with Islam. The culture of Islam seems significantly more problematic when Islam is engaged by both a lower status group that envies and resents Islam's power and a higher status Muslim group that wishes to remain separate despite long-standing kin ties.

Such dynamics lead not only to contests over what counts as proper Islamic practice and acceptable conversion, but also to idiosyncratic uses of Islam by Giriama that mark the religion (through language choice and other semiotic devices) as ethnically Other. While official Swahili ideology welcomes any and all converts into the fold, Swahili discourse and sometimes their interactions with Giriama in Malindi suggest that many Swahili regard Giriama converts as unsuitable Muslims. It is a description of which many Giriama are aware. Admittedly the very fact that some Giriama aspire to count themselves as Muslims suggests that at least some see the religion as available to them. Nevertheless, Giriama also routinely align Islam with Arab and Swahili ethnicity, as witnessed in the recurrent conflation of the terms *Muslims* and *Swahili* or *Arabs* (a term that sometimes encompasses Swahili and Arab communities) in Giriama discourse. Among Giriama we see tensions between the hope that they might be accepted as converts and strong currents of cynicism and insecurity about their relationship to Islam. It is not unusual for Giriama approaches to Islam to look like a kind of poaching, in which Giriama reach from a social and metaphysical distance for powers to which they do not necessarily feel entitled. In fact, their use of Islam in Traditionalist divination and healing rituals cannot be characterized as syncretism in the sense of a reconciling or harmonizing of different religious traditions. Rather, Giriama maintain a metaphysical distance between Islam and Traditionalism. In some regards, then, this book is influenced by the approach of Masquelier (2001: 8), who explores the ambivalence toward Islam on the part of *bori* spirit possession practitioners in Niger and the ways Islamic and *bori* identities “overlap despite concerted efforts, on both sides, to reaffirm distinctive forms of knowledge, practice, and morality.”

The tensions between hope and resentment, the belief that Mus-

lim powers are real but linked to Other ethnicities, inform an array of Giriama spiritual practices and experiences. For instance, the animus that Giriama feel toward their wealthier Swahili and Arab neighbors is present in elaborate narratives about Muslim *jini* (Kiswa., Kigir.) spirits who are said to collect money for their masters, sometimes pouncing on Giriama and drinking their blood to sustain themselves. Other Muslim spirits routinely possess Giriama and attempt to force them to convert to Islam, often by making them vomit traditionally Giriama foods such as bush rats and palm wine—an experience Giriama respond to with attitudes ranging from accommodation to resentment and resistance. Meanwhile in Giriama divination and healing rituals Islam is yoked to the high prestige, ethnically Other languages of Kiswahili and Arabic, which Giriama wield to tap Islam's power even as these languages reinforce the sense that Islam is an ethnically distant force. This ambivalence between aspiring to partake of Islam and feeling it to be a distant or potentially oppressive power culminates in dramatic cases of madness in the Giriama community. One of the most common symptoms of madness among Giriama is babbling in a spirit version of Arabic, sometimes even emitting Arabic calls to prayer, suggesting, perhaps, that the ethnically Giriama person has been utterly quashed and supplanted by an Islamic form of agency. To the extent that one can seek meaning in madness, such tragic cases might be interpreted as a perverse parody of Giriama aspiration or a personified cautionary tale about Giriama interactions with a dangerous supernatural force.

While ethnoreligious boundary work is a prominent theme in my findings, so too is the theme of ambivalence toward such boundary work. Dogmatic claims about the way the social world is may come to the fore in Giriama and Swahili discourse at strategic moments, but these tend to mask the heterogeneity and confusion of opinion and experience in the wider community. Some Swahili and Giriama in Malindi still define *Swahili* in permeable terms, even while members of the same Swahili family debate the very definition of the ethnic category. A residue of ethnic fluidity thus coexists with currents of ethnic absolutism, just as Giriama relationships with Islam vacillate ambivalently between aspiration to participate and doubt about full acceptance. Many Giriama shift back and forth between cultivating ties with Swahili and repudiating them, between longing for access to the privileges associated with Islam

and claiming to despise Muslims. Their liminal status is brought into sharp relief in tales of Muslim spirits colonizing their bodies and forcing them to reject the very foods associated with Giriama identity. The spirits' demands imply that Giriama identity is incompatible with, even polluting to Islam, and yet it is not clear that an alternative ethnic identity is available to these individuals.

*Personhood and Hegemony: The Shaping of Religious Practice and Its Implications for Social Hierarchy*

Two prominent concepts, *personhood* and *hegemony*, can help to illuminate the boundary-making dynamics among Giriama and Swahili in Malindi. The term *personhood* has been widely applied in the anthropology of African societies and beyond, encompassing an astonishing breadth of concerns that include cultural variation in the domains of exchange, kinship, and gender (Piot 1999; M. Strathern 1988, 1992, 1999); aesthetics, affect, and morality (Rasmussen 1995); embodiment, epistemology, and religiosity (M. Jackson and Karp 1990; Lambek and Strathern 1998); materiality and the ontological composition of persons (M. Strathern 1988); ritual, death, and memory (Battaglia 1990); and understandings of the human condition in response to forces of modernity (Ahearn 2003; Piot 1999). In this volume I use the term *personhood* as a way of indexing culturally specific expectations and ideologies about people's relative independence or interdependence, the qualities of their agency, and the extent to which they are expected (or not) to cultivate introspective, internalist modes of being-in-the-world.

An early and well-known articulation of these themes comes from Mauss (1938/1985), who suggested an analytical distinction between selfhood (*moi*), or awareness of one's own individuality, and personhood (*personne*), in which one plays out a social role as part of a collectivity.<sup>8</sup> Mauss suggested that the self-consciousness that seems utterly natural to Westerners is actually a relatively recent product of a long and shifting history. While subsequent scholars have criticized Mauss's evolutionist stance, his insight that different social organizations are bound up with different ideas of selfhood and personhood has been highly influential. More recently Dumont (1985: 93) has contended that "modern individualism . . . is an exceptional phenomenon," with roots in classical and Judeo-Christian heritage. He suggests that while some societies treat

the monadic individual as a paramount value, many others center instead on interdependent, hierarchical, and complementary relations between people.

In recent decades there has been a profusion of scholarly explorations of interdependent and fluid forms of personhood in non-Western contexts (Geertz 1973a; Lamb 1997; Shweder and Bourne 1991). In many African societies, for example, sociocentric ideologies are deeply bound up with customary forms of economic exchange (Bohannan 1959; Ship-ton 1989). In some Asian and other contexts, the interdependence of the person is thought to extend to an ontological consubstantiality with the communities, places, and objects with which the person interacts (see, for instance, Daniel 1984). In her ethnographies of Melanesian attitudes toward gender and material relations, Marilyn Strathern has developed the notion that persons are “frequently construed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produce them” (1988: 13; see also M. Strathern 1992). Similarly, ethnographers working in Africa have repeatedly described folk ideologies of the person that stipulate ontological interdependencies between persons and the material and spiritual domains (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; M. Jackson and Karp 1990; Piot 1999). In many societies persons are seen as enmeshed in and emergent from relationships and from the material, narrative, mystical, and other transactions that establish and modify these relationships.

