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THE *MWAKA* OF MAKUNDUCHI, ZANZIBAR¹

Odile Racine

One of the biggest festivals of Unguja Island (Zanzibar) takes place at Makunduchi each year. Originally this festival was part of a whole series of agrarian rites aimed at securing the protection and help of spirits in order to ensure the prosperity of the country and its inhabitants. Now only the New Year festival, or *mwaka*, survives. Rather than declining, this festival has become more and more important in recent years. This has coincided with a number of changes and the concerns of this new festival reach far beyond those of the original peasant community.

The Country of Makunduchi

Makunduchi, or Kae to local people, situated in the south of Unguja island, has approximately ten thousand inhabitants. Everyone, both men and women, cultivates the land. Some practise complementary activities like fishing, hunting, building, embroidery or rope-making. Even small-time traders or officials farm.

The inhabitants of the region, from Bwejuu to Unguja Ukuu, see themselves as belonging to one cultural community whose way of life (peasant communities), history (for a long time under the indirect role of the Arabs) and language (Kikae is one of the southern dialects²) differ from those of other peasant and, above all, from urban communities.

The whole population is Muslim and Muslim religious festivals are well-attended. However, none surpasses the New Year festival.

Ordinary *mizimu*

The *mwaka*, literally 'year' is a festival linked to the cult of *mizimu* (singular *mzimu*).

Mzimu is a sacred place, which is found at the edge of Makunduchi villages (*viambo*). It consists of a cave, a natural hollow in the rocks, or a hut situated in the middle of a grove of trees overgrown by brambles. No cultivation or collection of wood is permitted there apart from during cults.

¹ This paper was first published in David PARKIN, 1994, *Continuity and Autonomy in Swahili Communities. Inland Influences and Strategies of Self Determination*, Beiträge zur Afrikanistik. Band 48. Wien 1994; London. School of Oriental and African Studies, pp. 167-175.

² O. Racine-Issa: 2002.

The *mzimu* is the home of a spirit. Nobody enters unless first announcing themselves in the same way as one knocks on the door of a house. The presence of the spirit is indicated by a piece of white cloth, sometimes with the addition of a piece of red cloth. These colours symbolize man and woman, sperm and blood, and of course are found in different variations throughout the Bantu world¹.

In Makunduchi, the caves are considered to be places chosen by the spirits themselves, whereas the butts, which always face west, seem to be tombs. Such details are, however, rarely still remembered though this is not the case for *Mabuko*, on the beach at Kigaeni. This *mzimu*, celebrated for its power, is said to be the tomb of a leper.



Mzimu wa Mabuko - 1992

Each lineage has its *mzimu* and every individual can generally name two, three or four *mizimu* to which they are connected.

People never go alone to a *mzimu* but are always accompanied by a *mvya*² who is the spirit's intermediary with whom it communicates through dreams. The spirit warns them of epidemics, droughts, reveals sorcerers or those who have bad intentions, and at the same time gives remedies for these difficulties. The *mzimu* spirit is both the protector of the lineage's 'children' and an intermediary with God.

¹ L. Brain, 1973: 122-3.

² From *kuvyaa*, to give birth.

Apart from the *mwaka*, no ceremony has a fixed date. One goes to the *mzimu* only to ask for help or to make an offering (*ada*)¹.

Requests are made quite informally. The *mvya/e* begins to communicate with the spirit by burning incense and making up a prayer.

