

## SERVICE, SLAVERY ('UTUMWA') AND SWAHILI SOCIAL REALITY

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### Introduction

A basic dichotomy between what is civilized (**uungwana**) and what is barbarian (**ushenzi** or 'foreign, strange') has existed for centuries on the East African Coast. The concept of **utumwa** 'slavery, service' may be seen to mediate the opposition between the civilized and the uncivilized over time.

In this paper, I invoke a sociolinguistic approach to complement the historical record in order to examine the use of the word **utumwa** itself as it has changed to reveal distinct class and gender connotations especially in northern Swahili communities. To explore **utumwa** is difficult. There is no consensus with regard to what the word and its derivatives mean that applies consistently, yet it is clear that there has been a meaning shift since the nineteenth century.

This paper examines the construction and transformation of a non-Western-molded form of service in Africa. Oral traditions and terminological variation will be brought to bear on an analysis of **utumwa** 'slavery, service' as an important concept of social change in East Africa and, in particular, on the northern Kenya coast. What this term, its derivatives, and other terms associated with it have come to mean to Swahili speakers and culture bearers will be seen to mirror aspects of the history of Swahili-speaking people from the 10th-11th century to the present.

**Utumwa** functioned in contrast to notions of civilization (**uungwana**) and, later, Arabness (**uarabu** or **ustaarabu**). The construction of domestic service in modern Kenyan Swahili households may be understood to some extent by exploring the related notions of slavery (**utumwa**) and service (**utumishi**) as they together interact with civilization and its association with high status (**uungwana**). What is seen today as **utumwa** from the perspective of space, work, and gender has come about *via* the interplay of certain cultural oppositions. Considerations of space linked to **utumwa**, of ethnicity and status linked to **uungwana**, and of gender linked to notions of slavery versus civilization may be seen to partially explain how service has evolved distinctly in northern versus southern coastal Swahili towns and how it is viewed in other Kenyan urban contexts.

**Utumwa**, as nineteenth century household slavery became transformed into household service in the context of changes in the cultural definition of household membership and structure. The shift in meaning of slavery/service in the household has functioned ideologically both to ensure continuity with an African past and to define a complex Swahili coastal culture.

The long-awaited official Swahili dictionary published by the Institute for Swahili Research in Dar es Salaam in 1981 defines **utumwa** (which Swahili-English dictionaries gloss as

'slavery') as: "hali ya mtumishi asiyelipwa chochote na ambaye amefugwa na huweza kutendwa lolote na bwana wake" (*Kamusi* 1981:310), literally 'the condition of a person (who carries out the intentions of another person, cooperative or government - a servant vs slave) who is not paid anything at all and who is kept as livestock [and who] may be treated in any manner at all by his/her master.' My purpose in citing this official modern dictionary definition is to present the *received* sense of what the related terms have come to mean in their current cultural context, i.e., to see what the codified historical record is with regard to **utumwa** derivatives. **Mtumishi** is a servant as opposed to a slave, one who carries out the intentions (**mradi**) of others. An **mtumwa** 'slave,' on the other hand, works for nothing and is treated like an animal - and, as we shall see, this social category no longer officially exists. Jonathon Glassman (1991:289, fn 31) suggests that **mtumwa** was so broad a term that it included "many categories of subordinate, including personal dependents who would not fulfill most common definitions of 'slave.'" Pouwels (1991), in accord with this broad interpretation of what **utumwa** encompassed, supports the idea that "the institution of slavery in East Africa indeed arose 'as a variant of local concepts of clientship.'" (20).

When invoked as a concept, **utumwa** conforms to the inverse of the criteria of essential contestedness as put forth by Gallie (1956:171-172). **Utumwa** 'slavery' represents a condition that people compete to avoid rather than to attain. Inherent in the notion of the essentially contested concept is the idea that "to appraise something positively is to assert that it fulfills certain generally recognized standards" (197) and that various categories of associated behavior exemplify terms "worthy of the name" *as we use it today*" (198). What makes **utumwa** interesting in this regard is that *today* in use and as reified in the official Swahili dictionary there is no longer any *we* who even use the term.

By examining a term that is disvalued and negatively appraised, we may see "more precisely what it means by comparing and contrasting our uses of it now with other earlier uses of it or its progenitors" (op cit). Such unabashed historicism provides a useful lens when it comes to examining a notion such as **utumwa** during the nineteenth and twentieth century periods of rapid social change on the coast. Pouwels noted that the one thing slaves had in common, their arrival in Swahili society as total strangers without kin and completely dependant upon their masters (citing Glassman 1991), was something they also held in common with "uprooted mainland settlers "

The term used for a "raw" slave, **mshenzi**, for example, was universally applied by townsmen to all unacculturated "barbarians" of non-Swahili origins, whether they had been purchased, pawned, or made dependent for any number of reasons. Slavery, as it is normally used, has only social and economic connotations. (Pouwels 1991:20).

From the concept of **utumwa** came a vast array of terms which relate variously to the condition it represented. The words which refer to people associated with **utumwa** (such as **mtumwa** 'slave', **mtumishi** 'servant', **mzalia** 'home-born slave', **mtwana** 'male slave', **mjoli** 'fellow servant', **mshenzi** 'raw slave', **mtoro** 'runaway slave', **mtumwa mjinga** 'foolish slave', **mjakazi** 'female slave', **suria** 'concubine', **suriama** 'half-caste' **kibarua** 'day laborer' and **boi** 'boy') have come to refer to people seen as other-than-Swahili. Indeed, **utumwa** is now

remembered, by those who claim to remember it at all, as always having been other-than-Swahili.

