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## REFERENCES

MCINTOSH, Janet. — *The Edge of Islam : Power, Personhood and Ethno-Religious Boundaries on the Kenya Coast*. Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2009, 325 p., bibl.

- 1 *The Edge of Islam* is a detailed study, not of a particular community, but rather of the ethno-religious boundary that separates Giriama from Swahili in and around the coastal town of Malindi in Kenya. This is not, however, a symmetrical boundary. Giriama are excluded by the Swahili, living for the most part in slums on the outskirts of the town and relegated to economic and social inferiority. McIntosh took deliberate steps to avoid being identified too closely with either community when she was in the field. Nevertheless, she shows her sympathy for the Giriama rather transparently, and her account of Giriama attitudes towards Swahili is substantially richer and more nuanced than her depiction of how the Swahili view the Giriama. This bias—perhaps an unavoidable one under the circumstances—accounts for the remarkable strengths as well as the weaknesses of the book.
- 2 As she points out, the boundary itself cannot be taken for granted, but has in fact been solidified and reified throughout history. Before the colonial period, Swahili identity was relatively permeable. As a result of colonial policies and of post-colonial identity politics, it has become increasingly essentialized. Many Swahili, she notes, continue to deny that this is the case, suggesting that Giriama need only convert to Islam to become Swahili. Even so, she points out, Giriama converts are only begrudgingly accepted by Swahili as second-class Muslims, whose religious sincerity is called into question and who are perpetually suspected of reverting to their unacceptable, typically “Giriama” and implicitly “dirty”, practices, swilling palm wine and eating haram foods, especially bush rat.
- 3 McIntosh provides a compelling account of how the Giriama experience their exclusion, especially in terms of their highly ambivalent attitudes towards Islam, a religion

intrinsically tied in Malindi to Swahili identity. For Giriama, Islam embodies a source of power to which, unlike the Swahili, they are denied full access, and which they simultaneously covet and distrust. She focuses in particular on the practices and experiences of Giriama healers and diviners, some of them literally compelled to convert to Islam by Muslim spirits who possess them and who make them vomit up “impure” foods or meals they have consumed in the daytime during Ramadan. In her analyses of Giriama rituals of healing and divination, she shows how they attempt to harness the ever-“foreign” power of Islam.

- 4 Unfortunately, in order to fully explain the boundary, McIntosh would need to concentrate more systematically on the Swahili, those who are doing the excluding rather than those who are excluded. Instead, her explanations focus on differing religious ontologies and notions of personhood. She coins somewhat barbarous neologisms to contrast the “polyontological” approach to religion among the Giriama to that of the mono-ontological Swahili. In other words, Giriama appeal to powers (that of Islam among others) in a piecemeal fashion, whereas Islam, for Swahili Muslims, is a coherent and consistent whole. Such ontologies are reflected in Swahili understandings of personhood in terms of an agentive, reflexive, intentional self; Giriama, by way of contrast, understand the person in terms of a nexus of relations between humans as well as nonhumans, where actions rather than intentions prevail.
- 5 Such an explanation serves to reify the very boundary she seeks to problem-atize. Neither notions of personhood nor religious ontologies are uncontestable and immutable. Indeed, she points out that both Giriama and Swahili communities outside of Malindi do not always share all the preoccupations she documents on both sides. Even more important, she points to the continued existence of spirit possession and divination among Swahili in Malindi, behaviors which she valiantly but unconvincingly tries to reconcile with monoontological religious ideas and personal agency. She notes that such phenomena are hotly contested by those who call themselves Ahlul Sunna, who nevertheless remain a minority among Swahili in Malindi. McIntosh suggests very astutely that Swahili insecurities about their own religious practices have encouraged, if not led to, the intensification of exclusionary practices aimed at Giriama, stigmatized as incarnating everything that is essentially “un-Islamic”. Precisely because she is so engaged with the Giriama side, she does not engage in depth with the crucial question of why the Ahlul Sunna movement is gaining credibility among Swahili in Malindi, and why certain Swahili religious practices are increasingly contested and subject to modification.
- 6 In short, McIntosh has written a sensitive and compelling account of how Giriama experience and react to social, economic, and religious exclusion on the part of their Swahili neighbors. However, in order to fully contextualize and explain this exclusion, she needs to look more to the Swahili side.