Becoming the Other, Being Oneself

Becoming the Other, Being Oneself: Constructing Identities in a Connected World

By

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PREFACE

The Context

The thesis on which this book is (very loosely) based was an attempt to situate development theory and practice in a historical context. The basic premise was that formal development projects in Ngazidja since independence have, generally, been unsuccessful and that this lack of success could only be understood by referring to a wider historical context that recognised contemporary social structures in Ngazidja as being the product of processes that draw deeply on external contacts and influences in constituting viable and strongly incorporative social systems. These processes are not susceptible to controlled intervention, external or internal, but are rather self-driven. This statement may seem self-evident to anthropologists, but appeared to be far from being so in the development industry. That was the thesis.

This book is somewhat different. My thinking on development led me to a more general consideration of processes of social change. The underlying argument of the thesis has been more thoroughly developed—indeed, transformed—presenting an analysis of Ngazidja social structures as being a product of the specific relationships that the island maintains with the outside world. I develop a theory of mimesis, a tool for the negotiation of these encounters, and attempt to show how a resilient core of social practices underpin a flexible and often eclectic cultural syncretism that allows Wangazidja to be, or to appear to be, or to pretend to appear to be, all things to all people.

From first settlement some two millennia ago, Ngazidja identity has of necessity been continually renegotiated as island society has encountered outsiders. Not only do immigrants arrive with their particular social habits and beliefs, but contacts with other groups prompt Wangazidja to establish strategies that allow them to interact with those other groups on the best possible terms. The constituted core social concepts are rigid, but their specific manifestations are flexible. Flexibility allows Wangazidja to adapt to changing external socio-cultural stimuli; rigidity is a condition for the maintenance of a distinct identity in the face of continual external influences.

The Comoros are not particularly well-known in the English-speaking world, so a brief introduction may be in order. The archipelago lies across the northern end of the Mozambique Channel between the East African mainland and Madagascar: Ngazidja, the westernmost island, lies 300 kilometres east of the coast of northern Mozambique, while the easternmost island of Mayotte (Maore) is slightly further from the north-west coast of Madagascar. The archipelago spans some 220 kilometres from north-east to south-west (See Map 2.1).

The islands sit astride two socio-cultural worlds. At one pole, Madagascar; at the other, the Swahili zone of the East African littoral. Madagascar lies within an Austronesian sphere of influence: the language and much of the culture of Madagascar is clearly related to and derived from similar cultures in insular South East Asia, from where current evidence suggests migrants arrived early in the first millennium of the Christian era. The East African coast is culturally distinct from Madagascar and is occupied by Bantu-speaking peoples in the south, and Cushitic and Nilotic-speaking peoples in Kenya and Somalia. If certain characteristics of each zone reflect cultural borrowings and indicate deeper historical relationships between the two cultural zones, they can nevertheless be characterised as polar extremes.

This polarity is reflected in the characteristics of the four islands of the Comoro group. The easternmost island, Mayotte, has been subjected to strong Malagasy influences that, despite a high rate of immigration from metropolitan France, are evident today: one third of the island's Comorian population are Malagasy speaking and certain cultural features are clearly Malagasy in origin—*tromba* spirit possession, for example. Ngazidja, the westernmost island of the group, draws its influences from the East African Swahili culture and from the Arabian peninsula, and strong ties exist even today between Ngazidja on the one hand, and Zanzibar, Lamu and Yemen on the other. The two remaining islands, Ndzwani and Mwali, lie in-between, both socially and physically.[1]

The islands were probably first settled late in the first millennium BC by immigrants from the African mainland. Over the centuries Arab and Malagasy settlers arrived in their turn and the Swahili-type society that evolved later adopted Islam. Immigrants from Hadramawt, possibly from the early Islamic period, certainly from the middle of the second millennium of the Christian era, endowed local scholars with a religious knowledge and authority that later saw Comorians constitute a religious elite in East Africa, from Lamu to Zanzibar and beyond. From the early sixteenth century European navigators arrived and by the eighteenth century the islands, and particularly Ndzwani, were important supply stations on the Cape route to Asia as well as a fulcrum of the regional slave trade. Devastating raids by slavers from Madagascar at the turn of the nineteenth century were followed by the gradual abolition of the slave trade and the opening of the Suez Canal and, although the rise of Omani Zanzibar as a regional power and the arrival of a plantation economy mitigated the loss of trade, by the end of the century the islands had lost any importance they might have previously enjoyed.

The easternmost island of Mayotte was sold to France by its ruler, the Malagasy usurper Andriantsoli, in 1841; the Berlin conference of 1885 recognised French influence over the Comoros and the remaining islands became French protectorates in 1886. All four islands were constituted as a single French colony (Mayotte et Dépendances) in 1908 but in 1912 were attached to the colony of Madagascar as that island's seventh province. They regained their autonomy as a *territoire d'outre-mer* in 1946, were granted internal self-government in 1961, and in July 1975 President Ahmed Abdallah unilaterally declared independence, thus according the Comoros the distinction of being the only French colony in Africa to have done so. A month after independence a coup d'état brought the revolutionary government of Ali Soilihi to power and in December 1975 France finally recognised the independence of the three western islands; Mayotte, however, remained in French hands.