### Historical context

Coastal East Africa has had a rather complex urban society for hundreds of years. Oral traditions place the origins of this society in Shungwaya which, as revealed in these traditions, "might have stretched from the Jubba/Webbi Shebelle River system southwards to the Tana River. It included the coast and offshore islands and reached inland for an indefinite distance" (Pouwels 1987:13). Though there were pastoralists in this area, the people who settled on the coast southward were most likely the Sabaki Bantu-speakers and some Southern and Eastern Cushite ex-pastoralists. From Sabaki Bantu and some Cushitic influences, Swahili language and society evolved. Into this milieu entered Islam probably as early as the 10th century. According to Horton (1987:86), "[T]he Swahili, an African people, were converted to Islam by their trading partners. Partly as a result of their conversion, they emerged as a cohesive social group that anchored the new trade route and helped to lay the groundwork for the 10th century renaissance in Europe." By the twelfth century, trade links between the Middle East and northern Kenya were well established. From the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries northern coastal areas became "more insulated culturally and even physically from neighbouring Somali, Oromo, Miji Kenda, and Pokomo societies." (Pouwels 1987:25). In Kenya, Mombasa and Malindi began to rival Kilwa to the south as commercial centers. These and other towns represented themselves with distinctive regalia including "drums, spears, turbans and a side-blown horn (*siwa*) usually carved from wood or ivory" (Pouwels 1987:28). Many such symbols of power lasted into the twentieth century. Not surprisingly such symbols existed in a context of class differentiation separating those with rural/uncivilized *ushenzi* backgrounds from those with urban/civilized *uungwana* origins. From the sixteenth century on,

Swahili townsmen traditionally have divided their universe in true structuralist fashion between their town - representing order, civilization (*uungwana*), and predictability - and the world outside it - representing chaos, barbarity (*ushenzi*) and the fear-inspiring unknown. (Pouwels 1987:30).

New high status immigrants arrived on the coast from Benadir ports and Saudi Arabia beginning in the sixteenth century. These newcomers were "more lettered and more 'orthodox'" than the townspeople they encountered, introducing a new cultural ideal of 'Arabness' (*uarabu*). Indeed one word often translated into English as 'civilization' is the related form *ustaarabu*. They, in a sense were more inside than the insiders, and their presence highlighted even further the distinction between what was high class (*uungwana* AND *uarabu*) and what was not (*utumwa* 'slavery' AND *ushenzi* 'barbarian, foreign'). Confronted by Portuguese missionaries, an already complex situation became even more so. The interplay of African, Middle Eastern, Arab, and a series of Christianizing influences from the Portuguese to the German and the British is the background of modern Swahili society.

### Utumwa and East African coastal social reality

Swahili culture as it exists today, is neither entirely African nor Middle Eastern. To refer to Swahili people (or to Swahili culture, Swahili society) is to simplify a discussion that has been going on for years in the interest of answering the question "Who are the Waswahili?" (see e.g., Eastman 1971, Salim 1973, Arens 1975, Swartz 1978). There is a general sense that Swahili-speaking people along the East African coast (encompassing the islands in the Lamu archipelago to the north and Zanzibar, Pemba and the Comorian islands to the south) share an understanding of cultural similarities that may be seen to be ethnic. These are the people, then, considered to be Swahili and who constitute Swahili society despite a vagueness with regard to the way in which class interacts with ethnicity, some question of a differential distribution of culture along gender lines (Eastman 1988), and the fact that there has never been a tribal entity so-called.

In such a complex setting, notions of servitude are encoded with multiple layers of cultural meaning. The history of the Swahili people is one of incorporating former slaves, clients, dependents and high status immigrants into freeborn society accompanied by periods of social change during which formerly lower class clans came to achieve high status (Pouwels 1987). Thus, the cultural memory of *utumwa* as slavery is short and the modification of concepts associated with its condition is widespread. The condition of *utumwa* as applicable to individuals is slippery indeed. Recognizing that personal situations are fluid, one may discern a culturally encoded condition such as *utumwa* (slavery) only as it stands remembered and transformed in opposition to *uungwana* (civilization, high status) in Swahili society.

### Nineteenth century coastal slavery and Swahili texts

Late 19th and early 20th century urban <sup>1</sup> Swahili *watumwa* (slaves) primarily conformed to a "household mode of production" (Klein 1983:68) yet included more than domestic servants. This means some lived within the household, some worked alongside household members outside the home. Most *watumwa* were at least in some face-to-face contact with Swahili families. The nature of household work as primarily in the women's domain accounts for a situation in which many slaves became ex-slaves through bearing children in concubinage or in marriage <sup>2</sup> Slave women were frequently absorbed into the freeborn population. Swahili prose texts gathered by Carl Velten from native speakers between 1893 and 1896 tell of customs surrounding birth, marriage, childrearing, legal matters, death, and burial. There are also texts which one translator of Velten's texts, Lyndon Harries, has labelled "town affairs" and "the

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<sup>1</sup> The Swahili household par excellence was urban. The highest status people *waungwana* are always thought of as urban. They may own plantations on the outskirts of town, those *shambas* were traditionally farmed by slaves, generally males who could live and work there with their families. In the *waungwana* household in town, female servants did most household chores. Males attached to an urban household might do day labor on a *shamba* or work in town for wages.

<sup>2</sup> "Under Islamic law, the child of a free man was born free regardless of the mother's status, and the mother was free if she bore her master a child" (Klein 1983:86)

customs of slavery"<sup>3</sup> Velten's information was gathered from Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari and others (reissued, retranslated, and reedited in J W T. Allen et al. 1981).

What Velten was told referred primarily to what is now Tanzania but nonetheless brings out a number of features of **utumwa** practiced throughout the East African coast at that time. **Wazalia** or "Home-born slaves" were distinguished from unskilled slaves **watumwa wajinga** (literally "foolish slaves"). **Wazalia** work in the household scrubbing pots and pans, doing laundry, sweeping, learning to cook or to sew mats. In the Harries' translation **wazalia** are characterized further:

[W]hen the food has been dished up a slave prepares the meal for *her* master and holds the water jug for him to wash his hands, or another day *she* washes *her* master's feet and anoints him, but with his wife's permission. Or if his wife wishes to go into the country or to a mourning session or a wedding, *she* (*the slave*) carries it for her. (Harries 1965:207, emphasis added)

It appears that the usual case of the household slave was female (**wazalia** literally, those born "in"). To talk of the male home-born slave, Velten uses the term **mzalia mwanamume** (literally "male **mzalia**"). In contrast, the unskilled **watumwa wajinga** or unskilled slave must be clothed, provided with a hoe, and sent to a field. Velten's texts make it clear that these slaves work two to three days a week cultivating cassava and planting vegetables or beans and growing rice or millet. They must give their masters what they grow keeping a portion of the yield for their own personal use while they live and eat apart. The **mtumwa mjinga** is depicted as an adjunct to the Swahili household somewhat similar to the agricultural workers described by Cooper (1977, 1980) working within a plantation rather than urban-based economy. Unlike the **mzalia**, the **mtumwa mjinga**

wears no cap, whether or not a chief dies, nor does he wear shoes nor a long robe to cover his legs. Nor does he call a freeman by name, but addresses him as **Mwinyi**, that is Master. Likewise, he does not shelter under an umbrella on the road when it rains, though formerly slaves had umbrellas made from leaves of the hyphaene palm, when it rained they sheltered under an umbrella of this sort. Nor in the house does he have (lit. put) wooden slippers. (Harries 1965:208)

It is interesting that the name of Velten's source **Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari** translates as 'runaway slave' **mtoro** son of **Mwinyi** ('Master') **Bakari**. Alternate glosses of **mtoro** are 'deserter', 'truant', 'refugee' (Rechenbach 1968:371).

