

8 Resonant voices and spatial politics

An acoustemology of citizenship in a Muslim neighbourhood of the Kenyan coast¹

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Introduction

In 2006, a female member of the Kenyan coast's expatriate community residing in the resort town of Kikambala was involved in a fracas with a local imam.² The trouble began when the imam's mosque was fitted with new rooftop loudspeakers, one of which happened to be aimed at the expatriate's house. Evidently fed up with being woken up before sunrise every morning by the call to prayer, the expatriate stormed over one morning to lodge a complaint in person. Arriving at the mosque while the call was still sounding, she began to shout her grievances towards the edifice. In response, the imam came out and did what he later calmly described as the only sensible thing to do in the situation: he punched the expatriate in the eye.

By the time Kenyan news media caught up with the controversy, each party was threatening the other with lawsuits and criminal charges.³ Meanwhile, representatives of national Muslim organizations held that the imam's actions both reasonable and had been carried out in accordance with Islamic law. The most interesting response, however, came from the local community of worshippers: some of the male members banded together to build a stone wall along the path that the expatriate had used to reach the mosque from her home. Only wide enough to block the footpath on which it was built, the wall was clearly a message, meant to communicate that the woman's actions constituted an attack, perhaps even an attack of the same brutality as the one she had suffered at the hands of the imam.

This sort of 'blow-up' (Göle 2002) between Muslims and non-Muslims is a relatively rare occurrence on the Kenyan coast. But the underlying conditions for it – the status of the coast as a historically Muslim region within a Christian-dominated country, coupled with discrepant understandings between Muslims and non-Muslims of what constitutes public space and sound – are ever present. This is especially the case in the coast's more socially heterogeneous urban spaces, where Muslims and non-Muslims,

and Muslim and non-Muslim sounds and spaces, are in constant contact. This chapter develops a perspective on Muslim belonging in predominantly Christian Kenya through an ethnography of Islamic sonic-spatial practices in an historic Muslim neighbourhood of Kenya's port city of Mombasa. I describe how Islamic practices of sounding and listening in Mombasa Old Town effect a 'communitarian privacy' (Ammann 2006) that marks the historic neighbourhood as socially discrete – practically, though not legally, *sovereign* – within the larger city and, by extension, the Kenyan nation-state. I take an analytical ear to this neighbourhood's everyday Islamic polyphony of muezzin calls, religious sermons, and Quranic recitations, with the aim of making audible the cultural conditions of coastal Muslim citizenship in the Kenyan postcolony.

Mombasa Old Town

Mombasa Old Town is at once a typical 'Swahili stone town' and an integral section of East Africa's major port city. Traditionally understood as a set of smaller neighbourhoods, or *mitaa*, Old Town has emerged in the post-colonial period as a unitary 'neighbourhood in Arjun Appadurai's (1996) sense of a space of 'relatively stable associations . . . producing its own contexts of alterity' (191). More importantly, it stands as a clear illustration of Appadurai's assertion that neighbourhoods function as sites of entropy for nation-states, implicitly calling into question the link between nation and state.

Due to its *casbah*-like positioning within a heterogeneous city, Mombasa Old Town serves as both a physical location and a sign vehicle in and through which struggles for coastal Muslim autonomy collide with the dominant national imaginary. Even upon first approach, the neighbourhood reveals itself as a distinct and discrete segment of the city, marked not only by its late 19th-century stone buildings that line its narrow alleyways but also by its particular forms of social interaction. Women in full Muslim *purdah* walk towards the market, passing seated men in *kofia* caps talking about religion or politics. Aromas of incense coconut rice mix with decidedly less pleasant smells from the open sewers; and all these scents waft into an air that vibrates with the pained hollers of feral cats and the crackle of an amplified Islamic soundscape.

In everyday 'spatial practices' (Lefebvre 1991), denizens of Old Town actively and passively negate the *Kenyanness* of their town. Old Town is a place where national newspapers are hardly sold or read, where an overwhelming percentage of radios are tuned to local Islamic programming, where even non-Arabic speakers prefer Arabic satellite television to Kenya's English and Swahili programming.