Ali Soilihi remained in power for three years but his legacy marked the islands—and particularly Ngazidja—politically and socially. Attacks on the *aada*, excessive religious practices, and other social values alienated many, particularly the older people, but the revolutionary philosophy was appreciated by many younger Comorians and there has since been a largely positive critical re-evaluation of the period. In 1978 Ahmed Abdallah was returned to power in a coup led by the French mercenary Bob Denard, and he ruled with mercenary support and French and South African backing for eleven years before being assassinated in the presence of Denard, if not by Denard himself. Those eleven years saw the establishment of a one-party federal state—the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoros—and a strong identification of Abdallah with the state of which he was head. Despite being from Ndzwani, he relied heavily on a legitimacy based on his support for the *aada* and the informal role of the elders in local politics. Denard's mercenaries constituted a Presidential Guard, pay-rolled by apartheid South Africa, and involved in various lucrative activities in the 1980s, arms and drug trafficking and the training of Renamo rebels included.[2]

Following the death of Abdallah, Saïd Mohamed Djohar presided over a period of democratisation that was marked by frequent changes of government and chronic instability; Djohar was in his turn removed from the country by French troops during a coup attempt organised by Denard and flown to Réunion. He subsequently resigned the presidency and Mohamed Taki was elected to office in early 1996. Taki died in office in 1998 during a period of crisis that saw a separatist movement on the island of Ndzwani establish a de facto independent state; the interim president, Tadjiddine ben Saïd Massonde, was also overthrown in a coup, led this time by Col. Assoumani Azali, in April 1999. Azali negotiated the Fomboni Accords of 2001, which paved the way for the re-incorporation of Ndzwani into the loosely federal Union of the Comoros, whose president was to be drawn in rotation from each of the three independent islands. The current president, Ahmed Abdallah Sambi, is from Ndzwani.

The Comoros remain amongst the poorest countries of the world. The economy is weak. Aid and remittances are important sources of revenue. There is very little industry, mostly small scale business producing food and drink, cigarettes, soap and so on. For various reasons tourism is effectively non existent. The country's reputation for political instability, the lack of reliable transport links to the islands, the dearth of attractions (no elephants or Maasai warriors and few beaches to satisfy the sun-seekers of Europe) and, more recently, an undeserved reputation (based on the activities of Moroni-born al-Qaeda member Fazul Abdallah Mohammed) for religious extremism all keep visitors at bay. The primary sector is weak. Food production is insufficient to meet local demand and cash crops have recently seen a devastating fall in prices on the world market. The price of vanilla, once a significant revenue earner, has fallen from $400 per kilo in the mid-1990s to barely a tenth of that today; ylang ylang, an essential oil used in the perfume industry, is no longer in demand, replaced by artificial substitutes by all but the most prestigious perfumeries; clove production, too, has fallen in the face of competition from other producing countries and artificial substitutes.

Fieldwork and Research

Although I first visited Ngazidja (almost by chance) in 1985 and returned to the Comoros on several subsequent occasions in the early 1990s, my doctoral research, on which the bulk of what follows is based, took place over two years in 1997 and 1998. I returned for brief visits, each of approximately one month's duration in 1999, 2005, 2007 and early 2010. During my fieldwork I was also able to visit the three other islands of the group (including the "Etat d'Anjouan") and obtain useful comparative data, particularly on age systems; and in late 1999 as well as in 2005, 2006 and 2007, I conducted fieldwork in Hadramawt (southern Yemen) and the UAE which, although not part of this project, allowed me to meet a number of Comorians and Hadramis with Comorian connections and helped me to understand the wider context of Comorian-Arab relations. Finally, I have also had recourse to archival sources, particularly at the Centre d'Archives d'Outre Mer in Aix-en-Provence, to where most of the French colonial archives have been repatriated.

In 1997-98 I had originally hoped to live in a town at some distance from the capital (Mbeni and Fumbuni were potential choices), partly because they were considered to be less subject to external influences, and partly because the capital, Moroni, and neighbouring towns were already well-studied. However, I was accompanied by my wife and two young children and it became clear that we would end up living close to Moroni where there were facilities such as schools, doctors, electricity and running water.[3] We therefore found a house in the town of Itsandramdjini, some five kilometres north of Moroni and effectively part of the capital's urban area. Due to my interest in (and employment by) a local microcredit project, I had a secondary field site in the town of Kwambani, chief town of Washili and about twenty kilometres away on the eastern flank of the island. As coincidence would have it, the two regions where I spent most of my time, Itsandra and Washili, had been ruled by the same clan, and as a result my knowledge of the island was to a great deal shaped by this alliance. Thus, although the ethnography that follows is largely based on Itsandramdjini, where I have data from Kwambani that supplement or clarifies my analysis, I have included it. There are some differences between the two towns and where necessary I have made it clear if I am referring specifically to Kwambani.

A Note on Orthography

I (and undoubtedly other English-speaking readers) find the French orthography in use in the colonial period particularly unhelpful (Chouani for Shwani, Oichili for Washili),[4] and I have avoided it wherever possible, despite it being used on the 1955 IGN 1:50 000 maps (updated and reprinted in 1995). Only in proper names of real people have I retained the orthography used by the individual concerned: hence, for example, and perhaps ironically, Ali Soilihi, rather than Ali Swali (or, indeed, Ali Saleh, as he is known in Zanzibar). In all other cases I have generally followed conventions established by contemporary linguists, particularly Mohamed Ahmed Chamanga (e.g., 1976), who has proposed the most consistent and most widely used of the non-French orthographies. However, a new orthography recently proposed by Chamanga has introduced characters unlikely to be familiar to the general reader (and to the untrained ear the sounds they represent not significantly different from the Latin characters they have replaced: the voiced bilabial implosive "ɓ" for "b" and the voiced alveolar implosive "ɗ" for "d"), as well as what I feel to be unnecessary diacritical markers ("â" for the Arabic ʻayn-aleph pair, often recognised in Shingazidja but not, for example, in Kiswahili). As a result I have refrained from using it.

The orthography that I use, therefore, is the one in place prior to Chamanga's recent work, very close to that used in Kiswahili, and most sounds should be reasonably straightforward for the anglophone reader. The most frequently used Shingazidja word in this thesis is undoubtedly *aada*, custom, which is found in various guises: *ada*, *ãda*, *anda* and *aada* have all occurred in the literature. The "n" in this word is a nasalisation rather than a full [n], and although one does occasionally hear "anda", *aada* is generally pronounced "a'da", close to the Arabic, عادَة, from which it is derived. *Anda* and *ada* must therefore be rejected. Although I could have chosen to use Chamanga's *âda*, I feel that diacritics, absent from other Bantu languages, are unnecessary. *Aada*, however, accurately reflects the length of the vowel that accompanies the nasalisation, itself a reflection of the Arabic ʻayn-aleph pair.