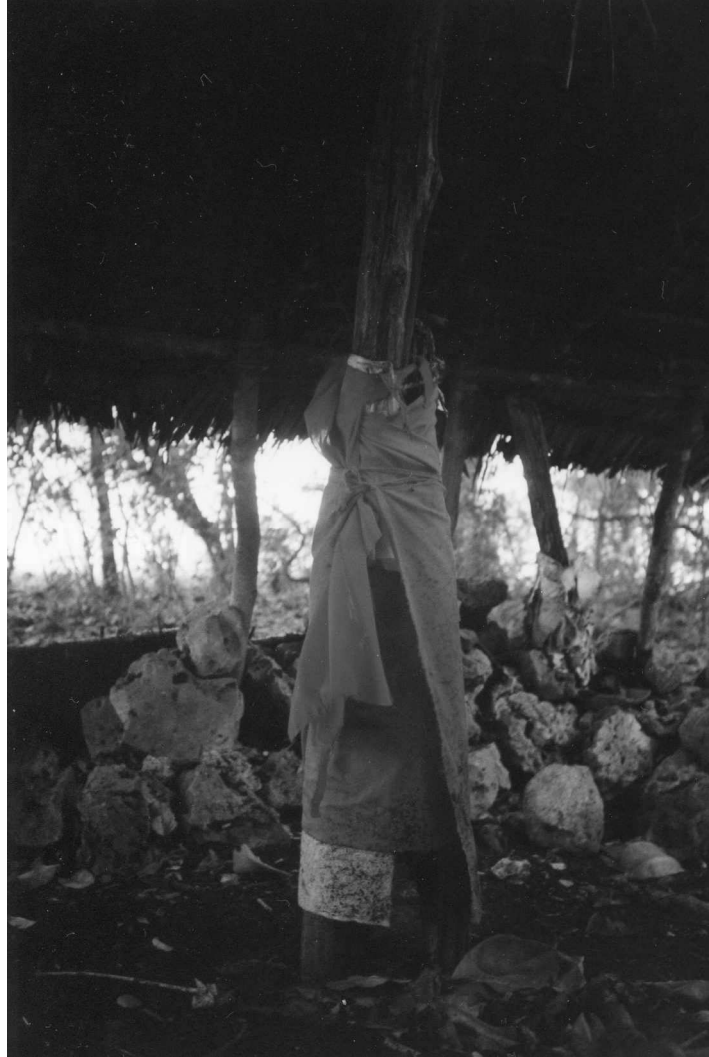
A propitiatory ceremony (*ada*) is more elaborate. After sweeping the area², women light a fire and begin to cook rice. Meanwhile the *mvya/e* changes the cloth and tells the spirit the purpose of the visit. Then one of the women gives food to the person making the offering and to the children, a handful of rice mixed with coconut milk (*tu'i*) or with honey, according to the spirit concerned. The participants then share a meal of which the main ingredient is rice. No sacrifices take place within *mizimu* and no food may be taken away.

Although it is difficult to conceive of today, it would seem that the cult of *mizimu* was originally an ancestor cult. This was how the first observers reported it³. Though other authors later rejected this idea this may be because, as among the Zaramo⁷, conceptions of the *mzimu* spirit underwent a transformation under the influence of more orthodox Islam which is increasingly linked to city life.

¹ The same is found among the Luguru, see G. Bombwe: 1983.

² Ibid.

³ De Courmont: 1885: 465; C. Saleux: 1909, xxiv; 1939, art. Mzimu; G. Dale: 1920: 25; W.H. Ingrams: 1967: 435-7; H. Koritschoner: 1936: 219; S.S. bin Omar: 1940, 25; J.S. Trimmingham: 1964, 116-7.



Mzimu wa Tangini - 1991

It is possible to trace the change in conceptions of the 'soul' within the last century from African to Arab-Muslim. In 1868, A. Germain writes:

L'âme est immortelle, séparée du corps elle devient *kinouli*, l'ombre, et s'en va, *peponi*, dans la demeure des esprits(...); les âmes des défunts tiennent à ce que les vivants ne les oublient pas; elles leur apparaissent en songe et exigent des prières, des cérémonies et des sacrifices¹.

In 1964, a century later, J. Trimingham notes:

¹ A. Germain: 1868, 554.

For the Swahili, man consists of two spiritual principles: the *roho* (*ar-ruh*) 'spirit' and the *kivuli* 'shade' or 'double'. When a person dies (*salimu roho*) his *roho* is taken by God; i.e. joins the universal spirit, but the *kivuli*, though detached from the body, remains nearby for forty days. On the fortieth day a visit (*vunja fungu*) is paid to make a valedictory offering, after which the *kivuli* is free to go and inhabit the world of spirits (*kuzimu*). It is then known as *koma* and often referred to as *mzimu* inhabiting the place of spirit invocation and sacrifice (*kuzimuni*)¹.