And the *Kenyanness* of Old Town is likewise negated from *without* – not only by the everyday spatial practices of Mombasans from other parts of the city but also by images and narratives that circulate in Kenyan public culture



in the background





Figure 8.1 Rooftop view of Mombasa Old Town in 2005, showing the skyline of the modern part of Mombasa
Photo: Courtesy of Kai Kresse.

at large. Take, for example, how the neighbourhood is placed, or misplaced, within iconography of the national currency: the images on Kenya's shilling notes represent the nation as untamed wildernesses and plantations rolling into the modern metropolis of the capital Nairobi. Where the coast appears, it is represented only by the famous elephant tusk gateway over Mombasa's Moi Avenue, in the central business district. The tusk image fades into an image of Somali camel riders in Kenya's untamed north-east, presumably because that is the only other predominantly Muslim area of the country. Despite their rich iconic potential, Kenya's famed 'Swahili stone towns'

Mombasa Old Town, Malindi Old Town, and the picturesque Lamu Town (a UNESCO World Heritage Site and storied pilgrimage destination for Eastern Sufis and Western hippies) – are absent.

When the Swahili town does find a place in the Kenyan nation imaginary, it is as something of an internal Orient. Kenyan anthropologist Mwenda Ntarangwi writes that when he was growing up in Kenya in the 1970s, ‘Mombasa was always a tourist attraction, given the multiple images of its attractiveness that are used to promote tourism in Kenya and which soon became part of the local discourse in the country’ (2003: 5). In the 21st century, the city has become more than just a symbol of touristic desire for upcountry Kenyans; it has become an actual destination for touristic pleasure seeking. Faced with a severe slump in the 1990s, the Kenya Tourism Board encouraged coastal beach hotels to mine the domestic market. Arabesque-themed hotels that once catered strictly to Europeans filled up with Kenyan vacationers, and marketing tropes that were once aimed at European consumers were retooled for Kenyan consumers. ‘The coast has its own fascination’, reads one Kenyan tourism guide aimed at foreign and domestic tourists. ‘Towns such as Mombasa, Malindi and Lamu have a unique and special magic. Their Arabian Nights ambience that forever holds one’s imagination is simply unforgettable’ (NMG 2002).

The disjuncture between the local and the national in Mombasa Old Town finds parallels in other ethnically or religiously marked neighbourhoods in Kenya and other African nation-states. Violent clashes or anti-hegemonic struggles can and do arise from such situations, given the right catalyst. But the absence of such highly visible flare-ups – which is both what I encountered in Mombasa Old Town during my fieldwork between 2004 and 2006, and what has historically been the case in the neighbourhood since decolonization, with few exceptions – does not mean the absence of *politics*. The aim of my ethnographic investigation of the local Islamic soundscape in Mombasa Old Town is to make visible and audible everyday micropolitical struggles over urban space that are at once struggles over social belonging within the nation-state. These struggles can easily go unnoticed or be dismissed as ineffable ‘tensions’, mere epiphenomena of larger struggles over the place of Muslims in Kenya. But while they often take place under the surface of social practice, within local actors’ everyday strategies of accommodation, micropolitical struggles over space are material to subject formation and thereby shape as well as reflect larger political processes.





Figure 8.2 A narrow street in Mombasa Old Town

Photo: Courtesy of Salim Nasher 2005.

Steven Feld's (1996) 'acoustemology of place' in Papua New Guinea provides a model for my approach to the dynamics of the Islamic soundscape in Mombasa Old Town. As with Bosavi auditory practices according to Feld, I argue that Muslim auditory practices in Mombasa Old Town serve as ways of understanding and enacting the material environment as a place-in-the-world. I depart from Feld, however, in my focus on acoustemological multiplicity and contestation, phenomena that are likely more common in postcolonial African cities than in the rainforest setting of Papua New Guinea. While I do hear a relatively coherent Islamic Swahili 'space

temology of place resounding' (to borrow Feld's phrase) in Mombasa Old Town, my interest lies with how this acoustemology interacts with competing acoustemological commitments, particularly those fostered by the Kenyan state's broadly liberal-democratic logic of urban public space. My aim is to reveal something of the subjective dimensions of Muslim citizenship on the Kenyan coast by asking how such acoustemological disjuncture shapes Muslim denizens' visceral understandings and experiences of being 'Kenyan'.