When using Shingazidja terminology, I generally use a single version of a word to stand for the different grammatical derivations thereof; whether this is the singular form or the plural depends on which of the two is the most appropriate: for the names of age grades it is generally the plural. Thus I use the word "*wazuguwa*" to stand for what technically would be one *mzuguwa* or several *wazuguwa*, as well as the age grade of *uzuguwa* which they occupy. Although I have attempted to write, as far as possible, to the correct grammatical form, this does occasionally give rise to some anomalies. However, I do this for ease of readability for those unfamiliar with the language. I hope purists and those who are familiar with the language will forgive me, but to vary all Shingazidja terms according to the context would render the text difficult to read for those who do not speak the language, while to vary some words but not others would call for arbitrary lines to be drawn. My only significant exception to this is the name of the people of

Ngazidja, who are Mngazidja (singular) and Wangazidja (plural); their language is Shingazidja.[5] All other words, nouns, verbs or adjectives, remain invariable: I have refrained from calling upon English grammatical convention to tinker with Shingazidja words and so add neither an "-s" to indicate the plural, nor any other sort of suffix in an attempt at adjectivization. Most Shingazidja terms used in the text are to be found in the glossary.

Acknowledgements

As is the case with such ventures, this project owes its existence to many individuals. Once a vague desire in the back of my mind, I embarked on my doctorate with the encouragement of Robert Aldrich of the Department of History at the University of Sydney. In the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, Ghassan Hage, Diane Austen-Broos, Paul Alexander and Michael Nihill all made pertinent remarks at one time or another; of my fellow students Jon Marshall, Sebastian Job and Taran Ramrakha are among those who did likewise. Grant McCall at the University of New South Wales and Geoff Hawker and Ian Bedford at Macquarie University provided encouragement along the way; and various texts that have been incorporated here in one form or another benefited from comments at readings at seminars in various departments at all three universities. Special thanks are due to my supervisor, Neil Maclean, who provided essential guidance, often over considerable distances, sharing the surprises of Ngazidja ethnography and firmly pushing me in the right direction when it looked like I needed pushing, which was not infrequently. In particular, his advice that I follow the mimetic path shaped not only the entire text but my thinking on Ngazidja generally.

I received constructive criticism from my thesis examiners: Ned Alpers and Keith Hart, but particularly Sophie Blanchy, who, in addition to discussions in Ngazidja and in Paris, provided me with a long and detailed commentary on the text of my thesis. Many of her observations were pertinent and informed, and allowed me to correct some errors of fact and refine my arguments. As is often the case, there were many points on which we will undoubtedly agree to differ, but such is the character of academic dialogue. In France I should also thank Mahmoud Ibrahime, Mohamed Ahmed Chamanga, Salim Himidi, Soilihi Abdallah and Jean-Claude Penrad. Elsewhere (effectively meaning in cyberspace but occasionally in person), thanks go to Derek Nurse, Tom Spear and various members of H-Net mailing lists. In addition to partial readings of my text by several

of those mentioned here, David Gellner read several chapters while Malyn Newitt and Paul Spencer read the chapters on history and age systems respectively. Pat Caplan kindly read an almost complete draft of the entire book. All offered constructive advice and I am grateful for their suggestions. Andrea Scheibler's copy-editing and proof-reading skills rendered this text far more readable than it otherwise might have been: any remaining errors are, of course, my own.

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Over the fifteen years since I first embarked on my doctoral project I have received financial and logistical support from a number of bodies. My doctoral research, including fieldwork, was made possible by a University of

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If I have omitted anyone, it is purely through lack of space and not because they have been forgotten: *ndjamdiwaza*! And, of course, regardless of the advice and feedback, I am entirely responsible for what follows.

It remains only for me to thank my wife, Annette, and my children, Maxim and Romanne, both for accompanying me, which I know they enjoyed, and for putting up with lengthy absences, which were harder to bear—for me certainly, and (so they assure me) for them, too.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL: IDENTITY, HYBRIDITY AND MIMESIS

> Comorians copy us. They come and watch our marriages and then they go off and do the same thing. And they listen to the names we give to our children and then they go and give their children the same names. They're always copying us. I don't know why.
>
> Informant, Zanzibar, June 2005

In the contemporary world social change has long been recognised as being a less than straightforward phenomenon. If change might once have been viewed as a consequence of the internal dynamics of relatively self-contained, if not autarkic social systems, a response, perhaps, to environmental influences, social discord or cultural whimsy, or even some sort of social version of Brownian motion, an increased awareness of the interpenetrating nature of social systems has required an equally increased, acute and perspicacious analysis of change. This is news to nobody, of course. World systems, globalisation, centres, peripheries and metropoles; 'scapes of one form or another; creolisation, diasporas, networks; transnational and translocal connections; colonialism, neo-colonialism, post-colonialism, anti-colonialism; borders, territories, hybridisation and even hyperspace: all these concepts, most quite meaningful, useful even, in their contexts, point to the magnitude of the contemporary preoccupation with cross-cultural phenomena. They reflect a recognition that change is predominantly stimulated through and in response to contact, not through pseudo-biological random mutations.

This being granted, it remains to elucidate the mechanisms responsible for change: how does change really occur? How—by what processes—do the influences of external social and cultural forces prompt transformations in a given social system? This question is not a simple one. Societies are not unitary, homogeneous entities and thus do not affect one another in quite the same way that billiard balls strike each other on a billiard table. Certain features of one social system may have a variety of potential effects on diverse elements of another. Like butterflies in Brazil, endless permutations of possible changes would appear to render the task of analysing past processes difficult enough without trying to foresee or predict future social transformations. Nevertheless, an analysis of change in the past can allow for the development of theories of change that can be useful in subsequent determinations of motivations for change, assuming change is to be analysed as being the product of agency.