### Service 'Utumishi' and the northern Kenyan coast

Such a situation as described above is seen by Jonathon Glassman (1991:279) as one in which "older ideologies of client slavery" are manipulated "in an effort to maintain or enhance [slaves] ability to construct institutions of kinship and community within the broad contours of the masters' culture". Glassman goes on to argue that such slaves "forged rebellious versions of

<sup>3</sup> Harries (1965:184) translates Velten as follows: "Many Arabs journey up-country to fight the uncivilized people, they make slaves of their prisoners of war, Or a tribesman goes to an Arab and says to him, 'I have come to follow you.' And the Arab agrees. And if the man has any relatives they follow along, and in the end he makes slaves of them. This is why some slaves from up-country or from Manyema bring constant trouble on the coast, for they say, 'This Arab did not buy me, I have just followed him, but now he wants to make me a slave.'"

traditions held in common with their masters" rather than "distinct 'slave cultures'." Such social change has led to a situation on the northern Kenya coast in which the distinction between slave and free is blurred. A blurring of the distinction is not true further south where Frederick Cooper studied plantation slavery and where plantation slavery continued to flourish. Glassman's (1991) analysis of the Mrima coast (northern mainland coastal Tanzania) where sugar plantations made use of slave labor suggests that the opposition between free and slave "was 'fundamental' only in the minds of the dominant members of society, and only at the height of plantation development" (286)

In Kenya (from Mombasa north), that household rather than plantation slavery prevailed may be a factor in the relative cultural unimportance of maintaining a strict distinction between *watumwa* and *waungwana*. Some members of a northern Swahili household might have additional agricultural workers (Strobel 1983:113) associated with it but a slave mode is not as distinctive an aspect of the Swahili service economy as is a household mode of service production. Strobel cites one household with 19 male and 11 female slaves (1983:115) associated with it. Male slaves would generally be away from the household doing men's work as farmers, sailors, porters, ferry/boat conductors, casual laborers, carpenters, or food sellers. Women served inside the home as cooks, nannies, food buyers, or outside as concubines.

Writing in 1884, John Haggard referred to the wealthy and to planters of Zanzibar and Lamu as Arabs. He also made reference to Swahili concubines as *Nyasa* (i.e., as from Nyasaland now Zimbabwe to the south). The term *watoro* (sg *mtoro*) referred to Swahili runaway slaves on the mainland. In essence when writing of the ruling class, Haggard would use the term Arab; when writing of slaves or servants the label was Swahili (Haggard 1884).

Eighteenth century Mazrui and Nabahani clan influence on the coast is seen to be responsible for encouraging a switch in the system of land tenure from being kinship and clientage based to becoming reliant on land alienation and chattel slavery, i.e., forming a plantation form of production (Pouwels 1991:24-25). People in both Mombasa and Lamu resisted this change with some success. In northern Kenya, at the end of the nineteenth century, where a plantation economy had not gained the importance it had further south, slaves (accustomed to the status quo) remained as they had been.<sup>4</sup>

The term *wajoli*, which the lexicographer Rechenbach (1968:323) lists as both archaic and of Indian origin, was used to refer to comrades or "fellow slaves" evocative of a sense of solidarity among people in such a position. *Mtumwa* 'slave' referred to "several coexisting varieties of subordinated client" in these men's work/women's work roles to the extent that "[T]he language used to define the slave's place in society was similar to that used in relation to women and other non-slave subordinates" (Glassman 1991:286). Pouwels (1991:25) uses the

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<sup>4</sup> Pouwels argues that the form of slavery which taxation and the plantation economy ushered in was an import. "The so-called slave mode of production (meaning combination of land alienation and forced extraction of labor from captive human beings, along with attendant cultural, political, and legal systems that sustain it), seems to have been exogenous to East Africa, introduced by Asians and Europeans" (1991:27). Some such slavery may have existed as early as the 15th century associated with gold and ivory. There may also have been slavery of this kind in the north at Pate during the period of Portuguese influence in the seventeenth century (Pouwels, 1991:27).

term **mjoli** to refer to the "kinship and clientage based system of land tenure and labor" that gave way on parts of the coast to a plantation system of "land alienation (**shamba**) and chattel slavery." In northern Kenya, the antipathy toward strict plantations and preference for "gardens without fencing lines" (Pouwels 1991:25) resulted in a situation in which both men and women might leave a household daily to work for wages returning in the evening to give their masters half (Strobel, 1983: 116).

As we have seen, there is very little agreement with regard to the condition **utumwa** 'slavery' as now or ever having been an actual aspect of Swahili society. A related concept **utumishi** 'service', however, continues as an integral part of both coastal Swahili and national culture in Kenya. A gender distinction arose whereby men would become servants (**watumishi**) but not **watumwa** ('slaves'), women would be integrated within a family situation (either as wives or concubines) and the idea of slavery (**utumwa**) as having ever been an aspect of Swahili society would disappear.

This sociolinguistic argument is intended to complement the historical situation described above that similarly argues for the emergence of distinct forms of a service economy on the northern and southern Swahili coasts.