In the opening anecdote of this chapter we are confronted with a phenomenon that, borrowing from V.N. Vološinov (1973), we might call the 'multiaccentuality' of public space on the Kenyan coast. We can identify at least two coexisting (and often coterminous) incarnations of public space on the Kenyan coast, each corresponding to its own logic of publicity and privacy. One of these incarnations emerges from the political structure of the postcolonial Kenyan state, and the other from Islamic precepts as they have been historically constituted on the Kenyan coast. The uncomfortable convergence of these two logics of public space is the larger issue underlying this bizarre encounter between a rural imam and his expatriate neighbour. Positioning herself as a victim with potential recourse to the legal system of the Kenyan state, the expatriate woman voiced her complaint in a shared physical space, recognizing the public space of a democratic state as, in Derrida's words, a space where 'a subject is questioned and has to answer' (Derrida and Ferraris 2001: 26). The imam, in contrast, was acting within a local Islamic logic of public space, which, as I will discuss, bears its own particular rules of conduct.

Vološinov's (1973) heuristic of multiaccentuality captures the ontological nature of the competition between logics of space on the Kenyan coast. By resisting the false dichotomy between representations and 'concrete material reality' (65), Vološinov reveals that the multiaccentual sign 'does not just exist as part of a reality – it reflects and refracts another reality' (10). An active competition between logics of space thus marks an 'ontological politics', 'a politics over what there is and who/what can know it' (Verran 1998: 238; Mol 2002; Law 2010; Born 2013). By acting upon (and thereby enacting) divergent logics of public space, the imam, the expatriate, and any others who became involved in their dispute were waging just such a politics.

An analysis of the multiaccentuality of public space on the Kenyan coast (and elsewhere) requires attention to the complex ways that physical spaces correspond to cultural sensibilities in heterogeneous contexts. I believe that an acoustemological approach to Old Town's Islamic soundscape can be of great value in this task.

An Islamic soundscape

Mombasa Old Town is every day awash with electrically amplified male

voices delivering Islamic devotional and moral texts in Arabic and Swahili. Five times a day a polyphony of cantillated (Arabic) calls to prayer emanates from the rooftop loudspeakers of dozens of neighbourhood mosques, its 'soaring yet mournful, almost languid harmonic webs' (Hirschkind 2006: 124) somewhat harshened by the crackling of over-stressed or substandard sound reproduction technologies.⁴ The constant rhythm of this key 'soundmark' (Schafer 1994 (1977)) is further punctuated each week by the polyphony of Arabic and Swahili sermons that emanate from many of these same loudspeakers. Between these periodic sonic events, a random assemblage of radios and computer speakers in local shops and homes supply the neighbourhood's private and semi-private spaces with layers of Quranic recitations; sermons in Arabic, Swahili, and sometimes English; and religious songs in Swahili and Arabic (Swa. *kaswida*; Ar. *qasida*) – producing a continuous (e)merging of vocal performances that I refer to as an Islamic soundscape.

Though most of its constituent elements involve a recitation of, or reference to, a key text (the Qur'an), an Islamic soundscape is less an intertextual field than an architectonics of audible events resounding in local spaces and sensibilities. As will become clear, what makes the Mombasa Islamic soundscape a coherent entity is not its intertextuality but rather its 'interpracticality', the ways in which its sounding and listening practices relate to each other and to the originary Islamic 'recitation', the Qur'an.

Above all, an Islamic soundscape must be understood as deeply implicated in processes of subject-formation; it is an *apparatus*, 'a machine that produces subjectifications' (Agamben 2009: 20). At the simplest level, the Islamic soundscape *qua* apparatus recruits those within earshot as particular types of inhabitant – subjects (residents, visitors, etc.). The call to prayer, or *adhān* in Arabic, is key: as a literal act of hailing a community of believers (*umma*), its role in demarcating the space of a Muslim community is always at the forefront (Lee 1999). Indeed, the *adhān* is one of the primary '[subliminal] cues' that enable both residents and visitors in a heterogeneous city to recognize a 'Muslim quarter' (Abu-Lughod 1987: 160). In Mombasa, the sound of the *adhān* marks the Old Town as a 'Muslim quarter', even though the neighbourhood is not the only part of the city in which the call can be heard. This is because outside of the Old Town, Mombasa's *adhāns* are simply part of the urban din. In the market area, for example, though *adhāns*

ring out from powerful loudspeakers mounted atop the high minarets of the large, Saudi-funded mosques, their sounds get lost in an urban din of rumbling cars and trucks, popular music soundtracks of *matatu* taxi vans, and voices of touts and peddlers. In the Old Town, meanwhile, a thick polyphony of *adhāns* easily reaches the ears of anyone present. Since Swahili-style mosques typically lack minarets, the voices are close to ear level; moreover, they are relatively unfettered by the rest of the acoustic environment. Some of the human-produced sounds that could potentially compete with *adhāns* in the Old Town (chants, laughter, music, etc.) give way as pious Muslim

residents receive the call; others, such as the throbbing *matatu* soundtracks, are simply absent in any case (*matatus* ply no routes through the Old Town's narrow streets).

