
That margins are good to think upon has been a well-known truism in anthropology ever since the days of Victor Turner or Mary Douglas. Janet McIntosh has proved it once again by sitting at the edge of Islam to write up a very innovative ethnographic study of this religion, building upon an existing body of anthropological studies on Islam and on previous ethnographic and historical studies of coastal East Africa. Swahili and Giriama have been interacting (to some extent even intermarrying) along the coast for several centuries, living on the periphery of several Islamic worlds. But while Swahili-speaking individuals and groups make (increasingly greater) efforts to connect themselves to Arabic and Indian domains (and are perceived to be connected to them via their Muslim jinns or spirits by their neighboring Giriama), the latter fall out of the Muslim domain and maintain a very ambivalent relationship (indeed in some cases leading to madness) with this religious culture and with the hegemonic world of the Swahili. Today Giriama and Swahili perceive themselves as more and more different, and idioms of resentment and betrayal are often invoked to justify the ethnicized differences.

There are many reasons why I would consider this book a “must read” for students of religion in Africa. First, by focusing on such marginal dynamics and on the symbolic and economic exchanges between these two groups, it constitutes a very original study of Islam. Second, the study is achieved through a very skillful ethnography, one based on simultaneous fieldwork among the two linguistic groups, thus breaking the mono-ethnic approach of most ethnographic research carried out in Africa by a single person. Third, there is a potential dialogue with a very old tradition: the book addresses some classic issues of personhood, destiny, and intention that have informed anthropological debates in Africa since the days of our venerated ancestors to help us understand the internal differences between Giriama and Swahili religious cultures. Fourth, the book can be a very useful tool for those interested in what has become a common feature of the African landscape over the last twenty years: the political hardening of ethnic differences (often along religious lines) in areas that in the past had witnessed a much more fluid transformation of identities and a more positive set of exchanges. Fifth, the book will no doubt be read by scholars of religion interested in “syncretism.” Rather than discussing whether the
concept is useful or not to describe situations where religions meet, McIntosh invokes previous debates on syncretism to embark on a fascinating account of what she calls poly-ontology: the capacity some people have, in regions where religious cultures overlap, to switch from one ontology to another.

The historical dimension of the relationship between Swahili and Giriama along the coast is explained in chapter 1, which gives a diachronic depth (from pre-colonial to postcolonial politics, revisiting such important moments as the slave trade and colonial land policies) to issues later discussed in a more synchronic mode. The chapter helps explain the claim that today ethnicities are hardening while in the past they were much more fluid (even if we can see how a Swahili hegemony began to impose itself over other groups). Other chapters shed light on notions of personhood, belief, bodies, conversion, syncretism, and (one of my favorite parts of the study) the madness to which a fascination for Islam can lead among Giriama. McIntosh’s approach to understanding how notions of personhood and internal attitudes and intentions shape different religious cultures, thus making it difficult for Giriama to convert to Islam (as it is lived by Swahili), is likely to inspire many other anthropologists working on religion and to enrich the burgeoning body of studies on Islam, belief, and prayer. The explanation, through poly-ontology, of how people live in such a constantly code-switching religious landscape is a valuable addition to the anthropological study of religious pluralism in sub-Saharan Africa.

Methodologically the book is exemplary. I wish more ethnographers, who normally focus on one ethnic group, could grasp the multicultural nature of their sites in a way similar to what McIntosh does. I also wish the attention to language and the dialogue with linguistic anthropology that she establishes were more common among ethnographers. Ethically speaking, the way she manages to echo voices from very distinct and competing points of view is also, I found, very tactfully and carefully achieved. The intermingling between theory (anthropology of Islam, notions of personhood, discussions on hegemony and ideology) and data is well achieved: the book becomes neither a hard read full of obscure theoretical lines nor a heavy ethnographic account, but rather a balanced study to be read with pleasure and profit.

All in all, I repeat, *The Edge of Islam* is a “must read” for anthropologists of religion in Africa. The book ends with a very useful epilogue in which the previous chapters are made relevant to understanding Kenyan