Societies also vary in the way they attribute intentions or motives behind actions and in their valorization of will and introspection. Every human being has agency in the sense of an ability to act upon the world, but cultures differentially prioritize intentional action as a vital, even a moral element of the person (cf. Taylor 1989). In classically liberal and capitalist contexts, persons are seen as autonomous beings with the ability to affect the world through their own free will and the capacity to (re)construct themselves through introspection. According to Giddens (1991), “self-identity” in the modern order is an ongoing, reflexive, and introspective endeavor in which persons continually strive to achieve a cohesive narrative or “story” of self. Yet in other cultural contexts the source of a person’s effectiveness may be external or ambiguous (see, for instance, Piot 1999), and there may be little stock placed in objectifying the self in order to scrutinize, fashion, or express it. These variable models of agency and interiority inflect religious ideals as well. Keane

(1997a: 679; 2007) details the tensions that surfaced between Dutch Calvinist missionaries and Sumbanese ritualists in Indonesia: the former expected prayers to express the inner sincerity of the individual, whereas the latter regarded ritual speech not as emergent from an egocentric locus, but as having been “handed down unchanged from the ancestors.”

Keane’s findings resonate with the theme of this book, in which different understandings of personhood compose a subtle backdrop for many of the differences between Swahili and Giriama, informing their respective understandings of religion and Islam and the felt distance between them. Customary Giriama notions of personhood are inflected by some of the interdependent mores I have described, whereas Swahili ideas of the person tend to place more emphasis on the individual, the result of the reverberation of ancient Islamic theological traditions, an influential Islamic reformist movement that stresses interiorism and rationalism, and Swahili participation in the modern, urban economic marketplace. I should make clear, however, that in suggesting that Swahili and Giriama tend to be subject to different prevailing models of personhood, I do not wish to create an artificial binary between modern Swahili and premodern Giriama, nor to suggest uniform consciousness in either community, for Giriama and Swahili culture mutually permeate one another, creating dilemmas and ambiguities within these communities. Both are perpetually in flux, subject to cross-cutting global and religious influences as well as shifting economic and political exigencies (cf. Piot 1999). Swahili possessive individualism is mitigated by an emphasis on charity, while Giriama sometimes wring their hands about the tensions between customary forms of communalism and the temptations of personal accumulation (Ciekawy 2001; S. G. Thompson 1990). Furthermore, as Leinhardt (1985: 145) reminds us, “One can lay too much one-sided stress on the collectivist orientation of African ideas of the person. . . . The recognition of the importance of an inner, mysterious individual activity [inside] a person is attested by many proverbs.” To this I would add that while prevailing cultural notions of personhood have a role in shaping subjectivity, they surely do not wholly determine it (see also Jacobson-Widding 1985). Nevertheless, it is the case that urban Swahili these days are subject to a number of ideological forces and expectations that do not circulate so prominently in Giriama communities, and vice versa. And these differences inform some of the tensions between these groups.

One such tension is in the economic realm. Giriama have historically endorsed long-term reciprocal economic relationships between people and the redistribution of wealth on a regular, even ritualized basis. Giriama entrepreneurs have challenged these values for decades (Parkin 1972), yet it is nevertheless the case that Giriama in Malindi emerge from a tradition that values an interdependent model of economic personhood, causing unease in their encounters with contemporary capitalist accumulation, which many regard as exploitive and hence potentially devastating to a community's very humanity (Ciekawy 2001). Meanwhile, among Swahili in Malindi capitalist values of individual effort and prosperity are considered largely compatible with Quranic messages and have taken hold of the consciousness of many (cf. Masquelier 2001). Almsgiving and charity are also crucial to their Islamic ideology, but these practices tend to signify affirmations of the individual's piety and compassion rather than obligatory forms of face-to-face reciprocity designed to level the economic playing field. As will be seen in chapter 2, such differences have a profound influence on Giriama envy of Swahili wealth, as well as Giriama cynicism about Swahili norms and values.

Two other elements of personhood that I explore in this book are the intertwined values of agency and interiority; these have particular importance in Swahili and Giriama modes of religiosity. Swahili versions of Islam in Malindi, particularly under the influence of reformism, tend to valorize individual choice and interior states such as belief and intention as crucial elements of piety. To be a good Muslim it is important to exercise self-control and to direct one's state of mind in pious ways; pious actions will follow. Giriama too value certain forms of agency; their strenuous critiques of their contemporary situation as a new form of slavery attest to that. But Giriama religiosity has not tended to valorize internal states such as belief and intention; one does not need to prove oneself a good Traditionalist, for instance, through the intensity of one's inner devotion. Furthermore, Traditionalism places less emphasis than does contemporary Swahili Islam on the role of individual choice. Instead, much Giriama religious practice involves making pragmatic decisions in response to outside forces, whether these are spirits possessing the body and making demands, ancestors appearing in dreams to offer directives, or the witchery of others that must be counteracted under the direction of a ritual specialist. To some Giriama appropriate personhood

is located in a person's very grounding in customary Giriama practice, which includes prosocial and reciprocal ritual activities designed to ensure the wholeness (*-zima*) of society. Social relations that have been "disordered, muddled, or broken" by one person have the potential to bring suffering not only upon that person but upon the community as a whole (S. G. Thompson 1990: 49). Giriama actions, particularly desirable actions, are thus not customarily modeled in terms of individual free will, but instead are seen as stemming largely from outside forces and potentially reverberating far beyond the individual.

This relative disregard for internal states has several implications for Giriama interactions with Islam. Because religion is not for them centrally about belief, Giriama often attempt to draw pragmatically upon the potency of more than one religious locus at a time, a pluralistic practice that dramatically violates the Swahili expectation that only one religion can have a monopoly on Truth. And because conversion to another religion need not stem from an individual's choice or will, many Giriama convert to Islam because, they say, possessing Muslim spirits have forced them to convert, a claim that Swahili tend to regard critically. Indeed, Swahili receptions of Giriama converts are sometimes influenced by the essentialist presumption that Giriama are intrinsically incapable of practicing Islam with inner conviction (being unable to shuck off the rural ways of "palm wine and women," as one Swahili put it, "to turn their minds to God"). Models of personhood also influence Giriama and Swahili interactions with the Arabic language in their divinatory rituals. While many Swahili diviners pride themselves on their literate, exegetical skills, Giriama are comfortable sharing agency with a possessing spirit who reads and writes Arabic through their bodies, prompting Swahili critics to see such attempts as superficial and mimetic rather than authentic, sincere, and grounded in self-command. Different understandings of personhood also inflect Swahili and Giriama interpretations of the relationship between wealth and the supernatural. Whereas Swahili tend to regard good fortune as a result of individual effort in combination with God's blessing, Giriama tend to regard Swahili wealth as emerging not from human agency but from the intervention of malevolent Muslim spirits who collect money for those already rich. Ultimately, Giriama and Swahili models of personhood help to sustain a social force field in which Giriama use spiritual intermediaries to appropriate an

Islam they find distant and Other, and Swahili cast doubt upon the legitimacy of Giriama interactions with Islam.

This interplay between personhood and religiosity reinforces common ideas in Swahili and Giriama communities that contribute to their ethnoreligious separation. Although Swahili and Giriama have different reasons for thinking so and different means of reinforcing these notions, the following ideas circulate through both groups: that Giriama and Swahili are categorically (and, to some, essentially) distinct ethnic and religious beings; that Islam and its accoutrements (especially Arabic) are intrinsically and supernaturally potent; that Swahili enjoy a more privileged connection to the forces of Islam; and that Giriama is essentially distant from and, in some respects, even toxic to Islam. These ideas are not shared by everyone in Malindi's Swahili and Giriama communities, but they are sufficiently prevalent and so often taken for granted that where they take hold they achieve what Bourdieu (1977: 164) has suggested every social order must: "the naturalization of its own arbitrariness." Ironically, this naturalized social order subordinates the very Giriama who subscribe to these ideas, creating a painful tension for many Giriama. Indeed, the fact and feeling of subordination inflect virtually every dimension of Giriama life discussed in this book, yet Giriama also articulate their anger at and defiance of this state of affairs. I have found it useful to discuss this duality, as well as other aspects of the power relations between Swahili and Giriama, by drawing on two related but distinct theoretical concepts that Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (1991: 22) call "the two dominant forms in which power enters—or, more accurately, is entailed in—culture," namely, hegemony and ideology.