Nowadays the term *kivuli* has completely lost its metaphysical meaning².

The *mizimu* cult has been studied in several regions of mainland Tanzania, e.g. among the Zaramo³, the Zigua⁴, the Ngulu⁵, the Luguru⁶ and the Kaguru⁷. Among these peoples a clan is composed of living people on the one hand and of spirits (*musimu*, plural *misimu*) on the other, that is, those who are no longer living or who have not yet been born and who inhabit the world of spirits (*kusimu*). Their country is far from the mountains. It is dark and vaguely associated with the west. They live in villages and have the same activities as men⁸. The graves are marked by some stones but it is only for propitiations that people visit them and sweep them⁹.

At Makunduchi, the *mizimu* cult is no longer thought of as an ancestor cult but merely as an invocation between men and God by means of an intermediary. Even though *mizimu* are all linked to and protectors of lineages, they are by nature different to humans. However, elements of this old notion are mixed with or conflict with newer conceptions of the world.

Community *mizimu*

¹ J.S. Trimingham: 1964, 79.

² But it was still found among the Zaramo in the 1970s. Cf. M.L. Swantz: op.cit,182, and elsewhere in eastern Africa, e.g. the Giriama (D. Parkin: 1991, 214-5).

³ Ibid, 181, n.3, 186.

⁴ T.O. Beidelman: 1967, 69-70.

⁵ Ibid, 57-63.

⁶ Ibid, 18-19; G. Bombwe: op.cit.; J. Mawinza: 1968: 421, 426.

⁷ T.O. Beidelman: op. cit.: 112-3.

⁸ Ibid: 33-4; 1986: 112-3.

⁹ Ibid:123; 1967:49-50; for a description of the ceremonies see G. Bombwe: op.cit: 21-3.

Some *mizimu* have influence beyond the lineage and play an important role in festivals which bring together the whole community. Of these, two are particularly well-known and emanate from notions that are virtually opposed.

Msikiti Kichaka, 'the Bush Mosque', is the only *mizimu* that is not attached to a specific lineage. It is maintained by the *Wakubwa wa ch^hi*, 'Important People of the country'. It is the *mzimu* of the whole community - one might almost say *umma* - of Makunduchi inhabitants.

It is situated at the junction of the north and south parts of the town, which are traditionally opposed. It is a small mosque, a permanent, whitewashed structure which, like all the country's mosques, faces north, but which contains both white and red pieces of cloth. It is also the only *mzimu* which is considered to be a place of worship rather than a dwelling place.

These days all ceremonies which concern the whole community make an obligatory stop at Msikiti Kichaka.

In spite of this, it does not signify in any particular relationship and, these days, has only a marginal role in the *mwaka* festival.

The other great *mzimu* is Majipeponi, 'the place where the big spirits live'¹. It is attached to a lineage, from the southern part of the country.

It is a cave at the edge of the sea to the south of Makunduchi and appears to be quite far from any habitation. No person from outside the lineage may go there.

The *Wamavua*², the Majipeponi spirits, are more powerful than the others. These are the protectors of the whole country of Makunduchi. During initiatory visits to the cave, they have communicated to humans, women in particular, knowledge of plants that cure female sterility³.

Without ignoring the differences, it may be noted that the Zaramo also got knowledge of plants to combat sterility during initiatory journeys to the heart of the earth⁴.

At Makunduchi, members of the lineage linked to Majipeponi are obliged to tell them of all births. The *Wamavua* then visit the young mother and give the child a name. The

¹ Or 'the water of Paradise' according to different interpretations. One also finds *Miji Peponi*, 'Towns of Paradise'.

² This should undoubtedly be translated as 'children of the rain' (*wana wa vua* in kikae); W.H. Ingrams (op. cit. 486-7) describes a cult of rain spirits.

³ O. Racine-Issa: 2002, 153-173.

