The Boni are an ethnic community, belonging to the Cushitic language family, who live in the coastal forest on the mainland north of the Lamu archipelago, near Kenya’s border with Somalia. Although they are traditionally described as hunter-gatherers, subsistence agriculture today constitutes their primary mode of production, but their self-perception is consistently informed by their association with the bush.

Academic literature universally contends that the Boni are Muslims who converted en masse around the middle of the twentieth century. This work identifies the historical forces that precipitated this conversion, but argues that the assertion of earlier scholars that previous religious practices have died out or exist as only peripheral elements is erroneous.

Adopting a phenomenological approach and a methodology based on participant observation, I identify three spheres of religious activity: the bush, the village centre (dominated by the mosque), and the individual homesteads. In each of these domains religious beliefs and activities are being utilised to bolster the economic, political and cultural interests of groups and individuals within the wider village community. The bush is being renegotiated continually to reflect an evolving Boni self-identity in a multi-ethnic setting and to allow the fermentation of resistance in the face of attempts at cultural hegemony advanced by external forces. The mosque has come to epitomise, in the eyes of some, the efforts at resocialisation under the guise of Islam so that, by usurping control over pivotal elements in Boni social and religious life, this community is rendered more malleable to the political and economic designs of others. Finally, at the homestead level, women assert control over the perpetuation of the Boni community while other religious activities are appropriated from neighbouring communities to meet contemporary needs. While some rites are employed for their divinatory or medicinal efficacy, others are reworked in the Boni setting to express the sense of emasculation and impotency experienced by that community in the face of external control.
Thus, far from merely submitting to the process of Swahili-isation/Islamisation, the Boni are renewing elements of their pre-Islamic religion, or incorporating those of neighbouring groups, as a means of self-empowerment and self-expression.

The opening pages of this work afford me the opportunity to express my sincere thanks to those who have been part of the journey behind the production of this book, which is based on my Ph.D. thesis, presented to the University of London in 2001.

My mind instinctively turns to the people of Bargoni who made me so very welcome from the day I first arrived in their village. It is, perhaps, only with hindsight that I am able to appreciate fully their care and concern for my welfare, especially when the El Niño floods isolated the village, or when armed shifas swept through the area. While I always felt accepted and welcomed in Bargoni, I must single out one individual for particular thanks and recognition. Mzee Bobitu Kololo first invited me to Bargoni when we met outside Lamu Museum shortly after my plans to settle in another village were undermined by a bandit attack. When I accepted his kind invitation, he offered me accommodation on his compound and extended his warm friendship to me. I have enormous respect for this wise man. On Lamu island, I thank Jan van Dijk for his hospitality and Bert Buijs for his friendship and his sense of humour, so necessary on occasions.

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Map 1. Bargoni in Relation to the Lamu Archipelago and the Coast of East Africa.