While the social scientific literature offers many definitions of these terms (see, for instance, Althusser 1971; Gramsci 1971; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Williams 1977; Woolard 1998a), Comaroff and Comaroff (1991) provide particularly useful interpretations that I draw on here. The Comaroffs' understanding of hegemony is inspired by multiple intellectual sources, including the work of Antonio Gramsci and a Foucauldian concern with the presence of power in the unrecognized corners of social life. According to Williams (1977: 108), prior to Gramsci, hegemony was defined as "political rule or domination, especially in relations between states." Gramsci enriched this definition by drawing on Marx's emphasis on relations between ruling and subordinate classes. At the same time,

however, he departed from a traditional Marxist understanding of power in which ruling classes secure and exert power largely through the materialist means of the base, including coercion. Gramsci never fully specified what he meant by hegemony (indeed, J. Comaroff and Comaroff [1991: 19] refer to it as a “relatively empty sign” subject to numerous interpretations). One widely held understanding of hegemony, articulated by Williams and elaborated by the Comaroffs, is as a system of meanings and values that expresses and more or less ensures the success of the interests of a particular class, typically the dominant one. In this understanding, hegemony permeates all class groups in a particular system, infusing the entire culture by organizing it around such meanings and values. Through the spontaneous consent of all class groups to assimilate the worldview of the dominant group, hegemony thus makes opposing ideas harder to think. While Gramsci spoke to Marxist hopes of revolution with his assertion that subordinate groups can secure the spread of their own worldview through persuasion and in so doing build up a counterhegemony to the ruling class, most scholarship since Gramsci has used the term hegemony to refer to a system that supports the status quo in power relations.

A close cousin to hegemony is ideology, a concept with such a complex and varied intellectual history (see, for instance, Eagleton 1994) that I will treat only a few elements of it here. In the most general sense ideology means a way of looking at things, but its relationship to mind, materiality, and social hierarchy varies from one definition to the next. Some theorists have placed ideology in a largely material context or as instantiated in “lived relations” (Althusser 1971; see also Woolard [1998a: 6] for a discussion of “behavioral, practical . . . or structural” definitions of ideology). Many followers of Marx have located it in ideas, primarily in the form of delusional beliefs (“false consciousness”) that serve the interest of the ruling class. Giddens (1997) uses the term ideology as shorthand for widespread ideas and beliefs that shore up the interests of dominant groups, a definition that resonates with Williams’s definition of hegemony. What is lost in this alignment of terms, however, is the distinction between ideas that are naturalized or taken for granted (because they are buried in practice, for example) and ideas that are more explicitly articulated (typically in discourse), as well as the distinction

between ideas that serve the interest of the dominant group and those that do not.

This is why the Comaroffs' differentiation of these terms has proven particularly useful. In their view, hegemony usually goes without saying; it consists of the signs and practices that typically serve the interest of the dominant group by reflecting or justifying particular relations of power and that come to be "taken-for-granted [by all social groups] as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 23). Ideology, in contrast, is an "articulated system of meanings." Thus while hegemony is so naturalized that its existence is simply understood (indeed, it is "not normally the subject of explication or argument" [23]), ideology is generally self-conscious and explicit (though I would add that hegemony need not *always* be tacit, particularly in contexts where anthropologists elicit articulations of what is ordinarily taken for granted). Furthermore, while hegemony is widely shared across social strata, ideology is "the expression and ultimately the possession of a particular social group"; hence different strata within a society may have different ideologies (24). This distinction is useful in part because it allows for the ideological expression of different worldviews and priorities of different social strata, especially when they are in conflict, while retaining the notion that the priorities of dominant groups can hegemonically infuse and (at least partly) shape the actions and experiences of subordinate groups.<sup>9</sup>

I find both concepts particularly important to this ethnography because Giriama attitudes toward their own oppression are so complicated. Hegemonic capitulation to Swahili and Islamic superiority coexists with defiant ideologies in many domains of Giriama life. Giriama narratives about the Muslim spirits that steal money for Swahili register an ideological critique of Swahili capital at the same time that they reiterate a hegemonic view of Islamic forces as intrinsically more potent than the forces associated with Giriama Traditionalism. Giriama experiences of possession by Muslim spirits that compel them to regurgitate customarily Giriama foods and convert to Islam seem an embodied instantiation of the hegemonic premise that Giriamaanness is inadequate, even polluting; at the same time, however, the very victims of these spirits frequently voice their ideological opposition to Islam. The Comaroffs have dis-

cussed the complex relationships between power and consciousness by mapping their distinction between hegemony and ideology onto a spectrum they call a “chain of consciousness,” a range of mental states from subconsciousness to awareness. They define the two poles of this continuum as

the unseen and the seen, the submerged and the apprehended, the unrecognized and the cognized. . . . Between the conscious and the unconscious lies . . . the realm of partial recognition, of inchoate awareness, of ambiguous perception, and sometimes, of creative tension: that liminal space of human experience in which people discern acts and facts but can't or don't order them into narrative descriptions or even into articulate conceptions of the world; in which signs and events are observed, but in a hazy, translucent light; in which individuals or groups know that something is happening to them but find it difficult to put their fingers on quite what it is. (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 29)

Several more clarifications about hegemony and ideology and their relationship to Swahili and Giriama are in order. First, the distinction between hegemony and ideology is not absolute or fixed. The concepts occupy the extreme ends of a continuum; ideas and practices (at both individual and collective levels) may thus move between states of lesser and greater susceptibility to awareness, scrutiny, and critical thought, sometimes existing in the liminal state of “ambiguous perception” the Comaroffs describe. As I have already indicated, hegemonic notions are often built in to social life and discourse in the form of habitual practices and presuppositions, but they need not *always* be tacit, particularly in contexts where anthropologists' inquiries pull them to the surface. Finally, the Comaroffs' discussion of hegemony assumes that hegemonic premises are shared by a particular “political community” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 24); in my case study, however, certain hegemonic premises circulate between two communities with overlapping but generally distinct cultural and political histories rather than within a single society. Such hegemony is possible because Swahili and Giriama live in a partially shared cultural field with recurrent points of encounter, including an ethnically based class system. As a result of this unusual case study that straddles two ethnic groups, I am faced with a special terminological

lacuna. I use the term *hegemony* to describe popular premises, often taken for granted, that circulate between two ethnoreligious groups and operate in the service of the hierarchical status quo. I use the term *ideology* to characterize the articulated and conscious values that circulate within each group, particularly those that address and critique ethnoreligious politics and class relations. Yet I lack a clear term for the often tacit, taken-for-granted social norms that preside only among *one* of these groups. I sidestep this terminological difficulty by resorting to familiar vocabulary, such as *culture*, *custom*, *model*, and *expectation*.