In its guise as a 'subliminal cue', Mombasa Old Town's Islamic soundscape is not just an apparatus but also a sign-vehicle. For outsiders, especially, the Old Town's Islamic soundscape is part and parcel of a multi-sensory tableau that ties together the neighbourhood's other typical sights, sounds, and smells: Indian-style wood doors, women in black purdah robes, Arabic- and Indian-inflected *taarab* music, aromas of incense and coconut rice, and so on. Mediated by narratives of the Kenyan tourism industry, this tableau reflects the 'Arabian Nights' ambience (MacDonald 1956) that has long been marketed to foreign tourists and is now increasingly marketed to middle-class upcountry Kenyans as well. But for some Kenyans this tableau signifies something more repellent and frightening: a number of Mombasans not from the Old Town (including one Muslim) informed me that they avoid the neighbourhood for fear of being harmed or seduced by genie magic, homosexual practices, or transnational jihadism, all of which are rumoured to be common among the Old Town's Arab(ized) inhabitants (Porter 1995; McIntosh 2009: 89–126).

An Islamic acoustemology

The subject, according to Agamben (2009: 14), 'results from the relation and, so to speak, the relentless fight between living beings and apparatuses'. It is in this more energetic sense that the Islamic soundscape serves as an apparatus for the production of *Muslim* subjects – only what Agamben describes as a 'relentless fight' Muslims describe in quite different terms, as *sacred obligation* (*fard*) and *submission* (*'islām*).

The Islamic soundscape's apparatical character is most apparent in its attendant practices of 'reception' (a somewhat imperfect term in this context). Consider the *adhān* once again. Unlike the Christian church bell, which is also a 'call to prayer' in the most literal sense, the *adhān* hails its subjects by initiating a participatory 'communicative practice' (Fennes 2010: 79). Proper audition of the *adhān* implies an active process engaging not only the ears but also the entire body, including the voice. Upon hearing the first line, pious Muslims repeat the first words '*Allahu Akbar*' (God is Great)

quietly to themselves, along with other prescribed responses to subsequent lines (El Guindi 2008: 135). The obligation to respond in this way to the *adhān* is laid out in the *hadiths* (the authoritative narratives of the Prophet's words and deeds). But the idea of a vocal response is also embedded in the institution of the *adhān* at a more basic level, as the text includes the *Shahada*, the testimony of faith ('There is no god but God, and Mohammed is his messenger'), the enunciation of which is the first 'pillar' of Islam. Pious Muslims who do not engage in such vocal responses (the question of whether women are obligated, or even allowed, to do so is actively debated

in many parts of the Muslim world) typically respond with an attentive, otherworldly silence and, if necessary (and it often is), silencing actions: the muting of televisions and radios, the silencing of unruly children, and so on. Women, meanwhile, adjust their headscarves. All these actions are habitual, undertaken with a 'calm serenity' (El Guindi 2008: 138) and 'a spontaneity analogous to the reflex adjustments of the muscles of a driver approaching a curve' (Hirschkind 2006: 125).

* **Document 8_1:** A call to prayer (*adhān*) broadcast from Mandhry Mosque in Mombasa Old Town, recorded from the street. Audio [01'52"]. Andrew J. Eisenberg 2006.