With regard to women in northern Kenya, it appears to be critical to mark those outside the household as 'other'. Marc Swartz has suggested that it is possible to extend the view that there is a gender-based discontinuous distribution of culture among the Swahili by considering the case of the **suria** slave/concubine (personal communication). According to Swartz, **waungwana** never marry "African" women except as second wives (**suria**).<sup>5</sup>

The urban Swahili home included women as concubines, wives, nannies and cooks (Strobel 1983). Women servants did women's work, men men's. Men servants generally worked in the fields (**shamba**) associated with a household. When a household had too many servants to support, it might send both men and women out to work for Asians as domestic wage-laborers. When workloads allowed, men would be sent, as well, to work on the docks. This is the situation that obtained when British colonialists arrived looking for domestic help - Swahili households with women domestic servants, Asian households with men and women from Swahili households doing domestic wage labor - and a general predominance of men available for both this type of work and dockwork. The use of Swahili household males (non-freeborn

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<sup>5</sup> That is, a former **suria** as a later wife becomes part of a Swahili household (moving from her own household). As a wife, she was treated as if she were **mwungwana**, as if she had never been **suria** at all. Swartz' view is in regard, specifically to Mombasa **waungwana** of The Twelve Tribes: Mombasa was organized as a confederation of "12 Tribes" divided into two groups referred to as "The Three Tribes" and "The Nine Tribes" each with their own institutions and coastal alliances. Each tribe or town (**mji**) was further subdivided into clans (**mbari**) with various prerogatives with respect to each other. See Chapter Five of Sh. Hyder Kindy's autobiography (1977) for a lively discussion of how the traditional Swahili political system operated. "The **suria** lives in her own house away from Old Town ... and her children live with her for at least the early years. This means that these children are living among non-**waungwana** ... especially ... the daughters who don't go far from the mother's house. These daughters are socialized far more as Africans than are any other people who have life-long contact with **waungwana** society. And they DO have contact because they are more likely to be associated with "waungwana" men when they grow up since they are Muslim and more "cultured" than other African women. It is, I speculate ... the descendants of these second and third generation **suria-mwungwana** marriages who find their way into **waungwana** society as **waungwana**." (Swartz 1988)

and ethnically diverse) as wage laborers spread. In many coastal and interior areas, they gained a reputation as excellent cooks and valets (houseboys) - with distinctive dress. Swahili household males entered into domestic service as wage laborers while women were incorporated into the Swahili family. Ironically, the costume of the coveted Swahili cook or valet in colonial homes emulated the clothing long associated with the *mwungwana par excellence* of nineteenth century Lamu or Siyu (*kilemba* 'turban' and long flowing robe with a decorated sword or horn *siwa* to bring out on fancy occasions). This outfit contrasts with that of the *mtumwa mjinga*, capless, shoeless, without even an umbrella.

The status of servant, *mtumishi*, eventually became associated with this particular form of dress, some education, and a certain amount of prestige. People from various coastal ethnic groups would aspire to have their sons become domestic servants and seek to apprentice them to Swahili households where they would learn the skill and style necessary for them to be sought after to work in colonial homes.

At the advent of British colonialism, plantations on what became the [southern] Kenya coast and Zanzibar were extremely productive, occasioning a need to continually import slaves and to do so from a much wider region well into East Central Africa (Cooper 1987:14). Not surprisingly, status and class differences arose among slaves as well. In 19th century as far north as Mombasa, on the docks "shippers hired slaves to load and unload vessels, and the slaves in turn paid their owners half their daily earnings" (Cooper 1987:26) giving rise to a system of day labor [day laborer *kibarua* pl *vibarua*]. The labor included agricultural and domestic slaves when work in the fields and households was slack enough for them to be released.<sup>6</sup> The nature of dockwork accounted for a male-only *vibarua* work force joined eventually by freed slaves as well. Indeed, what happened here illustrates that "...with the advent of wage labor common but time- and class-bound, Western stereotypes of what was considered women's and men's proper place and work affected the sexual division of labor in both town and country in Africa" (Hansen 1990:19 citing Bujra 1986:131-135).

The 1890-1900s saw the collapse of agricultural slavery and concomitant adjustment to this new system of day labor. "Mombasa developed a split labor market: coastal people - Swahili-speakers, ex-slaves, Arabs from the Hadramaut, other immigrants, and Mijikenda - sought casual work, plus a limited range of permanent jobs, as in the police or domestic service" (Cooper 1987:28). The term *Mijikenda* (lit 'nine towns') applies to groups of coastal agriculturalist Bantu-speakers including the Pokomo, Digo, and Giriama people. As the plantation economy declined south of Mombasa, many Mijikenda migrated from coastal hinterlands joining ex-slaves and overseas immigrants in competition for available work as squatters. Eventually "the nature of the relationships of Mijikenda and ex-slaves with Arab and Swahili landowners converged, their relations with each other became closer" (Cooper 1980:228).

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<sup>6</sup> The term *kibarua* means literally 'slip of paper or card' and it is the diminutive of *barua* 'letter' possibly derived from the notes such workers would carry to the docks saying they were sent from a particular plantation or household.

As should be clear by now, the kind of slavery associated with the Kenyan coastal house is quite distinct from the other kinds of slavery extant on the Swahili coast (such as plantation slavery, portage, etc). The concepts household and slavery interact in such a way that over time slavery gave way to domestic service outside the home and was transformed inside. The indigenous concept of the household in Swahili society incorporates a service component whose meaning is situationally defined. From the perspective of **inside the house**, the notion of slavery has been eliminated.

Information available about the interaction of people in the various service categories with the structure and content of the traditional Swahili household provides some insight as to how domestic service evolved on the coast. However, the record regarding the position of slaves in the Swahili household is somewhat unclear. James deVere Allen (1979) includes a room [sic] as part of the floorplan of the typical Swahili house. The room is called **nyumba ya Kati** (literally 'the middle of the house'). Functionally, this area has been described either as a place where slaves slept or as storage space (Zachariah 1988:7). Allen attempts to resolve this ambiguity by asserting that the original and real purpose of this room (now "locally forgotten") was "for laying out and washing dead bodies" (20).

The **nyumba ya Kati** was constructed on the ground floor of every 18th century stone house..., and usually it was immediately next to a bathroom. The beds in this room were on raised platforms built of stone with a drain running from them in order to facilitate the collection of water [and other fluids] from the washing of the corpse. (Zachariah 1988:7).