Although there are numerous influences upon the hegemonic force field I have described among Giriama and Swahili, personhood plays a central role. For instance, customary Giriama understandings of personhood, which do not put a premium on individual agency, interiority, or inner consistency, create the conditions of possibility for the particular forms of religious practice I have mentioned: spirit possession that compels one to convert without regard for one's agency; a kind of religious pluralism that does not require the practitioner to choose between faiths (or Truths), but instead allows the practitioner to propitiate two distinct religious loci that are radically separated along ethnolinguistic lines; and divination practices in which diviners need not possess literate or intellectual expertise in order to tap into the mysterious and congealed powers of Arabic and Islam. These practices in turn subtly reinforce a hegemonic ethnoreligious divide because they involve interacting with Islam from afar, sometimes experiencing it as a domineering and ethnically alien power, even among those who do not count themselves as Muslim. At the same time, the Swahili emphases on individual choice and rationality in religious practice, on the consistency of a person's private state of faith, and on literate expertise and mentation in divination all lead to critical judgments of these Giriama religious practices, thereby underscoring the notion that Giriama do not tend to make good Muslims. Put another way, customary Giriama models of personhood undergird religious practices that reaffirm both the potency of Islam and the distinction between Giriama and Swahili ethnoreligious groups, whereas prevailing Swahili models of personhood tend to undergird negative judgments of Giriama that reaffirm the high status of Islam and the same ethnoreligious distinctions. Hence although they have different means of and reasons for doing so, both Swahili and Giriama sustain the

hegemonic notions of Islamic potency and deep-seated links between ethnicity and religion.

The concept of hegemony captures well the way Giriama habitually defer to Swahili status and Islam's power. Perhaps because the Swahili promise of accepting, assimilating, and assisting Giriama is partially broken yet also partially kept, it is not easy for Giriama to see the force fields of power around them with clear eyes; Giriama thus sometimes are complicit in creating elements of the very structure that weighs so heavily upon them. At the same time, the Comaroffs' observation that hegemonic ideas can bubble up to awareness helps to account for the intermittent Giriama articulations of resentment toward this power structure. Those who collude in their own hegemonic oppression sometimes recognize what they are doing when enlightened by a resistant ideology. Similarly, those who hold more power may not experience themselves as oppressors and may have little conscious ill will toward those with less; indeed, the beneficent ideologies of the powerful may contradict the hegemonic nature of the social hierarchy that supports them. This dynamic is in clear operation among Malindi's Swahili, whose norms of charity and politeness inform such claims as "These days we are as one with the Giriama" and who express acute discomfort when confronted with Giriama antagonism. Several times I received stern lectures from Swahili men who informed me that it was treacherous to ask so many questions about ethnic difference. "We don't want Kenya to turn into another Rwanda," said one. "It's better to focus on how well we get along." Other Swahili insisted that their feelings toward Giriama are totally well-meaning and benevolent, even though the institutional distribution of charitable funds tends to follow well-worn tracks that lead to other Muslims and bypass needy Giriama. Most Swahili also adhere to conventional ideology regarding the Islamic brotherhood: namely, that it warmly accepts all comers. Yet almost in spite of themselves, many seem to associate piety with proximity to Arabness, while their cynicism toward Giriama's suitability for piety can make it difficult for them to embrace Giriama as true Muslims. Indeed, in some Swahili rhetoric, Giriama seem doomed to the no man's land described by Homi Bhabha (1994: 153), in which colonizers pressed their subjects to imitate them so as to become "normalize[d]" or "civilize[d]," at the same time they treated such assimilative efforts as pale forms of mimicry that revealed

the colonized as “almost the same, but not quite.” Yet most Swahili I spoke to did not appear to recognize the difficulties encountered by would-be Giriama assimilates to their religious and ethnic fold. Apparently hegemonic force fields can operate in such a way as to occlude the vision not only of the subordinate, but of those in power.

*Marginalization in Malindi and Beyond:  
Giriama and Swahili Predicaments*

When Vasco da Gama’s fleet arrived in Malindi in April 1498 they found an elegantly built town on the shoreline dominated by Arab traders and settlers and a unique Muslim Arabo-African culture called Swahili that had emerged from centuries of settlement and intermarriage. The economy thrived on the agricultural labor of African slaves and through a lively trade in gold, ivory, tortoiseshell, and other goods that circulated around the African coast, Arabia, and India (Strandes 1899/1961: 92). Malindi’s rulers extended hospitality to the Portuguese, but they soon learned that Portuguese intentions were less than noble. The Portuguese monopolized most Indian Ocean trade, exacted tribute from various coastal towns while deposing and replacing some of their rulers, established numerous customs stations, and razed the city of Mombasa (south of Malindi) twice, in 1505 and 1528, with great loss of life. Not surprisingly, Malindi withered under Portuguese influence; by 1606 its Arab population was living in poverty (Martin 1973: 41; Salim 1973).

After the Portuguese chapter came to a close in the late eighteenth century, Malindi’s fortunes lay dormant until its late nineteenth-century rebirth as an agrarian center. Numerous Arab and Swahili families migrated to the town from Arabia and other areas of the coast, rebuilding and vastly extending the agricultural industry dependent on African slaves, many of them Nyasa and Yao imported from the Kilwa area of what is now Tanzania (Martin 1973: 58). Town culture once again centered on a thriving Swahili way of life fed by multiple ethnic influences, including Hadrami, Omani, and Bantu. Coexisting with Swahili and Arabs, but living slightly inland or on the periphery of town, were members of nine closely related coastal groups known today as the Mijikenda, of which Giriama are the largest group and by far the most predominant in the Malindi area. Mijikenda in the nineteenth century were mutually dependent on the Swahili through paternalistic patron-client and trade

relationships that sometimes led to intermarriage and the assimilation of Mijikenda into Swahili society. A relatively small number of Mijikenda were also among the Africans enslaved by Swahili and Arabs, a fact that Giriama today repeatedly emphasize, if not inflate, in their discussions of contemporary Swahili power.<sup>10</sup>

Slavery was ended in Kenya in 1907 under British colonial law, but the transition did not lead to any straightforward condition of freedom for African workers. Instead, the colonial government engaged in a series of complex interventions that attempted to control African labor, with implications for former slaves and all Mijikenda in the Malindi area (Cooper 1980). The colonial state's primary interest was in enforcing the rights of landowners, many of them Arabs and Swahili, and creating an African working class committed to full-time wage labor. But a combination of shifting policies and what Cooper calls "governmental timidity" (224) resulted in a more complex arrangement than this. Stung by a Giriama uprising in 1914 and, later, wary of another Mau Mau revolt, this time on the coast, the colonial administration was reluctant to evict people with no land titles. Mijikenda and others squatted on land they did not own, sometimes remunerating the landlords and finding ways of avoiding steady work (225).

Mijikenda may have sustained some degree of autonomy, but they were hardly prosperous. Particularly in Malindi, Mijikenda remained vulnerable to market fluctuation and population growth (Cooper 1980: 289). Meanwhile the formerly paternalistic relations between Arab and Swahili landowners and their Mijikenda peasant tenants had been largely erased by colonial policies, heightening the vulnerability of squatters (276–77). By the time the transition to independence was complete, most Giriama in the Malindi area found themselves squatting on land owned by Arabs, Swahili, other ethnic groups, or the government. Some squatters became chronically indebted to Arab and Swahili traders and landowners, and what was once a symbiotic relationship became one-sided (S. G. Thompson 1990). In the Malindi area most squatters protected themselves against the fluctuations of the cash economy through subsistence cultivation, though they were on others' land.