The *adhān* is not unique in demanding a particular form of participatory listening from Muslims. Sermon-listening also calls for habituated bodily techniques. Charles Hirschkind (2001, 2006) describes Islamic sermon audition in Cairo as an 'ethical performance', which 'demands a particular affective-volitional responsiveness from the listener . . . while simultaneously deepening an individual's capacity to hear in this manner' (2001: 624). Habituated responses to the Islamic soundscape therefore index a lifetime of ethical practice: 'These are the motions of the heart, limbs, and will . . . as they continuously accommodate themselves to the familiar demands of a sonorous moral acoustics' (Hirschkind 2006: 124). Accordingly, pious Muslims place a great deal of emphasis upon the acquisition of pious listening habits in the earliest stages of physical and social development. In many parts of the Muslim world parents quietly perform the *adhān* and *iqāma* (the echo of the *adhān*, recited in the mosque) into the ears of their newborn children (Trimingham 1980 (1964): 126). Two influential works of Swahili autoethnography, Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari's 19th-century work *Customs of the Swahili People* (1981: 8) and Hyder Kindy's *Life and Politics in Mombasa* (1972) attribute great importance to this practice, citing 'a belief that children who do not experience [it] when they are born will go astray and become bad characters' (Kindy 1972: 5).

In the context of contemporary social theory, a discussion of shared bodily dispositions evokes Bourdieu's (1980) theory of the *habitus*. But as some anthropologists of Islam have argued in recent years, Aristotle's theory of the *habitus*, which has left a strong mark on the writings of Islamic

philosophers such as Ibn Khaldun, provides a more powerful theoretical perspective on Muslim subject-formation (see inter alia Starrett 1995; Mahmood 2005: 136–139). Unlike Bourdieu's theory, which stresses the unconscious and ineffable nature of embodied dispositions ('body *hexis*'), '[*habitus* in the] Aristotelian tradition is understood to be an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person' (Mahmood 2005: 136). In other words, it is a *cultivated* bodily orientation, which 'does not simply express the social structure but also endows

the self with particular capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world' (Mahmood 2005: 139). Armed with this Aristotelian notion of *habitus*, we begin to see and hear how habituated modes of sounding and listening are also acoustemic capacities that enable Muslims in Mombasa Old Town to actively transform, or 'convert' (El Guindi 2008), the physical spaces of their neighbourhood.

In a boldly panoptic ethnographic study of spatiotemporality in Islamic cultures, Fadwa El Guindi (2008) describes a 'rhythm of Islam', which is grounded in pious subjects' periodic 'movements . . . out of ordinary time and space and into sacred time and space and back' (2008: 134). Such movements, El Guindi contends, may be effected by individuals or by groups: they are 'effected singly' in the act of prayer, when a 'Muslim, stripped temporarily of worldly identity, is in a sacred state'; they are 'effected collectively' in contexts of collective ritual practice, such as 'the mosque during Friday noon prayer and the annual pilgrimage to Makka' (2008: 136). In Mombasa Old Town, as in other Muslim places, the constant movements 'out of ordinary time and space and into sacred time and space and back' are effected to a significant extent in and through the acoustemic capacities associated with the Islamic soundscape.

A resonant privacy

Mombasa Old Town's Muslim denizens' constant movements 'into sacred time and space and back' effectively transform, or 'convert' (El Guindi 2008), the neighbourhood as a whole into something of a sanctuary. As in the Arab world, the notion of 'sanctuary' in the Swahili context is a concept that 'connects sacred places, like mosque and pilgrimage centre, house of worship and house of learning, [and] also applies to women, women's quarters, and family' (El Guindi 2008: 150). Another way to understand this sanctification is as a kind of 'communitarian privacy' (Ammann 2006), understanding 'privacy' in the Arab/Swahili sense, which 'does not connote the 'personal', the 'secret' or the 'individuated space' [but rather] two core [social] spheres – women and the family' (El Guindi 1999: 82).⁵

In the literature on the 'Islamic city', communitarian privacy is classically described as a function of architectural form: winding streets and mazes of courtyards make public space 'defensible' (Abu-Lughod 1987)

by fostering multiple '[gradations of] private, semi-private and semi-public space' (Ammann 2006: 102). But to the extent that a Swahili stone town counts as an 'Islamic city', it suggests that Islamic communitarian privacy may be acoustical (or acoustemological) as well as architectural. Indeed, in the Swahili context a sanctuary is inherently *resonant*. Take, for example, the ideal-typical Swahili sanctuary, the domestic sanctum (*ndani*). As Swahili architecture scholar Linda Wiley Donley (1982) describes, the traditional house of a Swahili stone town is constructed not only with stones but also with sounds. Donley (1982: 72) offers the example of the elite Swahili

ritual *kutolewande*, in which a 40-day-old infant is introduced to the house that will become her ‘very cosmos for several years’. In this ritual the mother and other female members of the household make audible the differences between the various rooms of the house, making each room vibrate with its own didactic songs (1982: 70).