The area immediately in front of this "room" - a space called **ndani** (literally 'inside') - is the women's quarters (or harem, Allen 1979:8 diagram 3a). It may be that the association of this room with corpses and Allen's assertion that the area is women's space are not incompatible. That is, the rear area of the home (**ndani**) was the place for women, including women slaves, and the **nyumba ya Kati** was where women prepared bodies for burial. An etymological observation might be relevant here. In Mombasa at least there is another meaning for **nyumba** and that is 'wife'. The area behind the women's quarters with beds and underneath drainage may also have been the usual area for childbirth. **Nyumba ya Kati** would refer to the mid area of a house associated with married women while **ndani** was the inner space for all women. The diminutive form **kinyumba** refers to "the condition of an unmarried woman living with a man as his wife" i.e., an **hawara**-paramour cf Arabic whore (Johnson 1939:64). Things that are **-a kinyumba** are also private matters not to be spoken of outside (op.cit.) In all this, it is not clear where men servants/slaves even slept!<sup>7</sup>

Evidence that the more usual or unmarked case of **utumwa** was female is the fact that there existed a separate Swahili term for male slave - **mtwana** (pl. **watwana**). **Mtwana** referred to a male slave - also derogatively to a "rascal, rogue, ill-bred person" (Johnson 1939:313). The diminutive form **kitwana** was used for a young male slave, as seen in proverb (6) below. The term **mtwana** also referred to a pole used to strengthen "the mast in native vessels" (op.cit.). I suggest that the kind of work men slaves did - at sea, on farms - is indicative of the likelihood

<sup>7</sup> Marc Swartz tells me that according to what people told him repeatedly in Mombasa, male servants slept in the rafters (ceiling) of a house. In keeping with the argument being developed here, this places men servants/slaves outside the main domestic sphere. (See also Eastman 1989a)

that they were not members of the Swahili household proper. It is likely that **watwana** lived on boats or on plantations away from town (in the fields or even, as with **Siyu**, on the mainland) and, thus, were not well-integrated into Swahili family life.

Much of the literature to date on Swahili culture and society has been devoted solely to what is expressed in "formal Swahili ideology", constrained by religion and status resulting in a concentration on "the Muslim, Middle-Eastern, coastal and non-slave elements" (Giles 1987:249). Possession cults and the role they play in Swahili society may have brought this "oppositional set" together with its "other side" - "...the more African, pagan, mainland and slave elements" (op cit.). Similarly, Margaret Strobel (1979)

has developed a related argument about the role of Muslim women's (non-spirit) associations in Mombasa. She sees them as offering complex statements of identity which reveal societal values and structure while acting as integrative agents which both document and foster the assimilation of slave and non-slave cultural elements in Swahili society. (as cited in Giles 1987:254)

### Slavery 'Utumwa' transformed

As field hands replaced the majority of agricultural slaves and others had become **vibarua**, small numbers of slaves served as soldiers or artisans. Similarly and most visibly, small numbers of slaves continued as domestics and as concubines - "functions ... important to maintaining older conceptions of what a slave was, and to avoiding the confusion of the status of slave with work on the plantations" (Cooper 1977:182). Thus, slaves continued to function regularly and longer in Swahili households than in other domains and they fared relatively well. Cooper observed that the situation was not unlike that in the United States where, living in the master's house, domestic slaves had "more comfortable living quarters and better food than field hands, as well as more intimate personal relations with the master" (183). Being part of the household in Swahili society (as in other Islamic and African societies) had a different impact on domestic slaves' social identity than it did in the West. For Swahili domestic slaves "A person's identity was defined less in terms of his individuality and more in terms of the social group to which he belonged. A household was not just a residence but a social and political unit, and belonging to it carried meaningful rewards." (184)

Indeed, this may be seen to be particularly true on **Siyu**, in the Lamu archipelago, off the coast of northern Kenya. The Swahili island town of **Siyu** flourished from the eleventh through the nineteenth century with an economy that was not slave-dependent. It was noted for elaborate woodwork and elegant bookbinding and attracted scholars of Islam interested in text-production. People identified themselves as 'of the town' with plantations for date palm and coconut cultivation surrounding **Siyu** proper while crops such as millet were grown on the mainland or **bara** (Brown 1985: vi-vii). It is in such a context that the client form of household service described here as typifying the northern coast flourished. The more a person was associated with true town life and its associated skill and intellect, the more **mwungwana** 'civilized' a person would be.

In a study of a genre of jokes in Swahili, I was able to demonstrate a system of hierarchical social ranking operating on the northern Swahili coast (Eastman 1986). These **Siyu** jokes are

similar to put-down or 'hick' jokes. In contemporary times, these make fun of the nineteenth century people of Siyu who once epitomized **uungwana**. In the jokes, the following situation became apparent: Muslim urban males outrank ship captains who outrank rural non-Muslim males. Merchants have higher status than fishermen who outrank farmers. Women are at the bottom of the social ladder but categorize themselves according to the way they conform to community expectations.

The social hierarchy revealed in modern Siyu jokes has at its very bottom the same categories of people (women, non-Muslim males, and foreigners) the proverbs reveal to be associated with a stereotypical **utumwa** condition.

The Swahili coastal Muslim community, like the colonialist descendant, neo-colonialist and *nouveau-riche* communities in the rest of Kenya, still partakes in a system of household service. The following proverb collected by W. E. Taylor in 1891 is illustrative:<sup>8</sup>

(1) **Mwana mtumishi hula chake na cha mwenziwe.** (in Scheven 1981:347)

A child sent on an errand eats his own food and his companion's. i.e., A messenger usually benefits from his errands. A child who is willing to do errands [to do what he is told] will be rewarded.

Components of serving include doing errands, delivering messages, being obedient yet also deriving personal benefit from so doing. Slavery, on the other hand, from the slave's point of view, confers no reward upon the slave (see Eastman 1988).

**Mtumwa** 'slave' (**watumwa** pl; cf. **utumwa** 'slavery') means literally 'person who is sent' (**m-** 'person'; **-tum-** 'send'; **-w-** 'passive infix'; **-a-** 'indicative mood marker'). More broadly, **mtumwa** is also a person who is employed or given work. Randall Pouwels (personal communication) suggests that **watumwa** were given work *because* they are kinless, migratory, and lacking property and sustenance. Thus, 'slavery' which confers no reward would seem to be a relatively late derivation of the term (perhaps post-1820s in Lamu, even as early as the 18th century in Zanzibar, the southern coast, and Pate). **Mtumwa** may have referred initially to someone newly arrived (sent from afar) then later to a person regularly sent on errands to do service work etc., i.e., a slave. It may be that the word once referred as much to persons in a client role in relation to a master/merchant as it did to a person in a strictly service capacity. As seen above, the related word **mtumishi** (or **mtumi**) is used today to refer to a paid domestic or government servant as distinct from **mtumwa** used for the traditional live-in slave. **Mtumishi** may also refer to a messenger (reminiscent of the similar double sense of **mtumwa**).