This book considers the processes through which, in the contemporary world, cultures and societies change. As cultures influence each other in a performative resembling of the Other (or, perhaps, what the Other is not), so contemporary change is often characterised as imitation; and as we imitate, so we are transformed. However, the transformations produced by these strategies of imitation do not lead us to become the Other; rather, almost despite these imitative processes, we not only remain very much ourselves, but become even more ourselves, so to speak. The use of the word imitation would therefore appear to be misleading, for what is going on in our globalised world is not imitation at all, or not *just* imitation, but something socially deeper. This something I call mimesis.

Mimesis as an anthropological concept is not a new one, but it is both a neglected one and a promising one. It has a pedigree that extends back to Plato and Aristotle, and a variant that is widely applied in aesthetics, literary theory, art criticism and performance studies; in anthropology its roots lie with the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Benjamin, but also with Frazer and early analyses of magic. These origins have all combined to produce a mimesis that remains strongly linked either to the performative confrontation with the Other or to the desire to capture the powers of the Other, mediated by the idea of empowerment by similarity.

In this book I will try to develop mimesis as a more complex social tool than has hitherto been the case in anthropology: going beyond magic and performance, mimesis is revealed as a very elaborate strategy for negotiating social change. Using a case study of a group of islanders in the western Indian Ocean, I argue that an engaged participation in large-scale and long-term trading networks across the ocean have prompted these islanders to develop mimesis as a strategy for negotiations of contacts with the outside world.

Mimetic processes of construction of social identity have, over the centuries, been refined to allow these islanders to draw upon the more desirable characteristics of their trading partners, thus constituting a society that, outwardly, resembles (if perhaps only partially) that of their partners, and which enables them to continue to participate in these trading networks; but at the same time this society maintains an internal structure that is coherent, even if it, too, is constituted in the image of the Other. In this analysis mimesis is no longer simply a mirror in which the Self confronts the Other, nor a process for the appropriation of the power of the Other, but a process by which social and cultural features of the Other are internalised in a negotiation of the confrontation between two cultures, a process which ultimately empowers the borrowing culture, allowing it, paradoxically, while changing, to nevertheless remain "traditional".

The ethnographic context for this enquiry is the Comoro Islands, or simply Comoros, principally the island of Ngazidja (known in French as Grande Comore), the largest of the group, but peripherally the others, of which there are three: Ndzwani (Anjouan), Mwali (Mohéli) and Maore (Mayotte). The first three islands form an "independent state" (the reason for the inverted commas will become clear); the fourth, Mayotte, is still a French colony, although graced today with the title of "*collectivité territoriale qui prend le nom de «collectivité départementale de Mayotte»*".[1]

The Comoros are a particular (in the archaic sense of being slightly different) case. It is the lot of anthropologists to be firmly convinced that "their people" are somehow special, unique, singular, and that whatever they discover is equally special, unique, singular; and of course the Comoros, and the Comorians, are just as unique as all those others. Indeed, from my very first encounter with the islands twenty-five years ago, they have always appeared slightly particular. I recall then noting in my diary how Ngazidja, scattered with adventitious cones (the island is volcanically active) and seen from the air as my aircraft came in to land, appeared to be covered in furry green pimples. Few people got off the flight; a couple of English tourists on their way to Nairobi looked at me, looked out of the window again, and wished me luck. I knew nothing of the islands, and knew no-one who did. The sole reason for my visit was a change of aircraft as I flew from Madagascar to Tanzania; schedules were such that the weekly flight to Dar es Salaam took off moments before my flight from Antananarivo landed: I was on the island for a week.

Of course, Ngazidja turned out to be a place like many others, even if tourists were rare (I met none during my week's stay); but seven days on the island aroused my curiosity. There were some notable features. The island, indeed the country, I rapidly found out, was run by mercenaries, led by the notorious Bob Denard. The economy, such as it was, was based on vanilla, ylang ylang, cloves and other such exotic products (and, in my imagined recollection at least, the island was appropriately perfumed); and, perhaps most intriguing of all for a young anthropologist, there was some sort of extravagant marriage ceremony lasting several days which would cost a man his life savings or more, and at which his grown children, issue of that very marriage, were likely to be present: curious indeed. Finally, and on a more personal level, Ngazidja was the point of entry on my first visit to the Swahili world, a world that mixed the Indian Ocean and Islam in what was to me a most satisfactory fashion. When the week was over I left for Tanzania with a desire to return; but although I visited the Comoros in the intervening period it was ten years before I returned to the islands to carry out fieldwork for my doctorate.

My doctoral research was intended to be a study of the "big wedding" (*grand mariage* in French, *aada* locally, which means simply "custom") that I had heard and, by then, read so much about: its effects on the economy of the island and, specifically, on development, whether aid projects or political and economic change generally. As my research progressed I became aware that the country's relationship with the old colonial power, France, was a significant influence on economic and political development. Again, nothing unusual there, as students of francophone Africa will be aware; one wonders sometimes if one misheard: you did say independence, didn't you? In the mid-1990s France still had a reputation for its *foccartesque* ingerence in the affairs of its ostensibly independent former colonies, although the Comoros, undoubtedly by virtue of the fact that the islands had had the temerity to declare independence unilaterally rather than wait to have it bestowed upon them, seemed to have been singled out for particular attention. Six of the seven regime changes since independence have been the result of either a coup d'etat or the death in office of a president (or both), and mercenaries and/or France were implicated in at least four of them; the jury is still out on the fifth, and the sixth would be anomalous had French approval not at least been implicit.