In the Swahili context, humanly produced sound can also turn public (i.e. extra-domestic) spaces into sanctuaries. Indeed, for centuries residents of Swahili towns and villages have used sound to distinguish their settlement from a surrounding wilderness, or one moiety within the settlement from the other. Until the late 20th century, across the coast Swahili Muslims performed a yearly ritual of spatial demarcation and purification in which a sacrificial bull is led counter-clockwise around the town or moiety to the sounds of *siwas* (decorated side-blown horns of ivory, brass, or wood, which historically served as symbols of power in Swahili towns) and verses from the Qur’an are recited (see inter alia El Zein 1974; Ghaidan 1975: 69; Bakari 1981: 189–190).

Multiaccentuality and spatial politics

While the question of whether or not Kenya counts as a true liberal democracy is hotly debated today, it is nevertheless clear that the Kenyan state espouses a broadly liberal-democratic conception of the public/private distinction and the role of religion in public life, treating physical public spaces (at least in urban areas) as embodiments of the ‘arena of “neutral principles”’ on which it can justify its policies towards individual citizens and communities (Mitchell 1997: 165–166). What does it mean, then, for a resonant Muslim sanctuary – Mombasa Old Town – to be constantly superposed on the public spaces of Kenya’s heterogeneous ‘second city’? To approach the question, I turn to the case of the *khutba*.

The *khutba*, the Friday sermon, is broadcast via rooftop loudspeakers from over a dozen mosques scattered throughout Mombasa Old Town. Depending on the mosque, preachers in Mombasa deliver the *khutba* either in Arabic or in a mixture of Swahili and Arabic. In the latter case, the Arabic is used for certain required phrases and Quranic citations. The preachers, who are occasionally also imams of their respective mosques, are graduates of local Quranic schools. A few of them have also left the country to attend

Islamic universities in parts of the Arab world. Many of these foreign-trained preachers are attached to so-called non-communal mosques outside of Old Town. Their style of preaching, which is heavily influenced by global Islamic reform movements, including Saudi Wahhabism, involves a great deal of engagement with social and political issues. The mosques within Old Town, by contrast, are often described as ‘Sufi’, and tend to feature *khutbas* that address ethical issues in more general terms (though references to prominent political issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are not uncommon). It would seem fair to describe *khutbas* given at mosques outside Old

Town as political and *khuṭbas* within Old Town as apolitical. But this is not entirely true. Even though it is not meant to confront non-Muslims, and even though it does not generally become audible to the state or the dominant public sphere, the *khuṭba* in Old Town is nonetheless political, because the Islamic soundscape resounds in multiaccentual public space. What is required here is an ear for what the *khuṭba* does, not just what it says. Like the *adhān*, the *khuṭba* is in fact received as something other than a mere text.

Understanding how Muslims call upon their acoustemic capacities to enact the world requires an understanding of the Islamic ontology of the divine word. Muslims regard the Arabic text of the Qur'an as God's *ipsis-sima verba* (his very words), which were revealed to the world through the Prophet Mohammed's (mantic) recitation and were thereafter 'intended to be rehearsed and recited' by all believers; the Qur'an is literally 'the reciting' [al-quran] (Graham and Kermani 2006: 115). In an Islamic cosmology, sounded sacred words link the material world to the immaterial realm of God. In the process of forging this connection, sacred sound creates sacred space. A Swahili interlocutor in Mombasa directed me to a *hadith* passage (from Al-Bukhari, one of the most trusted collections of the Sunni canon) that beautifully illustrates this sonorous process of spatial sacralisation. 'When the Imam comes out', the Prophet is reported to have said, 'the angels present themselves to listen to the *khuṭba*' (Al-Bukhari 1997: 23). The image here is one in which angels literally make themselves present within the space and time of the *khuṭba*'s sounding (the Arabic root used in the passage, ḥ – ḍ – r, connotes physical presence in space and time). That is to say, heavenly beings listen to the *khuṭba* not through some mystical mode of hearing but by temporarily joining with human beings in the profane world (*dunyā*). Sound thus becomes a material tendon linking sacred and profane realms, thereby transforming (sacralising) the latter; or, better, sound becomes a *potential* tendon linking the sacred and the profane, as human beings also play an essential role in this sonic sacralisation of space.