Proverbs reveal **utumwa** as negatively valued. Expressions of what the condition involved are used to illustrate what constitutes non-**uungwana** (i.e. uncivilized) behavior. The term (whether or not the state exists/ed) is an expression of something that is non-Swahili. Good Swahili behavior is that of the **waungwana** - the composite free, culture bearers (male and female); including wives and wage laborers whatever the circumstance of birth of their forebears.

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise noted the proverbs from the Scheven collection appear as they were originally presented in written form by W. E. Taylor in *African Aphorisms* (1891)

Slavery, as **utumwa**, mediates an opposition between **uungwana** or high class (culture, civilization) as an ideal Swahili condition and **ushenzi** or barbarism (strange, foreign). Both **ushenzi** and **uungwana** are conditions in tension in Swahili society - having long existed in precarious balance in danger of being upset by **utumwa** and its transformation in the modern service realm as **utumishi** and the new condition **uhoi** 'boyneess' which came upon the scene with colonialist and neo-colonialist ways of life. **Maboi** 'boys' are household servants while **watumishi**, the word for 'servants' where used at all today may only refer to civil servants or messengers (the term has a muted servile status). Before European colonialism, **uungwana** which was always a fluid concept, "was threatened by the introduction of a new mode of production, implied by growing literacy, dependence on written (i.e., foreign, Arab) law, new modes of property ownership and possession, and dialect *as well as* new, more exploitative, relations with clients, dependents, and all ("**watumwa**") with whom one had perceived understandings of mutual rights and obligations - sometimes of a very long-standing nature" (Randall Pouwels, personal communication, emphasis his). Glassman observes that even among "those masters who were intent on transforming the primary role of their **watumwa** into that of a class of commodity producers" there was a need to "temper their actions with an eye to their ancient duties as patrons" (1991:289). People interviewed by Pouwels in 1975 about the Battle of Shela (between 1807 and 1813 on Lamu) made reference to a "huge 'slave' army" used by the Suudi clan to defeat the Zena clan. According to Pouwels (1991:14), and in accord with much of what has been presented here so far, the term 'slaves' as used by informants referred to client servitude. From the **Lamu Chronicle** written in the 1890s and based on a narrative told to a scribe, Pouwels comments on usage as in the line:

**ukiriziye hathiri watumwa na waungwana** - 'That to which we agree, both slaves and freeborn, is plain.'

and asserts that in the Battle of Shela, "It is patently clear . . . that their greatest fear, "slave" and "freeborn" alike, is abasement and loss of personal freedom" Otherwise opaque lines in the **Chronicle** "make perfect sense if the *type* of servitude meant is the form of production based on town-mainland clientage" (1991:19).

In lines composed by Bwana Zahidi Ngumi in the **Lamu Chronicle** the now archaic alternate term for "slave" **mjoli** appears connoting a "fellow servant" of the same household. To the extent that slavery existed in the 18th and 19th century on the island of Lamu (off the coast in northern Kenya), it was a matter of "mainland clients living and working in a 'pre-slave productive mode' rather than as chattels. " (Pouwels 1991:21)

A situation in which slaves are part of "a lineage production unit" has been noted by Shepherd to have existed elsewhere off the East African coast. In the Comoro Islands, slaves *without reference to their sex, were grafted onto their master's lineage*. As such, they sometimes stood in historical opposition to other alliances of masters and slaves as concubines or as soldiers and workers" (Pouwels 1991:21 adding emphasis and citing Shepherd 1980:89-90). Pouwels argues that "it is important to note that, despite Cooper's investigations (which were confined to the nineteenth century and specifically to the evolution of plantation slavery), others have given notice to the broader uses of the term in the context of (particularly pre-19th century) coastal communities" (1991:19). Indeed, as Pouwels points out further, "A flux of

literature in recent years has given important clarification to the crucial role male slaves played as *reproducers*, as much as producers, contributing offspring to their masters' kin networks as well as to their profits." (1991:19)

People associated with **utumwa** in Swahili proverbs have been seen negatively as, e.g., disagreeable, discontent, indebted, unable to breed, impolite. The term **utumwa** is familiar to people today who know proverbs even though the word hardly arises in modern conversational contexts. Errand boys and houseboys represent modern and more positively valued transformations of the **utumwa** condition. The following examples of Swahili proverbs provide a sense of the social meaning **utumwa** had (from Scheven 1981:225-228, 242, 346-348, 358, 361):

- (2) **Fadhili ni utumwa** - Favors enslave
- (3) **Hiari yashinda utumwa** - Choice is better than compulsion
- (4) **Kanga hazai utumwani** - The guinea fowl does not breed in slavery
- (5) **Lebeka si utumwa** - Politeness is not slavery
- (6) **Viovu vya bwana si vyema vya Juma kitwana** - What's bad for the master isn't good for Juma the servant
- (7) **Mwiza, mwiza si utumwa** - Being agreeable is not slavery
- (8) **Mkataa kwao ni mtumwa** A person unhappy at home is a slave

The proverbial use of the term **mshenzi** 'barbarian' as 'stupid' or 'strange' is also illuminating:

- (9) **Mshenzi ndiye asiyejua atokapo** - A stupid person is one who doesn't know from where he comes

In the proverb collection of W E Taylor (1891), the proverb:

- (10) **Mshenzi mpe mpya nguo asahau kwao** Give the strange slave new clothes so that he may forget his homeland

was accompanied by a note to the effect that **mshenzi** referred to a person from the interior along with the editorial remark that this is "a proverb better forgotten" (cited in Scheven 1981:242).

In my own work on contemporary forms of Swahili expressive culture (see Campbell and Eastman 1984; Kallen and Eastman 1979; Eastman 1972, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1986a, 1986b, 1986c), it has become apparent that the non-Muslim, African, mainland and slave elements of Swahili society are essentially female. In this examination of **utumwa**, and the complex set of concepts related to it, as experienced by males and females differently, a transformation of its meaning and form is seen.