⁴ M.L. Swantz: op.cit. 239; for the Kaguru see T.O. Beidelman: 1973, 143.

wavyale of Majipeponi therefore have at least two first names. The one given by the *Wamavua* is never a Muslim name¹.

A similar custom is found among the Kaguru where spirits give one or more names to a new-born child, for it has come from the world of the spirits. A birth among the living corresponds to a death among the spirits².

At Makunduchi there is no perception of a universe organized in this way. Sometimes, however, it is revealed by a slip of the tongue, betrayed by linguistic habits. A *mvvale* would explain the nocturnal visit of a *Mmavua* like this:

Siku nyingine husikia 'Haji'. Nyiwa nyumbani. Sasa hwitikia 'oo!' Siku nyingine natoka nje, natazama huku na huku. Hapana mtu. Husema: 'Basi, Wazee wao!'³.

'Some days I hear 'Haji'. I am at home. I reply 'oo!' Sometimes I go outside, I look here and there. There is no-one there. I say to myself: 'Well, it must be the ancestors.'

The *mwaka* is a festival celebrated by the *Wamavua* who have asked men to do the same. There are, therefore, two types of *mizimu*. The first, which is attached to a particular lineage, shares a certain ideal of the soul and of life beyond, at least with the nearby peoples on the Tanzanian mainland. The second, Msikiti Kichaka, symbolizes a break with the life, death, birth cycle and is tied up with Muslim ideas of the soul and of paradise.

The Traditional New Year Festival

The traditional festival of New Year or *mwaka* has always signified the highlight of the *mizimu* cult. Formerly it formed part of a series of ceremonies which took place every four months and which were called 'country medicine' (*miganga ya ch^hi*).

This festival has been portrayed many times, in most detail by J. Gray in 1954, who described it as a Persian inheritance⁴.

Since that time the festival has changed. Traditional ceremonies have withered while a political ritual has developed.

¹ For example Kidete, Jichungu, Ushavwa.

² T.O. Beidelman: 1986, 113-5.

³ Haji Vuai Mdachi, interview at Msufini (Makunduchi) 3 December 1989. J. Gray: op. cit., 1-23.

⁴ T.O. Beidelman: 1986, 113-5.

The traditional festival takes place in two stages. The first, the private part, takes place exactly a week before the public ceremony. In the past, the first phase was preceded by a 'country medicine', involving visits to different *mizimu*.

During the private festival, which corresponds to the *Wamavua* festival, the *wavyale* gather at Majipeponi to request aid and prosperity for the coming year. They make an offering of a loincloth as well as pieces of white and red cloth. During the prayers they rejoice for having been able to see the birth of the new year, while hoping to witness the next:

Alhamisi nyikutu, siviji wa Ijuma.

Napindukia, napindukia¹.

I have met that of Thursday but I don't know about Friday's.

I pass away, I depart this life.

During the public festival at Kae Kuu a week later, the women take up the same refrain.

The festival had started, however, the previous evening. After sunset, the *wavyale* of Kae Kuu² had met at the great *mzimu* of the *mwaka* in order to pray and make a sacrifice in the early morning. This ceremony was filmed by Zanzibar television. It was surprising how the actors gave the impression of being very orthodox Muslims. This short film was aimed at viewers on the islands only.

The crowd begins to gather around 12.30 p.m. The men, who are made up, form groups and fight each other with banana leaves. The women sing obscene songs. This is said to be a day without rules.

¹ *Kupinda* means 'to bend over' (Sacleux, C., 1939: 749), *kupindukia* 'to change sides, to turn over, to be transformed' (ibid: 750), *mapinduzi*, revolution, both in an astronomical as well as in a political sense. *Kupindukia* was explained to me as meaning 'I pass from one year to another'. The same term is used in another ceremony to mean that one is knocked to the ground by some supernatural force or spirit.

² Kae Kuu is a quarter of Makunduchi, situated in the southern part of the town, not far from the main road.