The *khuṭba*'s capacity for sacralising space lends it a distinctly political timbre, one that becomes audible upon considering the question of audience. The fact is that Old Town's electrically amplified *khuṭbas* bear the potential to reach a broad and diverse audience that includes many Swahili-speaking

Christians who reside, work, or simply pass through the neighbourhood each day. When I asked Mombasan preachers and imams from within and without Old Town about the significance of this, some allowed that a non-Muslim may be able to learn something from lessons (*mawaidha*) in the Swahili sermons, but all averred that the words of the Friday *khuṭba* are not meant for a non-Muslim's ears.⁶ A *khuṭba*, I was reminded, is a *sacred* oration mediating the relationship between the audience and God (cf. Hirschkind 2006: 39). While Muslim preachers may speak directly to non-Muslims, or expect non-Muslims to listen, while preaching in a public

park or in a radio broadcast, this is not the case when they are preaching in or from the mosque during Friday prayers. When I asked why the *khutba* is then broadcast on loudspeakers into public space, the answer was once again unanimous: all my interlocutors mentioned the homebound Muslim women, insisting that electrical amplification is a practical solution to address the fact that pious women wish to (and are encouraged to) listen to the *khutba*, but Swahili mosques do not have women's sections that would allow them to attend in person.

This characterization runs contrary to the opinion I heard from some upcountry Christians in Mombasa, who asserted that the *khutba* is most likely broadcast in Swahili precisely so that it may reach the ears of non-believers. This belief is understandable, given the growing number of preachers outside of Old Town who use their Friday Swahili sermons 'as a platform for communicating with other communities' (Topan 2000: 102). It also conforms to a liberal-democratic logic of public space, which is operative (if not always dominant) in Mombasa. To some extent any public broadcast in Old Town is a true *public* broadcast, which must '[abandon] the security of its positive, given audience' (Warner 2002: 113). 'Public discourse', Michael Warner writes, 'promises to address anybody. It commits itself in principle to the possible participation of any stranger. It therefore puts at risk the concrete world that is its given condition of possibility' (ibid.).

Discrepant understandings of the publicity/privacy of the broadcast *khutba* occasion ontologico-political struggles over public space every Friday afternoon in Old Town. I first became aware of these struggles by committing a faux pas (a time-honoured ethnographic method). One Friday, early on in my research on Old Town's Islamic soundscape, I set out to make an audio recording of an amplified *khutba* from a window of the flat I had rented in the neighbourhood. Though I was trying not to be conspicuous, neither was I attempting to hide what I was doing, naively confident in the knowledge that neither Kenyan law nor my professional ethics dictated that any permission was necessary to record a 'public broadcast'. As I later learned, some congregants who noticed me with my microphone expressed concern and called a meeting to discuss possible ways of preventing me from making any further recordings. Fortunately, friends of mine who were

respected members of Old Town's Swahili community caught wind of the developing situation and helped to defuse it by arranging for me to meet with the mosque's imam to explain my (purely academic) interest in their *khutbas*.

When I first learned that something I had done had stirred suspicion among some local Muslims, I was not entirely surprised, given how Kenya's entanglements in the 'global war on terror' had given coastal Muslims reason to suspect any white stranger who isn't a tourist of being a spy (see Preetheldt 2011). I wondered, however, how my act of recording a public

broadcast could be seen as threatening? A Swahili friend – I will call him Ahmadi – helped to answer this question, and in the process opened my eyes and ears to the nature of Old Town’s sonorous ontological politics. Ahmadi asked me to consider the case of Mbaruk Mosque in Old Town, which is situated across a narrow street from Mombasa’s Central Police Station, a building occupied by upcountry Christians who literally embody the authority of the Kenyan state. ‘You know’, he said, ‘those *polisi* hear every word of the *khutba* while just sitting there in their station. But if just one of them would stand outside like this. . .’ – he crossed his arms and puffed up his chest, imitating a police officer’s posture – ‘*listening!*’ he stressed, and then completed his thought with a characteristically Swahili ‘*eh-heh*’, meaning ‘just you see!’ In other words, according to Ahmadi’s hypothetical narrative, Mbaruk Mosque’s leaders and congregants understand, and perhaps even accept, that their weekly *khutba* is audible to agents of the state; but if an agent of the state should suggest, even through a simple bodily gesture, that he or she had the obligation to make sure the *khutba* accorded with the laws and regulations governing urban public space in Mombasa, this would be taken as an attack against or transgression of the communitarian privacy of the Muslims of Old Town.