Since independence the Kenyan state has created new tensions by attempting to bolster landowners' rights, sometimes implementing du-

bious “resettlement schemes” for squatters. Cooper (1980: 293) describes the position of Mijikenda and former slaves since independence as “less independent, less secure, and more exposed to the vagaries of markets and politics. . . . Food shortages have become chronic . . . wage labor is more often a necessity, and a job something that cannot be jeopardized by frequent returns to a farm.” Today many Giriama squatters outside of Malindi rely on subsistence agriculture, but many also commute into the town center in hopes of getting a job, often from Muslim, upcountry, or European employers. Some build mud-and-wattle dwellings on the margins of town, sacrificing their access to larger plots of land for the prospect of intermittent wage labor.

While Mijikenda have suffered the brunt of economic disenfranchisement in Malindi, Swahili too have reason to feel marginalized on both national and global scales. The British colonial government tended to favor upcountry ethnic groups, and as the move toward independence accelerated in the early 1960s, coastal Muslims, fearing subjugation by an upcountry-dominated and Christian administration, instigated the so-called Mwambao movement in favor of self-rule along the ten-mile-long coastal strip. Although Muslims were granted a degree of autonomy, including freedom of worship and the protection of Islamic Kadhi courts, the coastal strip was assimilated to the Kenyan national government in 1963, and since then coastal Muslims have felt persistently aggrieved by their relationship to the state. In 2002 the Muslim Task Force on Constitutional Review argued, “The Constitution and laws of Kenya reflect the Judeo-Christian origins and beliefs of the colonial masters. Indeed the conduct of state is manifestly Christian in nature” (Hashim 2005: 25). Coastal Muslims have been largely marginalized from ministerial and cabinet positions, while much of the country’s power and wealth remain concentrated “in Christian rather than in Muslim hands” (O’Brien 1995: 201; see also Oded 2000). Muslims’ political indignation was stoked in the early 1990s, when the Kenya African National Union (KANU) government helped sponsor a violent campaign designed to suppress the unregistered Islamic Party of Kenya on the coast (Human Rights Watch 2002). After Al Qaeda bombed U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998 the Kenyan government shut down numerous Muslim NGOs, prompting cries of opportunistic discrimination. Such political and economic

forces have conspired to focus Swahili's orientation overseas, sharpening their investment in and alignment with religious, social, political, and economic networks in the Middle East (O'Brien 1995).

In Malindi itself, both Swahili and Giriama are repeatedly confronted with other evidence of their marginalization. While most urban Swahili enjoy clear socioeconomic advantages relative to most Giriama, both groups agree that upcountry Kikuyu and Luo are disproportionately represented in managerial positions, and both have accepted the presence of European landowners, hoteliers, and tourists with ambivalence. In the decades since independence Anglos and Italians have bought up many shoreline plots, building private residences and luxury resorts and shepherding in what seemed, for a time, like a booming tourism industry that brought jobs and commerce to town residents and Mijikenda on the outskirts. In the 1990s, however, Malindi's tourism industry suffered a steep decline in the wake of the catastrophic weather brought by El Niño, the politically sponsored tribal clashes on the coast in 1997 (during which disgruntled Mijikenda, most of them Digo, were encouraged to target nonindigenous residents suspected of voting against the ruling KANU Party), and the 1998 embassy bombings, which were loosely tied to coastal Muslim communities. The tumultuous violence after the 2007 elections struck another blow to a town economy that had been rebuilding itself. Many Giriama living near Malindi are dependent on petty wage labor provided by the volatile tourism industry, yet many also decry how the dynamics of tourism have brought prostitution, drug use, and fragmentation to their community. Meanwhile, although Swahili benefit from tourism's overall effect on the town economy, many feel excluded from the managerial tiers of the tourism industry (Eastman 1994) and aspire to financial autonomy through landholdings, businesses, and capital received from friends, relatives, and sponsors in the Arab world. Most Swahili also resent the moral decline brought by Malindi's casinos and traveling sybarites. And the presence of so many wealthy whites in Malindi has heightened Swahili and Giriama awareness of global racial divides and the precariousness of their own economic security. Indeed, their constant exposure to national and global flows of people, capital, and images has made both Swahili and Giriama keenly aware of the fantastic advantages enjoyed by those with greater ethnic, racial, national, or class privileges (cf. Appadurai 1991; Weiss 2002).

The discontent of both groups is frequently expressed in tribal terms. After independence in 1963 Kenya did not shake the sharp ethnic divisions carved so deeply by its colonial officials. The colonial administration encouraged the formation of political districts along ethnic lines, and each of the eight elections since 1963 has been informed by ethnically oriented electoral practices, a tendency that has been unofficially institutionalized by politicians who persistently appeal for ethnic support (Adar 1998: 71) and that sometimes comes violently to the fore, most notably in the disastrous aftermath of the December 2007 elections.<sup>11</sup> In Kenya's crucible of inequality, the word on everyone's lips these days is the possibility of *majimbo* (Kisw.), an ethnically based federalism that has been hotly debated across Kenya and has been defined and redefined since the 1960s to suit every ethnic group's fantasies of entitlement to land and resources. Some coastal Swahili and Arabs have pinned their hopes on *majimbo* as a means of uniting and protecting the interests of Swahili-speaking peoples, and some Giriama versions of *majimbo* are freighted with fantasies of retribution against Swahili and Arabs who have encroached on territory they say is essentially theirs. The political history of East Africa has thus reified and exacerbated ethnic difference; it is perhaps not surprising, then, that Giriama find it more difficult than ever to attain acceptance if they try to assimilate into Malindi's core Swahili community. This sense of exclusion has ramifications in many domains of Giriama experience.

These historical complexities pull Malindi's Giriama and Swahili residents in several directions at once. Swahili, for instance, increasingly grapple with how to incorporate modern forms of personhood and material practice into their identity (P. Caplan and Topan 2004), even as many are oriented to the Middle East as an esteemed locus of kin ties, status, wealth, and Muslim solidarity. Depending on political exigencies, Swahili may define themselves as Africans entitled to be on the Kenya coast (A. M. Mazrui and Sheriff 1994; McIntosh 2001a) or focus on the essentialized cachet of Arabian blood from far away, as did many colonial administrators in their dealings with coastal peoples. As I have already indicated, Islam itself is contested, for local ritual innovations in Swahili societies, some of which emerged from contact with other ethnic groups in the region, are increasingly challenged by reformists who encourage a more orthodox, text-based, and interior version of the religion in which

one's state of mind is paramount to one's piety. The ritual practices of divination, herbalism, and spirit possession long practiced by Swahili up and down the coast and overlapping to some degree with Mijikenda Traditionalism are regarded by elite and reformist Muslims in Malindi as heretical and are discouraged by many in mainstream Swahili society. Overall the converging forces of modernity and Islamic reformism have heightened the salience of self-determination, agency, and carefully controlled intentions in Swahili personhood, though these ideologies hardly determine a uniform practice in Malindi.

Giriama are also subject to many cross-cutting forces. Customary social structures of the past, revolving around patriarchal, polygynous family units and ancestor propitiation, have deteriorated among residents of the Malindi area as much of their energy is focused on improvisational strategies for survival. The advantages associated with Westernization lure some youth into the tourism industry, usually as low-paid hotel workers, "beach boys," or tour guides. Christianity, which is loosely associated with the Kenyan state and the Western world, has gained a substantial number of converts, but Islam maintains a special status as a highly visible, high-status religion that Giriama associate with the wealth and privileges of their Swahili neighbors and that many Giriama look to with mingled resentment and hope. At the same time, customary Giriama models of personhood continue to shape modes of religious experience, as well as Giriama's judgments of the perils of modernity and the ills of capitalist hierarchy.