Wanawake wakiimba - 1990



Wanaume wikipigana - 1990

Meanwhile the *wavyale* become active. Those from the west and, in particular, those from the small *mzimu* who are also *wavyale* of Majipeponi, request happiness and prosperity and make an offering of meat, honey and of biscuits which are round and oblong, symbolizing the two sexes.



Bisukuti - 1990

To the east, other *wavyale*, all men, build a hut of millet straw and make the same offering as the *wavyale* of the small *mzimu*. A man enters the hut, while the women tighten the circle, singing *Napindukia, napindukia*. Then the but is set on fire. The *mvyaie* who is inside, rushes out and flees to the east, towards what was in former times thick bush. On his way he must pass over a stone known as *Jeta* because of its form¹ which contains medicines (*dawa*). As the hut becomes enveloped by flames, the crowd throws stones at the fire, shouting:

Tunazima maradhi, tunazima maradhi²

'We extinguish the sickness, we extinguish the sickness'.

¹ *Jeta* is a bivalvular shell.

² In Swahili sickness is often linked to notions of temperature (*homa*, fever; *kupona*, to cure, etc.).



Jeta - 1990

During the 1950s, the festival contained other sequences which no longer take place. At daybreak the women used to meet on the beach to wash themselves and the household utensils¹, in the same way as widows at the end of their period of seclusion². In Zanzibar town, they would go home dancing the dance of the corpse³.

The *mwaka* is a mourning. The festival is accompanied by forty days of strong winds (*upepo*) while the spirits (*pepo*) wander around, just as the soul (*kivuli*) did before after having left the world here below⁴.

¹ J. Gray: op. cit., 10.

² On this subject J.S. Trimingham explains (op.cit:141): 'The widow is not free to marry after the forty days since her state of *uzuka*, the period during which she is *haram* and must remain faithful to the 'shade' of her husband (*kukaa katika kivuli cha mumewe*), now corresponds to the Islamic *idda*. This is four months ten days with *Shafi'* is and half the period for a slave girl. As *kizuka* she remains in the house and cannot go visiting for fear of bringing calamity on those visited. She sits on the ground, wears old dark clothing and wooden shoes, and leave her hair and body untended. If during the *uzuka* she commits adultery, it is thought that the *koma* of her late husband will kill her when, at the close, she is washed in the sea. At the end comes her release (*ondoza uzuka*). She is taken to the sea and doused seven times. Her lied and household utensils are also washed.' Cf. also C. Sacleux: 1939, and Johnson and Madan: 1939, who give the same root for *kuzuka* 'widow', *uzuka* 'state of seclusion of a widow', *mzuka (wa)* or *zuka (ma)* 'apparition, ghost'. They always main that the verb *kuzuka* means 'emerge, appear suddenly'. Among the Zaramo, the seclusion of widows lasts between three and six months and a *hitima* takes place on the fortieth day after the death, M.L. Swantz: op. cit. 177.

³ J. Gray: op.cit., 11; Zanzibar Gazette. Supplement of 22 August 1925.

⁴ J.S. Trimingham: op.cit, 79. Page 141, he writes: 'The full period of mourning lasts forty days and this is closed by another *hitima*, reading, and feast called *arbaini (ya maiti)*, 'the fortieth of the corpse'. On that day also the grave is visited, and offerings are left there (called *vunja fungu*, to beat the mount). After this ceremony, the soul (*koma*) is free to depart, for the belief is widespread that it lingers for a time in the vicinity of the corpse until decomposition sets well in'.



Kibanda cha mwaka - 1990

But the *mwaka* is not a death. The year dies but it is reborn and, according to the day of the week that it commences, augurs ill or well.

To celebrate the New Year is termed *koga mwaka*, 'the year's bath', which refers both to the idea of washing the year which is dead and gone and to that of bathing the one that is just born.

A woman who has just given birth is, still today, kept in seclusion for forty days. Death, birth and re-birth are thus inextricably linked, and there is a direct parallel between the country and man¹. We may note here some analogy with ideas held by the Kaguru regarding the passage from life to death².

Once the hut is burnt, the crowd disperses. Inhabitants of Makunduchi go home to eat while strangers go to the beach, where they picnic and rest until the evening. Then begins the commercial festival which will last three to five nights.