Giles (1987) saw cult performances as "cultural texts" that, while "non-avowed", still serve to affirm "a model of society which runs counter to formal ideological statements without requiring public recognition of the paradox" (249). Activity associated with **utumwa**, in contrast, is both "non-avowed" and represents a once paradoxical model of society from which the paradox has now been removed. Those men engaged in domestic wage labor who are from Swahili households may be cooks, houseboys, or valets, even **watwana** or **wajoli** but not **watumwa**. Cooper (1977: 183) points out that some slaves were trusted in matters of business

affairs and household management and that there was even a category of **watumwa wa shauri** 'advice-giving slaves' born and brought up in the master's household. It is likely that such men represented a different manifestation of **utumwa** than did slaves who did plantation work. Women in Swahili society are wives - though once they may have been **suria** (concubines).

Another term **suriama** refers to any person with parents of different colors (**wa rangi mbali mbali**) (op cit.). Johnson (1939) defines **suria** as "a concubine, but strictly speaking one who is a slave" (441), while **suriama** refers both to "one born of a concubine" and "a hybrid, halfcaste".

It is not **uungwana** to do manual work, but, if one must work at all, fishing would be acceptable. Still, not working at all would be preferable. Similarly, a number of the other characteristics of a person in a truly cultured state highlight the tension between the abstract condition of either **uungwana** or **ushenzi**. To be in a state of **uungwana** entails being fashionable, civilized, discrete, firm, perseverant, uncomplaining, strong and loyal. A **mwungwana** (i.e., person in an **uungwana** state) is honest and makes an effort not to impose on others. A non-**mwungwana** acts disgracefully, emotionally - is quarrelsome, wishy-washy, whiney and arrogant. Yet it is not enough to be born noble to be noble and money can be more important than nobility (**uungwana**). The features that proverbs tell us make a person civilized (**mwungwana** make HIM an ideal domestic servant. In fact, they depict precisely the person the British colonialists found to be the ideal man servant/cook/valet - complete to the extent of being fashionable, discrete, stepped on, noble and poor! These qualities combine in the condition of **utu**, i.e., the abstract qualities of being human (compare **mtu** 'person', **watu** 'persons'). **Utu** represents what stood out among Swahili males in domestic service. The term represented a cluster of features sought by other coastal Mijikenda families (e.g., Digo and Giriama), who, by the 1900s, would send their sons to Swahili households to learn to work and to be Muslim. In the household where Bi Kaje of Mombasa grew up at the turn of the century, one third of the household's thirty slaves were Mijikenda (Mirza and Strobel 1989:21). In a kind of hierarchy of servant qualities, Mijikenda males were considered to be very good. Some slaves even joined the "social networks of their owners as dependents" while still maintaining ties with their own kin (op cit.). Mijikenda males trained in Swahili households would actually be Swahili-ized and eligible, with the advent of colonialism, to work in British as well as Asian households. However, as Mirza and Strobel noted "Although both female and male slaves worked for wages, the variety of male occupations greatly exceeded that of female" (op cit.:22). This situation continued following the abolition of slavery.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, it became common for Mijikenda boys to go to Old Town Mombasa and work for free in Swahili households as domestic servants (i.e., originally as **watumishi** and now as **maboi** rather than **watumwa** 'slaves'). While training, they would learn to read the Koran and pray.<sup>10</sup> Once trained they would seek work as paid domestic servants in colonial homes

<sup>9</sup> Mirza and Strobel (1989:127 fn. #8) cite Marcia Wright (1975) and Patricia Romero Curtin (1983) as providing evidence of this.

<sup>10</sup> Marc Swartz, personal communication, March 1988.

The fashion which came to be associated with the Swahili-trained servant is no small matter here. The turban and robe worn by Swahili household males sent out as domestics has become a kind of trademark of 'class' in the colonial abode. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a household male slave could not marry until "he obtained his master's permission and paid him a due called **kilemba**" (Trimingham 1964:148). The word **kilemba** is the word for 'turban' - an article of clothing which came to mark the valued Swahili male cook/valet in British households. Consider the following seven proverbs illustrating the values people associate with **kilemba** (Scheven 1981:49, 182, 248-49, 289, 303, 354, 412):

- (11) **Dalili ya ushehe ni kilemba** - The sign of Sheikh-hood is a turban i.e., His headgear has thus become a sign of his work and station in life
- (12) **Kichwa cha kuku hakistahimili kilemba** - The head of a chicken cannot support a turban. Said if someone looks down on people.
- (13) **Usinivishe kilemba cha ukoka** - Do not put a turban of grass on my head i.e., don't flatter me
- (14) **Kucha mungu si kilemba cheupe** - The fear of God is not the wearing of a white turban. Or: It is the action that makes a man pious; not his dress, uniform or turban.
- (15) **Shibe ya nguo ni kilemba** - The fulfillment of the clothing is the turban. i.e., Only when the person puts on the turban is he fully dressed
- (16) **Waarabu wa Pemba, hujuana kwa vilemba** - The Arabs of Pemba know each other by the turban. Or: The Swahili can tell each other by the turbans they wear.
- (17) **Kilemba hakimfanyi mstaarabu mtu** - A turban does not make a man civilized.

Clearly the turban represents a mark of relatively high status. In (5) and (7) it is the broader interpretation that more accurately reflects the situation. As Randall Pouwels points out "It was the 'Umanis [Omanis] especially who wore the white turban. Swahili literature often had these *double entendres*. And, of course, the Arabs of Pemba were 'Umanis who knew each other by their (white) turbans" (personal communication). The look of the stereotypical houseboy in a **kilemba** in colonial Kenya (as perpetuated to day in movies such as *White Mischief* or *Out of Africa*) reflects this link with Swahili households. Randall Pouwels reminded me of another Swahili proverb:

- (18) **Kucha Mungu si kilemba cheupe** - "Fear of God is not a white turban"

collected in the 19th century by W.E. Taylor. In this proverb "The white turban refers to Ibadhis Coastal Swahili were, of course, Shafi'i Muslims. . . though this fact would seem to have been less important than the differences between local orally-dominant, legal traditions (and, by implication, productive modes) and the more literate legal tradition familiar to learned 'Umani scribes, **walis**, and **qadis**." (Pouwels 1991:fn 75).

In contrast, the twentieth century Swahili male **mwungwana** (gentleman) is marked instead by the **kofia** (white embroidered cap). Wearing the **kofia** and also a **kanzu** (gown usually white or yellow with beige designs often sewn with gold thread), the **mwungwana** asserts his contrastive status (see Swartz 1989). There may no longer be **watumwa** but **watumishi** and **maboi** are a class apart from **waungwana**.