*Malindi Today: Spatial Hierarchies of Ethnicity,  
Religion, and Language*

It is by now an anthropological commonplace that ethnic communities premise their identity not only on contrasts with other groups (Barth 1969), but also on particular spatial relations (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b). Spatial experience is a privileged dimension of social contrast between Malindi's Swahili and Giriama, in part because their domiciles, places of worship, and languages tend to be concentrated in different locales. Yet the spatial quality of Giriama-Swahili relations is as much a product of social imagination as of demography (cf. Appadurai 1991; Gupta and Ferguson 1997a), and ideologically loaded spatial fantasies play central roles in Swahili's and Giriama's sense of identity. For in-

stance, while many Swahili aspire to root their religious faith and identity in the Arabian peninsula (indeed, many have claimed an Arab heritage, sometimes on tenuous grounds), Giriama understand their most authentic identity to be grounded in the Kaya; these are circular clearings in the hinterland forest that, now almost empty, are said to have once been inhabited by entire Giriama communities and tightly administered by revered elders with sacred powers (Parkin 1991a). Swahili define themselves as an urban and civilized (*mstaarabu*, a term derived from the word for Arab) people, in contrast to the Nyika, the pejorative label they sometimes apply to Giriama, which can be loosely glossed as “people of the bush.” Giriama in Malindi often reflect bitterly on the limited scope of their travels compared to Swahili abilities to tap into supernatural forms of flight and speed.

The imagined quality of space in Swahili and Giriama discourse also makes itself plain in a semiotic pattern Irvine and Gal (2000) have termed “fractal recursivity,” in which the same conceptual opposition is projected at various levels of scale. Among Swahili, for instance, not only is the Muslim, urban coastal strip contrasted with the supposedly primitive hinterland, but even within Malindi the central sections of town numerically dominated by Swahili are sometimes rhetorically contrasted with the primitive depredations of impoverished outlying Giriama areas. The inner sanctum of Swahili houses tends to be guarded against low-status visitors such as non-Muslim Giriama tradesmen, who, if they are considered too redolent of the bush, are typically obliged to remain outside; indeed, the valorization of private, enclosed, and pure spaces has a long history in Swahili architecture (Donley-Reid 1990). The same opposition between civilized and less civilized spaces is thereby imagined with both broad and fine-grained brush strokes.

Spatial tropes also provide metaphors for religious ontologies in Giriama discourse, preserving the conceptual separation between Giriama-ness and Islam. For example, Giriama in Malindi tend to divide spirits into those hailing from “the Giriama side” and those from “the Muslim side.” Giriama Muslims sometimes refer to conversion to Islam as a kind of “arrival” or “going in” and claim that Swahili “will never come out” of their religion, as if it were a privileged space. Spatial metaphors figure too in Giriama apprehensions of their disadvantage and marginalization. The young man discussing the disappointments of conversion in my

opening vignette alludes to Giriama “trying to get to the Muslim side” who will “find themselves sweeping cake off the floor of the mosque at the end of the day.” His reference to the floor picks up on his friend’s image of Muslims touching their foreheads to the floor in prayer, but transforms the floor from a site of piety to one of debasement and servitude.

While tropes of spatiality are central to Swahili-Giriama hierarchies, these find much inspiration in the demographic facts and the physical layout of Malindi town. The township of Malindi extends in a seven-kilometer strip from north to south along the Indian Ocean. From a small roundabout at the center of town, paved roads radiate in several directions, partitioning and crisscrossing the various town divisions (*mitaa*, sing. *mtaa*; Kisw.). One road encircles the densely packed shops, eateries, Swahili and Arab residences, madarasas (Kisw.), and schools that make up the central division known as Barani; another passes Shella, the division housing several mosques and much of Malindi’s Swahili and Arab population in buildings constructed with stone. A popular thoroughfare runs from the north, passing tourist rental cottages, cafés, insurance agencies, tiny medical clinics, Internet kiosks, casinos, and discos, ultimately arriving at the bustling heart of town. From there it deposits travelers and tourists at banks, grocery stores, gas stations, Malindi’s fishing club, and dozens of curio shacks, eventually tracing the beachfront south of the town center and the large European expatriate mansions and luxury hotels so important to an increasingly fragile town economy. Still another route branches off the roundabout to the southwest, past the mud dwellings and makeshift cement houses of Ngala and Kisumundogo divisions, where migrant laborers from many ethnic backgrounds live. This road passes the small landing strip that is the Malindi airport, until it eventually veers south to Mombasa. Back in town, unpaved routes weave through several residential areas, the roads pitted with rocks that ruin the axles of Malindi’s decrepit fleets of three- and four-wheeled taxis. Some of these routes can be traced into the heart of divisions such as Majengo to the west and Maweni and Muyeye to the south, where so many Giriama live. Muyeye is a particularly impoverished region, and increasingly crowded as well. During a bad rainstorm the water sluices along the muddy paths between dwellings, carrying plastic bags and empty tin cans to someone else’s doorstep.

Malindi's town center fairly throbs with the hum of bus engines and commercial activity. At the outdoor market just outside of town, near the piles of fresh fruits and vegetables, the cassava stacked on the ground like tree branches, and the glittering heaps of dried fish for sale, an astonishing diversity of people circulate each day. Barefoot Giriama women come from their rural homesteads to sell surpluses of mangoes, bananas, and greens; these they balance on their heads in large woven trays that complement their carefully tied, matching *kanga* cloths in bright colors. Many of the older Giriama women wear the customary *hando* bustles of grass and cloth that enhance their hips and buttocks, and small talismanic pouches around their upper arms, waists, or necks that announce their affiliation with the spirits and diviners of Giriama Traditionalism. They circulate amid Christian men and women of various ethnic backgrounds (including Giriama), some of whom take advantage of the trade in secondhand clothes from the West to buy patterned synthetic dresses with shoulder pads, pumps, or dress shirts and slacks.

Muslim Swahili and Arab men sometimes wear Western-style clothing, but many also wear their white *kofia* cap every day, and on Fridays most don the full-length white *kanzu* robe. Swahili and Arab women are hard to mistake, draped in their head-to-toe *bui bui* veils, usually of black polyester. Their feet, exposed to public view, can reach heights of expressiveness. Some women have stained their toenails with henna or painted them with red toenail polish; many wear open-toe shoes whose straps, heels, and sparkling vinyl declare an expensive and precious femininity. These groups comprise most of the marketplace crowd, but every so often others stroll past: a lone Maasai draped in his red cape, on his way to a hotel where he and his peers have been hired to sing and dance for a largely Western audience; a Somali immigrant from the war-torn north; a Bohra Muslim of Indian descent, perhaps walking to the fabric shop he owns; a finely shod Kikuyu office worker; a Kamba from the hinterland, come to sell his carvings to tourists or in search of wage labor. Occasionally a group of white backpackers—usually English, German, Italian, or American—strides through the marketplace looking for a soda and gazing curiously at the scene.

Beyond the market, Christian churches and Muslim mosques are scattered throughout Malindi's divisions. The construction and maintenance of Malindi's large mosques are often funded by organizations

from the Middle East, while a handful of missionaries, most of them American, have been instrumental in the efflorescence of small churches around town. In 1998 I found twenty-eight churches and fifteen mosques in the approximately fourteen square kilometers of Malindi township, some of them sitting almost cheek by jowl. The mosques, while fewer in number, have the advantage of beauty and size; their tall, bulbous minarets are visible from a distance, their cavernous central spaces are encircled by long, crenellated walls, and their ornate pastel paint jobs seem designed to broadcast both purity and wealth. Calls to prayer are typically announced through loudspeakers, filling the town with melodious Arabic. Most churches, on the other hand, are humbly and rapidly constructed; small, one-room cement structures provide no distractions from their intended spiritual message. Many were built in the past few decades as a renewed postcolonial surge of missionary effort and competitiveness with Islam washed across the Kenya coast (cf. O'Brien 1995). As if to compensate for their unprepossessing appearance, they announce their presence to potential members with numerous small, hand-painted signs mounted on stakes and driven into the soil along the main roads of town.