In the specific context of aid and development, the French influence was weighty. Bilateral aid constituted a significant proportion of the development budget, and while multilateral aid from the European Union is ostensibly just that, in this part of the world practicalities mean that both the visible and the invisible faces of Europe are generally, or are assumed to be, French. However, the French influence makes itself visible in other, less overtly hegemonic ways. Consider, for example, the following tableau:

Towards the end of my fieldwork in Ngazidja a rather unpleasant virus confined me to bed for a long week. One of my first acts upon recovery was to attend a friend's wedding. Philippe was a French doctor, an aid worker posted to the local hospital; during his stay on the island he had met and decided to marry a young Ngazidja woman, Kamaria. As one might imagine, this marriage was not straightforward. Not only was Philippe not a Muslim, but Kamaria was the eldest of her family and thus destined for one of the opulent customary weddings for which the island was renowned. After much disagreement, pleading, threats and negotiations, including Philippe's conversion to Islam, Kamaria's grandfather finally agreed on a wedding which, although unsatisfactory from both a customary and an Islamic point of view, would save the family's honour.

I was late arriving at Philippe's house, and slightly dazed; most of the other guests were already there. In Ngazidja fashion the bride was sequestered in a room elsewhere in the house while the marriage itself was about to take place on the terrace. Philippe, now a Muslim, was dressed in a *kandu*, the long robe worn by Wangazidja, and a *kofia*, the embroidered skull-cap worn by Muslims throughout East Africa; so, too, were his two witnesses. The grandfather, replacing a missing father, was also in Ngazidja dress, formal for the occasion, while the assembled French guests were well-dressed but casual (as is common at French weddings); in contrast most of the Wangazidja were dressed more formally in dark lounge suits and ties.

Through the detachment of my not-quite-cured illness the situation was quite bizarre, verging on the surreal. Frenchmen in Ngazidja dress were behaving like Wangazidja or, perhaps more correctly, behaving as they thought Wangazidja should behave, engaged in what was, after all, a Ngazidja wedding. They were doing this in the company of Wangazidja, who, in French dress, were behaving as they thought the French should do, knowing that they were at a French wedding and not a Ngazidja one. Only the grandfather muddled through, determined that the marriage should have significance for him at least, if not for anyone else. The Ngazidja ritual proceeded and was finally accomplished with the handing over of the brideprice; at this final symbolic sealing of the union, a dapper young Mngazidja stepped up to an electric keyboard and struck up the first chords of *The Green, Green Grass of Home*. The ceremony was complete.

On a superficial level the play here is obvious: an event that is astride two cultures, neither one nor the other, has prompted the actors to call upon their ingenuity in attempting to do honour to the Other: a Ngazidja wedding? Well then, the French will be as Ngazidja as possible. A French wedding? Well then, the Wangazidja will reciprocate. A simple if somewhat comic scenario that might not have much significance beyond the here and now since it was an atypical situation. And an atypical situation

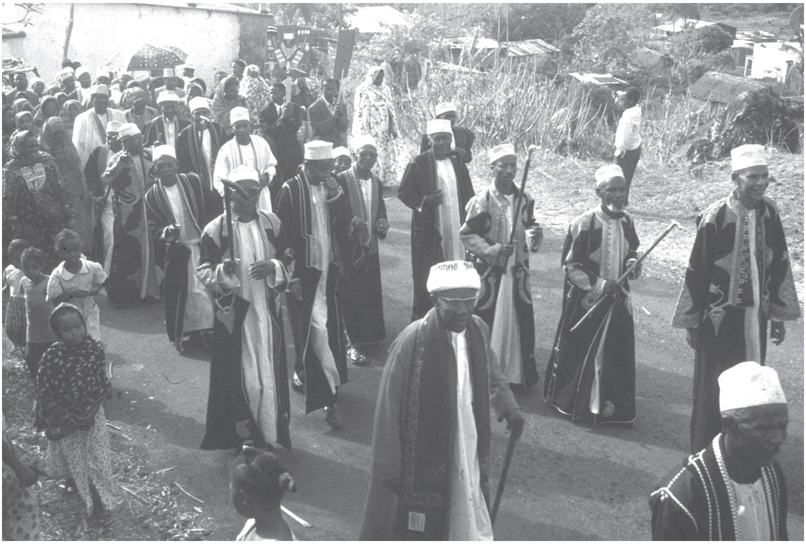

Fig. 1.1 A *zifafa*, Kwambani.

it was. Cross-cultural encounters do, of course, occur—a formal occasion at the French embassy, dinner at an aid-worker's house—but in the normal course of events each to his or her own. But there are some clues to a deeper phenomenon here: all is not as it seems.

At Philippe's wedding, and despite a noble attempt to be Ngazidja, the three Frenchmen dressed in *kandu* were not completely at ease; and they were, of course, the only French so dressed: others (myself included) had made no attempt to wear Ngazidja dress (understandably, perhaps, since most were aware that it was not really a Ngazidja wedding). The Wangazidja however were quite at ease in Western dress, despite the fact that at the time Wangazidja still wore local dress—the *kofia* and *kandu*—in daily contexts. Indeed, generally speaking, Wangazidja are at ease being like the French. This might, of course, be dismissed as a legacy of colonialism. I referred above to "a formal occasion at the French embassy, dinner at an aid-workers house": Wangazidja, having been suitably colonised, transformed into good (albeit "African" and thus not perfect) Frenchmen, are expected to move comfortably (and as permitted) in the French spheres of influence, conforming to French ("civilised") norms. Note that there is no movement in the opposite direction: a Frenchman at a Ngazidja wedding (a real *aada* wedding) will invariably present himself for duty in a lounge suit and tie: no *kandu* here.[2]

Is this then little more than an example of "successful" colonialism? Wangazidja recognise their inter-cultural agility. "We're more French than the French" is a claim I have heard more than once in the islands, and in certain respects it is not an inaccurate one; but what is important is that this type of practice is not restricted to cross-cultural contexts, and it is this observation that holds the key to understanding the issues involved. Not only do Wangazidja move easily between cultures, but they readily incorporate facets of other cultures into their own.

