



The Edge of Islam

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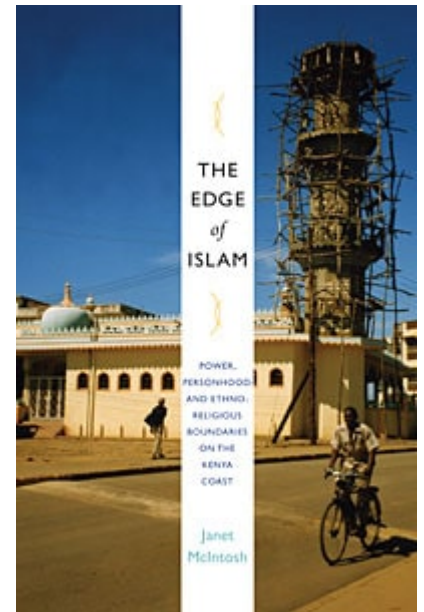


The Edge of Islam is an in-depth and nicely written ethnography about Giriama and Swahili ethnic groups and their identification with Islam. Focusing on the town of Malindi, situated on the Kenyan coast, the ethnography also includes a theoretical discussion on the different valorisation and enactment of oppositional kinds of personhood of the two ethnic groups' members, which thus create two essentially distinct categories: the Giriama and the Swahili. [Janet McIntosh](#) pictures the diversity of Islamic practices and the multiple understandings of Islam as a religion, a means of power and distinction, as well as an explanation for economic success and social privileges by two ethnic groups. In her own words



the title of the book suggests that “Giriama find themselves on the margins of a spatial and metaphorical geography, peering in at a life of greater privilege and sometimes cognizant that they are on the brink of access but not quite able to break through” (p.8).

McIntosh’s study centres on questions of how more rigid boundaries between the ethnic Giriama minority and the Swahili majority developed in Malindi. She asks why in this town, where intermingling was common in the past, Giriama today identify Islam as belonging more deeply to the ethnic group of the Swahili than to themselves, and yet still use Islam in their own rituals (p.4). To find answers to these research questions she draws on ethnographic material collected during her eighteen months of fieldwork between 1995 and 2004 (p.38).



It is rare to find a study like this conducted in one site, over a rather long period of time by a researcher who understands the languages of the different ethnic groups and socialises more or less to an equal extent with informants from both groups.

McIntosh is eager to show the mutual perspectives of Giriama as well as of Swahili ethnic group members on each other in a balanced way and includes background information about historical and economical forces that shaped their relations. Nevertheless, she slightly adumbrates sympathy for Giriama whom she describes as dominated by Swahili and as widely underprivileged. In her analysis she argues that different forms of religious practices (e.g. in economy, conversion or ritual code switching) and religious discourses (e.g. about morality or spirits) among Swahili and Giriama reinforce the idea of two clearly distinguishable ethnic groups, of which the former are seen as more connected to Islam. The author links her research findings to theoretical reflections on the concept of



personhood (p.16), which in the case of Giriama and Swahili members she describes as often being oppositional and delimiting of the respective other ethnic group.

On the one hand McIntosh stresses that the ethnic and religious boundaries are fluid, especially since some Giriama try to “Swahilize” (p.5).

She argues that religious and ethnic identities on the East African coast can shift over a lifetime and that the boundaries between Traditionalism, Islam and Christianity are also considerably permeable even within a single ritual.

On the other hand she points out that the differently constituted and shifting ethnic and religious boundaries (no matter if fictive or politically motivated) are nevertheless constitutive of the social worlds and group identities of many (p.7). Not all (especially Giriama) who would like to cross boundaries are able to do so as the relation between Swahili and Giriama is not only a relation of shared belonging to the Umma (Muslim community) but also a relation of unequal power in the society. Thus, in order to reflect on the ethno-religious separation in Malindi, McIntosh uses the concept of hegemony (summarised as ‘power’ in the subtitle of the book) by drawing heavily on work of the Comaroffs (p.22).

The Edge of Islam is structured into an introduction, five thematic chapters including illustrative ethnographic material, and a brief epilogue. The *Introduction* itself is very rich as McIntosh successfully presents her main findings related to the concepts she uses like personhood, essentialism, hegemony and ideology, which are in turn embedded in theoretical discussions in an accessible but highly sophisticated way. Eventually, while presenting the main concepts, she could have connected her work more to the huge body of literature on ethnicity in general. That being said, the introduction does touch on the historical background and methodological reflections. The methods part could, however, have been further elaborated to include more information on the collection and analysis of the research data, rather than just mentioning the topic of how to stay neutral towards the two ethnic groups.



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In *Chapter 1* she discusses Giriama and Swahili ethnicity from historical, political, contemporary and discursive perspectives and provides a solid background for the further chapters. *Chapter 2* presents the current economic discrepancies between the two groups and how this influences their members' personhood. In this section, McIntosh writes about Giriama's perception of the Swahili ethnic group as rich, internationally mobile, and possessing more power due to their cooperation with spirits. Here McIntosh could have deepened the analysis by considering the differences within the ethnic group; differentiating between the perspectives of wealthier and more powerful ethnic group members with the perspectives of poor and less powerful members could have shown additional nuances. The focus in *Chapter 3* is turned towards the two groups' ideologies and attitudes towards Islam as well as the handling of spirit possession. In this



chapter, attention to gender differences would have been a plus. Indeed, throughout the whole book, McIntosh unfortunately fails to consider differentiations of gender, age or education within and across the ethnic groups. In *Chapter 4* the author draws on how the Arabic language is used as a medium of power and distinction in Giriama healing practices in which Traditional and Islamic beliefs are combined. *Chapter 5* elaborates on the topic of power and personhood in interactions with Arabic and explores the politics of language.

The *epilogue* to *The Edge of Islam* builds the bridge between the ethno-social tensions between Giriama and Swahili and the riots that divided Kenya during the presidential elections in 2007. McIntosh nicely depicts how, on the one hand, ethnic tensions can lead to an outbreak of violence and, on the other hand, how Islamic leaders were able to stabilise the situation on the East Coast through their preaching. This epilogue shows concretely how up-to-date the book's issues are on the creation of ethnic divisions in Kenya. It discloses the importance of understanding what is happening on the ground and how ethnic boundaries can be reified by "the social logic of civil war" (p. 258).

In all the thematic chapters McIntosh relates her findings and interpretations comprehensibly to the most important anthropological and historical literature on Swahili and Giriama, so that the reader can easily see the embedment of her study and her deep examination of the literature on the East African coastal area. The same is true for her ethnographic skills, as she subtly interlaces her ethnographic material and thus depicts her analysis.

As McIntosh correctly mentions it is not new in social anthropology to focus on how Islam is locally imagined. However, what *The Edge of Islam* adds to the already existing literature is a perspective on the negotiation of Islam between ethnic groups in a context of socioeconomic hierarchy and tension. She successfully analyses how social divisions are created between two ethnic groups. This is a great book to read for anybody who is interested in the East African Coast, in the Swahili and Giriama ethnic groups, in the anthropology of Islam and



religion in general but also for scholars interested in linguistic anthropology.

McIntosh, Janet. 2009. *The Edge of Islam: Power, Personhood, and Ethnoreligious Boundaries on the Kenya Coast*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 344 pp. Pb: \$25.95. ISBN: 978-0-8223-4496-4.