Walking through Malindi town, passersby can hear a *muzzein* intoning the call to prayer from a mosque loudspeaker or the sound of children reciting Quranic prayers in the madarasa. On Sunday morning the church just a few doors down might resound with Christian songs accompanied by the tambourine or the tumult of an entire congregation speaking in the voice of the Holy Spirit. The presence of Giriama Traditionalism is more muted, for it stakes no claim to land in town or to formal educational institutions, and its shrines are tucked away in rural spaces. Many Muslims and Christians consider it a backward form of religious practice, one that they have transcended with their connections to transnationally validated faiths. Yet Traditionalism's presence in the town center is nonetheless broadcast through small, subtle cues: the talismans on the arms of Giriama women, the occasional sign advertising traditional healing (*uganga wa kienyeji*), and the tiny kiosks named after some element of Traditionalism (such as *kiraho*, a supernatural spell that protects against theft).<sup>12</sup>

The material accoutrements and spatial layout of Malindi's religions point to and reinforce the steep hierarchy between Islam and Tradi-

tionalism. A related hierarchy can be found in the linguistic domain, which is central to the ethnoreligious dynamics I describe. The four most prominent languages in Malindi are Kiswahili, Kenya's national language and one of its official languages; English, the other official language; Kigiriyama, the Giriama mother tongue; and Arabic, vital to Islamic religious life. Of these, Kigiriyama, Kiswahili, and Arabic are most central to the ongoing struggles of Swahili and Giriama to define and protect their ethnic identities. And each language tends to be associated with certain spaces that are more or less valorized in coastal society.

Swahili see Arabic as broad in its extension, connecting them to the wealthy and sacred Arab lands and to the pan-national sites of the global Muslim community. Arabic also extends vertically in the sacred imaginary, as the language not only of the Quran, but also of Allah and all the souls in heaven. Those Swahili who have the opportunity and the motivation study the language in madarasa, and some travel to Arabia to master it.

The national language, Kiswahili, has a more truncated spatial reach and a correspondingly lesser status among coastal Muslims, but still enjoys prestige for several reasons. For noncoastal Kenyans, Kiswahili represents an element of panethnic national identity and, for those who have learned the standard forms in primary and secondary school, education. The language is spoken by millions in East Africa, offering a degree of local cosmopolitanism to its speakers. Among coastal residents local versions of Kiswahili, which is strongly associated with their ethnic heritage and with Islam, constitute the mother tongue of the Swahili people. While Kiswahili has many Bantu elements, with syntactic and semantic cognates in Kigiriyama and the other Mijikenda languages, about 20 to 30 percent of its lexicon originates in Arabic. The meanings that Swahili themselves impose upon these linguistic facts are a matter of cultural and political contingency (Khalid 1977; A. M. Mazrui and Shariff 1994; A. A. Mazrui and Mazrui 1995; Russell 1981). Some nationalists have emphasized Kiswahili's Bantu roots to underscore its essential African-ness, while others have cited its Arabic components to support an Arabo-centric model of Swahili identity. Regardless of where the ideological and spatial emphasis is placed, Kiswahili retains a dual connotation on the coast as both the language of urban Muslim Swahili and a language of education and East African commerce.

Kigiriana, by contrast, suffers as the least valued and most spatially marginalized language in the wider linguistic marketplace. Considered atavistic and nonliterate by Swahili and Arabs, upcountry folk, and representatives of the Kenyan state, Kigiriana is sometimes associated by cultural outsiders with the bush (*msitu* or *nyika*) rather than with town life. It has been neglected by scholars and state agencies, is virtually never used in print media, and, unlike Kiswahili, Arabic, and English, is not offered as a subject of study in state or private schools. While some non-Giriana pick up elements of the language through proximity, the idea of setting out to learn Kigiriana would strike most coastal residents as peculiar, if not outlandish. Underscoring this stigma, many coastal schools forbid the use of Kigiriana in primary school classrooms once students have begun the study of Kiswahili and English. The opprobrium associated with Kigiriana works against elderly and unschooled Giriana who speak little to no Kiswahili or English; they are isolated from employment opportunities, from communication with medical professionals in town (most of whom come from upcountry), and from interaction with most bureaucrats. Giriana themselves recognize the stigma some apply to their language and the limits of its extension into the wider world, yet many associate it with the potencies of Traditionalism and defend it as the repository of an authentic Giriana identity. “Those old Giriana diviners in the hinterland,” say some Giriana youth with reverence, “they speak the original Kigiriana, the pure version.” The Giriana deployment of Kigiriana, Kiswahili, and Arabic in divination and healing rituals sometimes reinscribes the ethnoreligious links between Kigiriana, Giriana people, and Traditionalism, as well as the hegemonic ethnoreligious links between Kiswahili, Swahili people, and Islam.

### *In the Field*

Every field experience brings its own complications. My own, carried out over eighteen months in 1995, 1996, 1998–1999, and 2004, was shaped by the contingencies of studying two communities that live in a fraught relationship with one another. Giriana and Swahili alike were intrigued by my research into their relationships, an interest that opened up many conversations about the perceived shortcomings of the other group and, in some cases, anxiety that my study might exacerbate ethnic tensions. Nevertheless, I found many informants to be forthcoming, particularly as

people grew accustomed to my presence. I gathered information through a combination of interviews with both Swahili and Giriama and participant observation in households and public areas, where I could listen to daily chat among family and friends and witness interactions between Swahili and Giriama. I have altered the names and other identifying characteristics of most of my informants to preserve their anonymity; exceptions include my primary research assistant, Maxwell, and certain well-known individuals who did not object to being identified, such as the famous Giriama healer Charo Shutu (now deceased).

Finding a suitable place to live proved to be more complicated than finding conversation with willing informants. I worried that members of each community might look at me askance if they thought I was living with the other ethnic group. Choosing a home was also complicated by the economic hardships in Malindi; a precipitous drop in tourism in the late 1990s had resulted in heightened violent crime that made outsiders (especially those assumed to be wealthy on the basis of race) potential targets. When I first arrived in town I found quite a few well-to-do families scrambling to set up security alarm systems for their homes. The tensions between Mijikenda and Swahili, fomented by the politically motivated ethnic clashes of 1997, fed an undercurrent of discontent among Mijikenda youth, among them Giriama who contemplated rebellion against Swahili and Arabs and sometimes, in my presence, discussed the possibility of another violent uprising. When the embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were bombed in August 1998, FBI agents swarmed through Swahili communities up and down the coast (eventually arresting one individual from Malindi), and some of my Swahili friends and informants participated in rallies where American flags were burned. Some Swahili, particularly those with ties to the controversial and as yet unregistered Islamic Party of Kenya, wondered aloud if I might be a CIA agent with anti-Muslim intentions.