Let me quote again from my fieldnotes:

> The scene is both splendid and surreal. Standing in the middle of the [public square] is a character who can best be described as a "dandy", a man in his mid-twenties dressed in a perfectly cut three-piece brown suit, a matching hat (slightly askance on his head) and a flower in his button-hole. Best of all, however, is that he is leaning on a walking stick at what I am sure is called a "rakish" angle.
>
> [The groom] himself is dressed in a dinner jacket, white tie, with a white silk scarf around his neck, and is puffing on a large cigar. All this in the dust of the village football pitch under a moonlit sky.

A similar scenario: Wangazidja at ease in Western dress, conforming to Western expectations, moving easily in a Western world. Except, of course, that they are not moving in a Western world at all, but under a moonlit sky on a football pitch in the middle of a lava field outside a small town in the south of the island: apart from the anthropologist and the French wife of a local man, there are no Europeans present. And this reveals the problem: Ngazidja imitations of the Other take place regardless of the presence of the Other, in contexts that are entirely local. "The Other is symbolically present," is the obvious rejoinder, and clearly this is a clue to what is happening. But the all-pervasiveness of the phenomenon requires exploration, for it is not simply the French Other that is singled out for attention, but all Others that Wangazidja encounter, have encountered, and no doubt will continue to encounter in their historical trajectories.

So, one final example: during *aada* marriage events when formal dress is required, it is not Western, with some (important) exceptions, but rather a more traditional dress, quintessentially Ngazidja, much of it the work of the finest tailors the country can muster, whose carefully honed skills are the result of a long apprenticeship and much experience, passed down from generation to generation. During the *zifafa*, the ritual procession formally marking the end of the core marriage sequence during which the groom is led to the bride's house (henceforth his place of residence) senior participants wear clothing—the *dragla*, the *djoho*, the *bushti* or the *djuba*—according to their status. Most men will wear the *kofia*, but the groom will wear the *kiemba*, a turban, very similar to that worn by Sultan Qaboos of Oman, which only a few experts are qualified to tie. The most obvious statement that a casual observer might make is: don't they all look like Arabs (see Fig. 1.1)? Perhaps this is because they are: when, on a recent visit to Moroni, I explained to a passer-by in the street what I was doing (researching Arab identity among Wangazidja) he replied, "Well, you have your work cut out for you. We're all Arabs here." I politely refrained from pointing out that he was supposed to be more French than the French.

Identity and Globalisation

This book is about identity: how, over time, identities, both individual and collective, are constructed; how they are maintained; and how they evolve in response to the various demands, pressures, needs and desires that people feel and to which they are subjected, using the social and cultural tools at their disposal and at the disposal of those around them, in their interactions with one another. It seems to me that whatever one may make of the word identity itself as a research tool (and I return to this below), questions of identity are important, even central, to anthropology: questions such as who people are; who they think they are; who others think they are; how, why and when they are who they are; and how, why and when what they are affects what they do. This is particularly so in view of the enduring character of some identities where, one might suppose, they should wither away. In 2005, during a visit to Muscat, I met a prominent Swahili historian: "Identity?" he challenged me rather angrily. "Why does everyone keep on about identity? Another twenty years and no-one here will speak Kiswahili. They'll all be Omanis. Why is everyone so interested in identity?" Leaving aside the political import of what he was saying, it seems to me that identity is very important indeed; and his implicit reduction of identity to language is revealing, since language (in a strict linguistic sense) is, in certain respects, and perversely perhaps, one of the less important markers of identity. First generation excepted, many Italian-Australians rarely speak Italian; likewise Armenian-Americans or, closer to home, Comorians in Zanzibar. Yet, despite the lack of what is often felt to be the primary marker of identity, these people, these groups often manage to maintain a very coherent sense of identity, so much so that Italians, visiting kin in Australia, remark on how

Italian they are, still doing things that have long since fallen by the wayside back in Italy.

Questions of identity invoke responses of kinship, ancestry, education, cultural practice, politics, location, religion, and a wealth of other markers, practices and characteristics. All of these things allow individuals to define themselves as being like or unlike others; they allow them to form groups whose members are, collectively, also like or unlike members of other groups. These markers are what make Italian Australians different from Anglo (or Greek or Indigenous) Australians; equally important, they also make them different from Italians. Ultimately the labels are unimportant: the Swahili of Oman may not, in the next generation, speak Kiswahili, just as many Omanis of East Africa no longer speak Arabic (or at least not in any serviceable fashion), and they may not call themselves Swahili; but I suspect that some of them will see themselves, somehow and in certain ways, as being different from other Omanis. They may constitute a group of some sort that may, in different ways and at different times and even with different members, be distinguished from other groups.

This all sounds very vague: “somehow”, “in certain ways”, “may”, “of some sort”; and of course this very vagueness, widespread implicitly if not explicitly in studies of identity, has prompted criticism of the term “identity” itself. Brubaker and Cooper feel that the term is lost between the extremes of “hard” essentialism and “soft” constructivism. For them the essentialist notion of identity as something that has “connotations of boundedness, groupness, and sameness” (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 25) is misleading, if even people are allowed to have multiple identities; but post-essentialist approaches which emphasise the fluid, dynamic and contingent nature of identity are too vague and all-embracing to warrant the use of a single term, “identity”. Siniša Malešević agrees with them, voicing much the same concerns: on the one hand, modernist, structuralist and Marxist conceptions of the term are too constricting, construing identity as imprisonment, “conceptualised as a collective or institutional mechanism of control and domination” (Malešević 2003: 267), thus leaving no room for individual autonomy; but on the other hand, post-essentialist formulations of identity see it as “an orgy of unconstrained voluntarism, assemblage and self-stylism” (Kellner, cited in Malešević 2003: 269), thus both removing a sense of group and suggesting that identity is a matter of personal choice.[3] However, while I have sympathy with these criticisms, it seems that it is precisely the flexibility of “identity” as an analytical concept that endows it with utility, and that if recourse to use of the term necessarily presupposes a definition thereof, this does not necessarily weaken the term itself: on the contrary, does one not sharpen a tool before using it? Indeed, and as with most things in contemporary anthropology, it is precisely in the subtle interplay between structure and agency that the concept of identity is at its most useful: how much autonomy do actors enjoy in creating their own identities, and to what point are they subject to the structures, the social imperatives, those things that define them but which constrain their freedom of action?