Ahmadi’s ethnomethodological thought-experiment reveals a constant process of negotiation (or mediation) in Old Town, a kind of social choreography whereby Muslims and non-Muslims with conflicting acoustemological commitments respond to the Islamic soundscape according to a shared set of normative behavioural expectations. Missteps are constant in this negotiation, but they are usually small and subtle, such as (to take one example from my fieldnotes) when an old Muslim woman bluntly informed a young, non-Muslim woman that the ostensibly public setting in which a traditional *maulidi* recitation was being delivered for the annual commemoration of the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed was ‘no place for infidels’. Such micropolitical controversies are part and parcel of the seemingly impalpable ‘social tensions’ (Prestholt 2011) that obtain between Muslims and non-Muslims on the Kenyan coast. As such, they set the conditions for larger ‘blow-ups’ (Göle 2002), like the one involving the expatriate and the imam in Kikambala, or the one that might have resulted had no one intervened on my behalf after I was spotted recording a *khutba*.

Conclusion

I have described a sonorous production of Islamic communitarian privacy in the public spaces of Kenya’s major coastal city. As a palpable alternative to a liberal-democratic social imaginary, Islamic communitarian privacy bears a powerful resonance for struggles over notions of coastal Muslim citizenship in Kenya. This is especially true since the run-up to the final referendum on the new Kenyan Constitution (enacted in 2010). During these debates, coastal Muslim activists and politicians raised the quix-

the yet highly provocative idea of complete political autonomy for the coastal strip (Ndurya 2009), an idea that harkens back to the Mwambao movement for coastal autonomy that flourished in the run-up to Kenyan independence. In the short time since that referendum, a well-organized separatist party, the Mombasa Republican Council, has emerged on the coast.

While the idea of coastal autonomy is partly grounded in particular interpretations of historical events (Brennan 2008), it is certainly given impetus by the model of communal autonomy provided by the Islamic communitarian privacy that resounds daily in Mombasa Old Town. Enacted through affective, bodily practices of ritual sounding, listening and responding, Old Town's Islamic communitarian privacy supplies a model of communal autonomy that does not need to be recollected from the past. It is a living model, experienced, bolstered and defended every day through sonorous ontologico-political struggle.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is a revised and shortened version of my 2013 chapter "Islam, Sound, and Space: Acoustemology and Muslim Citizenship on the Kenyan Coast," published in the Cambridge University Press volume *Music, Sound, and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience*, edited by Georgina Born. Reproduced with permission of the licensor through PLSclear. The images and sound example are new to this version.
- 2 The woman, who was of apparent East Asian extraction, was described as 'Chinese' in local news reports. In interviews she demonstrated knowledge of Swahili, indicating that she was a longtime resident.
- 3 To my knowledge, the story was only carried on the Swahili-language news, presumably because it was seen as a story of primarily local interest.
- 4 Mosques throughout Africa, the Middle East, and Asia commonly employ loud-speakers. The electrically amplified *adhān* came to Mombasa Old Town in the 1970s, after years of creative attempts by local muezzins to compete with the increasing the volume of the city by using other makeshift technologies, including horns cannibalized from gramophone players.
- 5 Neither Arabic nor Swahili (the latter of which borrows much of its philosophical lexicon from the former) has a word that adequately expresses the classical Western notion of 'privacy' as the domain of an individuated subject (on Arabic, see El Guindi 2008: 147–150). El Guindi glosses 'privacy' in Arabic with reference to three intercalated cultural categories of 'sanctity – reserve – respect' (El Guindi 1999: 77–96).

- 6 I interviewed a number of Islamic leaders and intellectuals in Mombasa. Two consultants who can be named are Sheikh Abu Hamza of Sparki Mosque and Sheikh Mohammed Dor of Mbaruk Mosque. The latter was general secretary of the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya at the time of my research. He currently serves as Kenya's Ambassador to Oman.

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156 Andrew J. Eisenberg

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Resonant voices and spatial politics 157

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