## Discussion

With reference to the situation in northern Tanzania, Glassman similarly found that "[T]here was much in the cultural language of slavery to suggest that the institution arose as a variant of local concepts of clientship" (1991:288). Further, "This was true even at the end of the remarkable period of plantation development in the late nineteenth century, when it was observed that the common Swahili word for slave, **mtumwa** (plural **watumwa**) could be used to denote a 'delegate', a 'person who is sent on an errand, who does not act in his own name'" (288-289). Rechenbach's Swahili-English Dictionary (1968:372) specifies **mtumwa** as co-occurring with **mwanamke** (**wanawake** pl.), the word for woman and referring specifically to female as the unmarked (generic) form for slave. This confusion among related words and the emergence of a distinction between **utumwa** and **utumishi** along gender lines may be seen as indicative of social change in progress at the turn of the century. **Utumwa** as slavery *per se* does not now exist though the term and what it connotes is maintained in community expressive culture. Bi. Kaje, a Mombasa woman, born in 1890 reflected, "During our time we didn't have slaves, they were our mothers and friends, that's all. The real period of slavery happened before us" (Mirza and Strobel 1989:40). **Utumwa**, as slavery in Swahili society is now but a dim cultural memory. A situation has been described here, with particular attention to the northern Kenya coast, in which **utumwa**, slavery, has been transformed as **utumishi**, service, functioning to maintain a distinction between what is **uungwana**, 'civilized, high class, cultured' and what is **ushenzi** 'barbaric, low class, foreign'. This situation is accompanied by a certain memory loss that is called into play to fix-up present day genealogy so that **utumwa** is a thing of the past, **utumishi** is a condition of others, and **uungwana** is the Swahili social condition *par excellence*. This is reminiscent of what Meyer Fortes found throughout West Africa and likened to the situation in Homer's Greece. Indeed, in Greece and West Africa, strangers (much like the **mtumishi** 'person sent,' which translated for a time as domestic servant/wagelaborer) were absorbed and made free, full members of society so that at a given point in time all members in any local political community belonged by dint of "filiative or adoptive filiative membership of a constituent segment of the community." That is, genealogies were rearranged to justify and rationalize a present state (Fortes 1975:245). This has led to a situation today where one does in fact hear reports that all men - all Swahili people - are **uungwana** (cf. El Zein 1974). That this is especially the situation that developed from Mombasa north may be an artifact of the system of slavery there.

The district commissioner of Lamu from 1920-21, T. Ainsworth Dickens, recorded the situation as it appeared to him then:

The Swahilis as denoted by their name, are a somewhat mixed quantity. There is, however, an absolute distinction in actual fact. The pure bred Swahilis of Lamu are part of the aristocracy of the Protectorate. Some of the families [sic] are people of considerable social standing and have behind them a long pedigree. This class has by reason of many generations of indolence or semi-indolence, due to their being in the past owners of slaves, become almost effete. They together with their neighbours the representatives of the Muscat Arab families, reached some years ago a fairly high stage of oriental civilisation. The Arabs of Lamu are of two classes. Some of the Arab blood has been mixed with Baluchi. Arabs and Swahilis have also considerably intermixed, and the two are to all practical purposes as regards Lamu one people; yet we believe distinctions are at times made by the descendants of Muscat stock.

The middle and lower classes of Swahilis are composed of descendants of slaves and natives of interior and other tribes who, by residence in Lamu and long association with the inhabitants, have come to regard themselves and to be termed Swahilis..." (quoted in a letter from Patricia Romero to the author July 31, 1991 from a manuscript in the possession of Edward Rodwell).

Historical evidence indicates that a system of patron/client interaction in the context of a household mode of production (in areas especially north of Mombasa such as Lamu and Siyu) may be responsible for the transformation of **utumwa** to **utumishi** with a concomitant blurring of the lines between the free and the non-free

No civilized member of a northern Swahili community could be a stranger or a foreigner, a servant or a slave. Neither would a civilized **mswahili** (**mwungwana** or **mwarabu**) be non-Muslim. As Richard Werbner observed "Religion and strangerhood transform together" (1979:663). The situation that has been described here is not unlike that described by Werbner with regard to the way cults in Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Upper Volta take in strangers. And, in turn, this is not unlike the way ancient religion would change so that "Citizen and stranger alike shared the world religion's communion" (1979:663). The slave/free or barbarian/civilized distinction is now a matter of class. Marc Swartz (personal communication) provides the following Swahili proverb from his fieldnotes to exemplify the danger involved when **wazalia** (homeborn slaves, lit. 'those born in' the home and, therefore, free) are involved in discussions of geneology in an **uungwana** context:

(19) **Timba, timba utatimbua mawi** - Dig, dig, you will dig up shit!

The explanation he was given was that for just about any Swahili community member, if you dig deep enough into family history, there will be a slave (usually an **mshenzi**, and, perhaps a **suria**, i.e., concubine)

Pouwels (1987) argues that by the 1870s, "**ustaarabu** [Arabness encompassing its association with Islam] supplanted **uungwana** as the standard of 'civilization'. To be 'civilized' meant having to be 'like an Arab' - and usually having to be Arab-like meant having to give the appearance of wealth even where wealth did not exist" (182). Plantations often encountered financial difficulties with land going over to "Indian money-lenders" (182). It is at this point that male slaves from Swahili households are likely to have been farmed out as domestic servants for wages - with no more work in the fields and with the Asian money-lenders being owed.

With regard to the social institution of slavery, instead of a conflict of cultures, there occurred a conflict surrounding the very concept of **utumwa** in Swahili society. The condition of slavery to which the term referred has been progressively erased as a component of northern Swahili culture. Concern with what type of service a person engaged in and the differing statuses attached to males and females depending upon whether they were skilled or unskilled, attached to the household or separated from it, points, too, to the differential distribution of culture along gender lines that marks Swahili society.

Werbner argues that people may switch their 'cultural code' and that when this involves the transcendence of boundaries (as e.g., from **mtumwa** to **mwungwana**) it is not necessary to abandon one code for another. Instead, the two codes "must be brought into focus as one point

to and from which people, goods, services, and ideas flow" (Werbner 1971:681). In line with the argument Werbner makes for social change and the absorption of strangers in West Africa, it appears that as *utumwa* was transformed, strangers became citizens, and the boundaries of northern Swahili society became fuzzy.

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