Identity remains a useful concept, in its various guises. Thus, while philosophical and mathematical uses of the word, like formal dictionary definitions, refer to sameness, oneness and individuality, popular conception and anthropological formulations are more focused on being like others (still some sameness here, of course), belonging to a group of some sort (identity as identifying with) and more specifically as ethnicity or nationalism (here a hint of difference creeps in). Identity is a concept that expresses both similarity and difference, individuality and belonging (Appiah 1994; Taylor 1994), which is precisely what it is about: it is its flexibility and its scope that allow it to stand for a concept of who we (you, they) are in the world. It is a term which I find difficult to replace—Malešević's "collectivity" (2003) seems inadequate, partly because it refers more to a group than to a concept,[4] while Brubaker and Cooper's portfolio of terms have lost that very scope and flexibility that makes "identity" so useful. I therefore retain "identity" as an expression that frames a field of inquiry into both individuality and group membership; into exclusion and incorporation; and not only into mobility in and out of groups that are constituted with reference to an array of characteristics, beliefs and practices, but into the very constitution of the groups themselves. That is, not only may individuals define themselves by their group membership, moving from one to another (voluntarily or involuntarily), but groups themselves may dissolve or reconstitute themselves *around* those individuals.

Finally, and briefly, it is worth recalling what Fredrik Barth (1969) pointed out long ago: that what makes groups (and, by inference, individuals: groups of one) is difference, not sameness; contingency, not inflexibility. Indeed, Barth made several points which are sometimes lost in postmodern reflection and so are worth reiterating here. First, it is precisely the boundaries of a group and its members' interactions with non-members of the group that constitute the group itself, differentiating it from other groups. These boundaries are of course permeable, allowing members to come and go, within limits, of course, without challenging the persistence of the group itself. Second, the cultural contents of the group are not invariable and homogeneous: it is sufficient that social organisation permits intra-group interaction according to certain parameters for behaviour; cultural markers may be shared or not shared, played down or called into play, according to the context. Finally, there must nevertheless be agreement between groups on social norms that allows for interaction, if the groups are to interact and maintain their boundaries. That is, difference and boundaries are actively constituted and not passively attributed: difference must be maintained through interaction. But if there are areas in which social interaction is both permitted and regulated, there are other areas in which, as an essential mechanism for maintaining boundaries, social interaction is proscribed. These points, well accepted if since modified, underlie this book and will be developed further: how boundaries are constituted and maintained, allowing Wangazidja to preserve a (very distinct) identity as a group while nevertheless interacting with others on their own terms.

If we may retain "identity" as a tool, there are other terms that I believe need to be contested and avoided, even and especially when they are called into play by the subject matter. The apparently imitative practices of Wangazidja that I have described would seem to be the product of the processes I listed at the beginning of this chapter: transnational connections, globalisation, colonialism, hybridisation and so on. On the face of it, this is not surprising. Wangazidja are, as are we all, part of a global world (despite the hoops one sometimes has to jump through to get to the islands): large emigrant communities live in France, smaller ones in Zanzibar, mainland Tanzania, Kenya, Madagascar and Mozambique. Wangazidja may be found in Australia, Canada, South Africa, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia and countless other places. They return, regularly, with cultural imports, both cognitive—democracy, pan-Africanism, Arab identities—and material—suitcases full of clothes, a VCR, shampoo—to add to the already complex (hybrid?) cultural practices found locally. They communicate even more frequently, by telephone and email, with news of activities in the diaspora (in one direction) and at home (in the other); and they send money, so that those at home can purchase those things they might need to maintain appearances: bricks and mortar to build a new house, a pair of shoes, a new car. Appadurai (1990) would probably find they constitute a 'scape or two; Hannerz (1990) might call them cosmopolitan; they are, clearly, a product of the post-modern international community.

Indeed, over the past quarter century transnational contacts have radically transformed cultural practice globally: as travel becomes quicker and more affordable, as email and telephone calls, instantaneous exchanges of information, also become affordable, so people move, things move, money moves, ideas move and, in the scenario now permanently fixed somewhere in the back of everyone's minds, we all wear Nikes, eat at McDonald's, watch the Simpsons and listen to Madonna. Anthropologists have, naturally, seized on these phenomena as characteristic, pivotal, to an understanding of our contemporary world. Hannerz, in a much-cited contribution to the study of globalisation, recognised that the world was no longer "a cultural mosaic, of separate pieces with hard, well-defined edges, [but rather] a global ecumene of persistent cultural interaction and exchange" (1997: 107).

