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Swahili Modernities. Culture, Politics, and Identity on the East Coast of Africa. Pat Caplan and Farouk Topan, eds. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004. 270 pp.

A photograph of a young woman wearing a greenish veil and holding a mobile phone to her right ear adorns the cover of “Swahili Modernities”, a collection of conference contributions dealing with “Culture, Politics and Identity on the East Coast of Africa”. It should be pointed out that the modernity in the title refers to a much longer period of time than the cover-picture suggests, the most obvious example being José Arturo Saavedra’s chapter on the incorporation of foreign words into Swahili poetry written between 1880 and 1907.

The plural, “Swahili Modernities” reflects not only the many forms in which modernity manifests itself on the East African Coast at various times, but also the diversity of approaches used by the contributors to the volume who have their background - with the exception of Greg Cameron, who is a political scientist - either in language and literature studies or anthropology. The case studies covers almost all of the Swahili Coast with Lamu as the most northern site of research and the Comoro islands the most southern, passing Bagamoyo, Zanzibar and Mafia island.

The book is well structured, although the headings of the three sub-sections “From Malindi to the Comoros: Local-level Case Studies of Swahili Modernities” (chapters 2-6), “Focus on Zanzibar” (chapters 7-9) and “Modernities and Identities in Swahili Texts: Poetry, Songs and Plays” (chapters 10-13) which are given on the homepage to the book have gone missing in the book itself.¹

In the introductory chapter Caplan defines what modernity means in the context of the history of the Swahili Coast, by summarizing the main threads of discussion between the conference participants who were faced with two main challenges: to make clear that the coast of East Africa “has long been an area of perpetual change” (p.3) and to show that “the relationship between modernity and tradition is far from being an either/or matter.” (p. 5). As the editors state in their preface, they aimed to explore “the impact of recent historical changes on the East Coast: globalization and its concomitant, localization; development and under-development; political changes, conflict and contests; and local understandings of and strivings towards the elusive goal of modernity” (viii) – an aim which they definitely accomplished with this volume.

The elusive character of modernity is at the center of Caplan’s own case study on Mafia island for which she employed a creative approach. As her last visit dates back to 1994, Caplan uses the many letters sent to her since then, to analyze the changes which the island has undergone in the period of structural adjustment. She discusses how people deal with the increasing financial demands, which go hand in hand with modernization and also reflects on how these demands translate into requests for financial support placed upon herself, the anthropologist (p. 51) In her conclusion Caplan cautions against “exaggerating the success of coping strategies or romanticizing resistance” (p. 58) which is taking up a great deal of recent

literature on development and modernity and - having known the area for over three decades – takes a much more pessimistic outlook when she states: “In the context of Mafia Island, and indeed, I suspect, of much of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, the odds are just overwhelming [...] The fact is that people die needlessly and people’s lives are much harder than they should be. Modernity remains elusive” (p. 58-59). In the second, also very stimulating, case study on Mafia island, Christine J. Walley explores notions of the meaning of development to the people on Mafia and contrasts them with the understanding of development by the different actors within the development-business.

Greg Cameron’s „Political Violence, Ethnicity and the Agrarian Question in Zanzibar“ is the first of two chapters which deal with the recent political conflict between the ruling Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party and the Civic United Front (CUF) opposition which also took violent forms such as the demonstrations most notably in the January 2001 where many CUF supporters lost their lives in shootings. He convincingly argues that “the origins of Zanzibar’s contemporary political crisis derived from the agrarian crisis manifested in Pemba’s regional isolation, rather than a reassertion of Arab hegemonic designs on the Isles” (p. 112). This position is partly challenged by Kjersti Larsen’s chapter which is based on observations and conversations during extensive fieldwork in Zanzibar from the mid-eighties on.

The authors who deal with cultural expressions of Swahili identity generally offer more positive perspectives. Assibi A. Amidu describes Swahili poetry as a means to fight out political struggles in Lamu, while Paul Musau discusses how innovations on various levels have changed Taarab from a non-participatory form of music revolving around the main topic love, to a music-style which encourages the participation of its audience and which also addresses socio-political issues such as corruption, education and HIV/AIDS. The only chapter with an explicit gender focus is Farouk Topan’s analysis of the, representations of Female Status in Swahili Literature. Having traced changes in three pieces of Swahili literature which have been produced in different periods of time, he concludes that, “the attitude of men towards issues of gender” which on the level of literature manifests itself on the number of male writers who take “a stand against the exploitation of women” is a decisive factor. (p. 224-225)

All twelve chapters are relatively short and generally read well although there are substantial differences with regards to their quality and originality. Some authors remain very much on the surface of their topic and a more selective editing policy could have improved this collection. Despite these shortcomings the book certainly is of great value to anybody with an interest in the contemporary Swahili Coast and the way its inhabitants face and construct the complexities of modernities.

Birgit Englert
University of Vienna

Note

1. See <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/departments/anthropology/staff/pat-caplan/swahili-modernities.php>