¹ The same is found in other ceremonies.

² T.O. Beidelman: 1986, 113-5.

A Festival with a Political Dimension

The *mwaka* has become one of the biggest events to be seen in Zanzibar. In the preceding days, all vehicles-lorries buses, taxis-travel southwards. The New Year is also a tradition that is put on for outsiders.

In 1983 a New Year Committee (*Baraza la Mwaka*) was created whose objective was to replace the traditional way of financing the festivities by a commercial one. Previously, in the evenings of the two preceding weeks, women went from house to house singing praises. They were given a few coins by each householder. They would leave, thanking them and wishing them happiness and prosperity in the new year, and then pass on to the next house¹. The money collected in this way paid for the offerings and sacrifices. On the evening of the festival, however, the dances (*ngoma*) were organized spontaneously in each quarter.

Since 1983, these celebrations have been replaced by a fairground-type festival which takes place on the football pitch in the middle of the town. It now lasts five nights.

The money collected when stands are allotted pays for the offerings and sacrifices and also for the whole political ritual that has become grafted onto the traditional festival.

Since 1985, the New Year Committee (*Baraza la Mwaka*) invites each year an official guest, someone who holds a high position in government or in the CCM (*Chama Cha Mapinduzi*).

The first of these guests, in 1985, was Salim Ahmed Salim, then Minister of Security. He was followed, the next year, by Salmuni Amour, the current President of Zanzibar, then Minister of Commerce for Zanzibar. In 1988 it was Omar Ali Juma, Prime minister of Zanzibar, in 1990 Rashidi Kawawa, Secretary General of the CCM; in 1991 the Prime Minister of the United Republic of Tanzania, John Malecela; and, in 1992, the Secretary General of the CCM, Horace Kolimba.

The main preoccupation of the New Year Committee (*Baraza la Mwaka*) is political at the present time. This is evident from its internal organization. It is made up, in effect, of two parts: the first is composed of the Committee of Elders (*Kamiti ya Wavyale*); the second, the Festival Committee (*Kamiti ya Shughuli za Sherehe za Mwaka*), formed in 1985,

¹ This is still done at Jambiani.

contains virtually no-one connected by tradition (*jadi*) to the *mwaka*. It is made up of all the top personalities of the regional government¹.

This Festival Committee is divided into three: the Treasury, Supplies, and Reception Committee. They are all concerned with receiving the official guest, who generally goes first to the traditional festival at Kae Kuu, then to Msikiti Kichaka. The Reception Committee gives him a meal and he makes a short speech.

This new dimension of the festival goes well beyond the horizons of the traditional peasant community.

The *mwaka* of Makunduchi is the only non-Muslim festival in Zanzibar to receive media coverage. Every year it is televised and many official photographs are later posted in offices.

It is true that the south is by tradition a stronghold of the CCM. Under the label Shirazi, the people define themselves as the 'Africans of Zanzibar' and openly stress their African ancestry. It is not surprising, therefore, that the *mwaka* of Makunduchi should have been chosen to demonstrate a cultural continuity between the islands and the mainland, given the background of the political problems of the Union.

Paradoxically, it is since having undergone a great transformation in order to conform more to the norms of the dominant religion that the non-Muslim side of the festival has been exploited politically.

Within the framework of the Union problem, the *mwaka* of Makunduchi, once transformed into folklore, in other words stripped of its original functions, serves to uphold the idea of a common cultural foundation between the islands and the Tanzanian mainland.

(Trans. M. Parkin).

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¹ The Regional Commissioner (*Mkuu wa Mkoa*), the Secretary for the Region (*Katibu wa Mkoa*), the Member of Parliament for the Region (*Mjumbe wa Mkoa*), the District Commissioner (*Mkuu wa Wilaya*), the Member of Parliament for the District (*Mjumbe wa Wilaya*), the Regional Commissioner of Police (*Mkuu wa Polisi*), the Head of Security for the Region (*Mkuu wa Usalama*).

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