In the excitement aroused by the concept of globalisation, the newness of the terrain, it took a while for the realisation to sink in that it wasn't entirely new, although there has always been a recognition that some "global" processes are old (Featherstone, 1990). But by the end of the twentieth century, it was being recognised that the translocal (under a different name, perhaps) had a long pedigree in anthropology (Hannerz 2000); by 2003 Eriksen was providing confirmation (although he hedges his bets, conceding that the contemporary world is "in substantial ways different" [Eriksen 2003b:2]). Friedman also agreed: "Globality is not new" (1999: 253). Intercultural contacts and exchanges were occurring in the world long before the appearance of the Airbus and the internet, even before the steamship and the telegraph. Malinowski's (1961) putative spatially-bounded ethnography of the Trobriands is in fact a study of translocal networks, social, cultural and economic (the very title of the book, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, suggests movements and trade); so, too, Evans-Pritchard's Nuer (1940; cf. Werbner 1999, Eriksen 2003b), and many others besides. Indeed, as these writers and others have now pointed out, anthropology began with ideas of diffusionism and evolutionism that, if long unfashionable, presupposed contacts between societies, the exchange of ideas, objects and people. The isolated tribe of the anthropological imagination never existed, even the Nambikwara had contacts with the outside world (Lévi-Strauss 1955). Some were willing to be precise: Wallerstein affirms that "globalisation has been happening for 500 years" (2000: 249), while Pieterse kindly provides tables of different perspectives on exactly when globalisation started (2003: 16, 62); others (Hannerz, again, 2000) decline to be drawn. Eriksen feels (and others agree) that the term is no longer particularly useful: "we need to get rid of the word itself," he writes in the Introduction to a collection entitled (with provocative irony) *Globalisation* (Eriksen 2003b: 4). The decent thing to do then would be to lay this particular dead horse to rest, for if globalisation means that we are all connected beyond the local, this has been true for a long time; if it means that we should be attentive to these translocal connections, then the term "globalisation" doesn't really seem necessary. And, indeed, in anthropology the focus has shifted to a closer analysis of the dynamics in these translocal, cross-cultural exchanges; there has been an accompanying rethinking of the terminology. Thus Roland Robertson, who helped launch the term "globalisation" in the 1980s, now offers us "glocalisation" (Robertson 1995), as if to emphasise that even if nothing is new, it's still new. But to say it is new is to disempower those for whom it is not new, forcing them into a "it's new for us, so think of it as new for you, too".

And so if globalisation is discarded, centres and peripheries, too, have outlived their usefulness, for flows are highly nuanced. If we can accept that there may be multiple centres and multiple peripheries, that one woman's centre is another woman's periphery, that there are flows in both directions, then does not the concept become so broad as to lose its worth? What of circular relationships, whereby a series of centre-periphery relationships join up like an Escher staircase? And what if, in a specific context of contact, each partner is, at the same time, centre and periphery: if Ngazidja's relationship with Zanzibar is both one of centre (the supply of religious leaders) and periphery (an adhesion to Swahili cultural norms), does this not take the edge off the analytical tool? Thus, while Hannerz is reluctant to abandon the notion of centre and periphery (1997, 2000), Appadurai now feels that "the new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centres and peripheries)" (Appadurai 1990: 296). This leads to his (in)famous series of 'scapes: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes and ideoscapes, through which multifaceted relationships, variously situated and "deeply perspectival" (ibid.), may be contemplated.

There is another element of globalisation that merits consideration, and that is the association with modernity, and thence to the West. Contributors to the Winter 2000 issue of *Daedalus,* entitled "Multiple Modernities", contested the idea of the single Western modernity, suggesting that modernity is not necessarily a Western preserve (Göle 2000); that there may be multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000); even that there may not be any modernity at all (Wittrock 2000). This is an important point. My list of characteristic features of a globalised world—Nikes, McDonald's, the Simpsons, Madonna—was deliberately American: globalisation is often implicitly and specifically seen as Americanisation. Global cultures, cosmopolitan practices, universal values, these terms invoke a potentially universal system of values and practices that, while perhaps not entirely American (or even entirely Western: we are allowed to eat sushi from "modern" Japan), is nevertheless founded on Western culture and values—the nation state, liberal democracy, the free-market economy, universal (*sic*) human rights, a secular society, scientific knowledge, the English language, and so on: a Neo-Kantian world of enlightened souls, a Weberian post-traditional society. But the term Westernisation conceals such a diversity of cultural, social, political, economic and religious practices that it is doubtful whether it can be of any real use at all (and *idem* for its Other, of course, the non-Western). "French" is very different from "American", and yet "French" is supposed to be Western, too; in the present context, to talk of Western influences in the Comoros is rather meaningless; to talk of French influences is highly significant.

It is not really my intention to challenge every keyword in contemporary social science, for many of them are quite useful. What is important is to ensure that the use of a term both reflects a valid concept and does not, in the guise of something new, rework a concept that already has validity. Globalisation, hybridisation, transnationalism, all seem to me to be terms that present themselves as incisive, cutting edge, and yet refer to phenomena that in many ways are not really so new or special. If all cultures, all societies have, at all times, been subject (for example) to translocal processes of hybridisation, then to set these terms up as new, grounds for a rethinking of something radically disruptive, is ultimately to be counterproductive since it conceals one of the most important features of the process: precisely that it is not new. Hannerz discusses this very issue with reference to hybridity, recognising the historical character of the phenomenon, but then contemplating his own formulation of creolisation, suggests that "in one particular period, some cultures are more creole than others" (2000: 14), and that during such a period the phenomenon merits attention. True, perhaps, but (politely) is it not trivial? Marriage, too, occurs at certain moments in an individual's life and not at others, but this fact does not lead to a recentring of theories of marriage. It is analysed when it happens and its timing only becomes important if it is anomalous. I do not think there is anything very exceptional about the timing of Hannerz's periods of creolisation.

Ultimately, and despite the post-modern turn, it seems to me that many of these terms continue to presuppose oppositions: hybrid as opposed to pure; global as opposed to local; modern, opposed to tradition; colonial, opposed to post-colonial; the West, opposed to non-Western. Given the increasing recognition that many things are indeed contingent, I prefer to bracket these terms, retaining only those that are essential for an analysis of process, and, in preference, retaining only those that do not invoke unnecessary oppositions; like Appadurai, I would rather contemplate the mul-