Seeking a safe space that would not obviously align me with either Swahili or Giriama causes, I eventually spent the greater part of my fieldwork house-sitting for an East African of British descent whose gated home was equidistant from some of my primary field sites: the Swahili communities in Shella and Barani and the Giriama communities in Muyeye and Maweni. My home base may have aligned me initially with the white colonial community, but it also helped me present myself

as neutral in the matter of Swahili and Giriama disputes, and I hoped that my extensive contact with Swahili and Giriama friends and informants would eventually make it clear that I was a *mzungu* (white person) of a different stripe. By day I walked or rode a bicycle to Swahili or Giriama communities, socializing at length with certain families I came to know well, accompanying family members on their errands, joining in leisurely conversations on public verandas in town or in clearings in more rural areas, and engaging in prearranged interviews. Sometimes I would live in a Giriama or Swahili household for several days during special occasions, such as a Giriama funeral or Ramadan. I also ventured into communities several kilometers away from Malindi town, living with Giriama friends in Ganda and Swahili in Mambui. Much of my attention was directed toward religious practitioners, including Giriama diviners and healers (*aganga*), Muslim leaders (imams and other pious individuals), and the Swahili diviner healers known as *walimu wa kitabu*. I came to know some of these people fairly well, observing as numerous Giriama *aganga* practiced their craft and studying Arabic with one Swahili *mwalimu wa kitabu*. As a woman I was not allowed access to certain ritual contexts, particularly within Malindi's mosques, but I also came across as a more benign figure than I otherwise might have, able to ingratiate myself fairly easily into households and many social situations.

My field situation involved speakers proficient in Kiswahili, Kigiriama, and occasionally English or Arabic. I interviewed some Giriama in Kiswahili and, less often, English. When spending time with Giriama who were speaking Kigiriama, I required the help of an assistant, who performed simultaneous translations and went over recordings of interviews and less formal (often multilingual) discussions in detail with me. I interviewed Swahili in Kiswahili and occasionally in English, and I used a Swahili assistant to help me translate Arabic when necessary. Most of the quotations in this book come from transcribed recordings of conversations carried out in Kiswahili, Kigiriama, or English.

### *Overview of Chapters*

In chapter 1 I discuss Giriama and Swahili ethnicity from two angles: the historical and political, and the contemporary and discursive. I offer a brief overview of the rise of ethnic categories on the Kenya coast, describing the precolonial fluidity between Swahili and Giriama in the

nineteenth century and the colonial policies that attempted to crystallize divisions between these groups while allocating resources asymmetrically. This divisiveness lives on in the tribalist rhetoric of today's politicians and has been heated to the boiling point by politicized ethno-territorial contests over land and resources that blight much of Kenya. I then discuss contemporary ethnic discourse among Swahili and Giriama in Malindi, focusing on widespread (though not unanimous) currents of ethnic essentialism and on Giriama frustrations at perceived Swahili prejudice. This chapter sets the stage for my subsequent discussions of a hegemonic divide that is not only ethnically but also religiously framed.

In chapter 2 I lay out a more detailed portrait of current economic discrepancies between Swahili and Giriama, explaining how Giriama experience and translate these discrepancies into models of the world. I describe how economic differences emerge from and reaffirm core differences in Swahili and Giriama understandings of personhood. Swahili increasingly emphasize individual discipline and accumulation (supplemented by a flow of resources from Middle Eastern communities), while Giriama tend to apprehend these orientations with some suspicion, valorizing instead more reciprocal modes of the economic person. I further explain that Giriama tend to model Swahili wealth in terms of tropes of mobility, speed, and transport to faraway locales, qualities Giriama perceive as both enviable and dangerous, and qualities that they contrast with the rootedness in local land to which many Giriama aspire. Finally, I detail the popular Giriama narratives about Muslim *jini* spirits that live off the blood of innocents, including Giriama, so that they may fly to Arabia to bring money to their Swahili and Arab owners. I suggest that these spirit narratives constitute a critique of Swahili capital, consolidate the association between money and mobility, and contribute to a hegemonic naturalization of the perceived relationships between ethnicity, religion, and supernaturally obtained privilege.

In chapter 3 I focus on Giriama attitudes toward Islam and the contrasts between Swahili ideologies of conversion to Islam and Giriama spirit possession experiences that compel them to convert. These religious differences among Swahili and Giriama hinge on the different notions of personhood that prevail in their respective communities. Swahili notions of ideal conversion target inner states such as rationality, free choice, and intention. In contrast, Giriama tend not to focus on these

mentalist notions; their model of personhood privileges practice and embodied experience as crucial components of religiosity. This orientation can be seen in the Giriama spirit possession phenomenon in which Muslim spirits overtake Giriama individuals and force them to regurgitate the food and drink considered quintessentially Giriama while demanding their conversion to Islam. I suggest that this possession experience, far from constituting an act of resistance, as it is commonly described in the literature on spirit possession, is an embodiment of a hegemonic premise, namely, the notion that Giriama and Islam are intrinsically incompatible and that Giriama is polluting to Islam. Still, although some possessed Giriama convert to Islam to mollify the spirit and end their own torment, many also give voice to their anger against Muslims and Islam. Embodied hegemony and articulated ideologies of resistance can therefore coexist within the same individual. Finally, I discuss the fact that Swahili sometimes deride what they see as flawed Giriama agency in their spirit-forced conversions. Their different assumptions about personhood thereby score an even sharper line between these already ruptured ethnic groups.

Chapter 4 details Giriama healing rituals in which practitioners seem to tack back and forth between distinct, linguistically grounded loci of power, one Traditionalist and the other Islamic. I argue that the religious and linguistic pluralism in such rituals is grounded in a Giriama model of religious personhood in which mental states such as belief are neither scrutinized nor discussed, and hence consistency of belief is not particularly important. As a result, Giriama appropriation of Islamic symbolism in these rituals is not best described in terms of standard notions of religious blending or harmonious syncretism; indeed, I suggest that we need a more refined term, *polyontologism*, to take account of a mode of religiosity that deliberately moves between discrete supernatural ontologies. I further argue that code switching in some Giriama rituals both emerges from and helps to sustain a hegemonic model of ethnoreligious essentialism in which particular ethnolinguistic groups, in this case, Swahili and Giriama, are intrinsically linked to particular religious forces: Islam and Traditionalism, respectively. Even when Giriama appear to be mixing religious influences, many ritual practitioners nevertheless mark them as not only ontologically but ethnically separate.

Chapter 5 explores the politics of language in greater depth, with

a focus on power and personhood in interactions with Arabic. Both Giriama and Swahili consider Arabic a repository of supernatural power with divinatory and curative abilities; this is another instance of hegemony that Giriama tend to accept. But Swahili and Giriama uses of Arabic texts in divination ceremonies are quite different, in ways that speak to their different models of personhood. While Swahili tend to treat Arabic as a rich repository of hidden meaning that can be accessed only through mental mastery and intellectual agency, Giriama tend to access its potency through spirit possession, in which they relinquish personal agency and defer to the powers of the Muslim spirits. This pattern consolidates the Giriama mystification of Islam and reinforces Swahili suspicions that Giriama “don’t know what they’re doing” with Arabic texts. At the end of the chapter I analyze the fact that a common symptom of madness among Giriama is being taken over by Muslim spirits that speak (spirit versions of) Arabic. Apparently the ultimate dissolution of Giriama personhood is represented by its colonization by this ethnolinguistic identity.

The epilogue discusses Giriama responses to the politically driven ethnic violence that tragically divided Kenya in the wake of the December 2007 presidential elections. In early 2008 some Giriama and other Mijikenda retreated to the Kaya, the mythic locus of their autochthony, to plot a war against those coastal residents who have profited in a geographic region where they supposedly do not belong. In this latest national conflict, it seems that all sides have turned to ethnoterritorialism in some of the starkest terms Kenya has ever seen.