

MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
WORKING PAPERS



MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

WORKING PAPER No. 172

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ON NGAZIDJA AND
AMONG COMORIANS
IN ZANZIBAR

Halle/Saale 2016
ISSN 1615-4568

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Place and Space on Ngazidja and among Comorians in Zanzibar¹

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Abstract

Since the spatial turn in anthropology, space has been much theorised but its counterpart, place, less so. In this paper I look at spatial practices on the Comorian island of Ngazidja and among Comorians in Zanzibar through the lens of Lefebvre's tripartite dialectic of spatial practice, representations of space, and spaces of representation, suggesting the latter are in fact places. Spatiality is fundamental to social organisation in Ngazidja, framing practices in a ritual context as well as in daily life. The quotidian and the ritual both produce and are produced by places within the town, places which are constantly being reworked in a dynamic relationship with spatial practice and representations of space. These representations of space are carried into diaspora in Zanzibar where they continue to frame spatial practice and provide for the maintenance of links with places in Ngazidja.

¹ This paper has been through a number of iterations. Early drafts were presented at the Canadian Association of African Studies Annual Conference, Laval University, May 2012; at the University of Texas Africa Conference, Austin, April 2014; at the "Connectivity in Motion: New Studies on the World of the Indian Ocean" conference, MPI Halle, October 2014; and at the "Cosmopolitan Currents in the Indian Ocean" conference, NYU Abu Dhabi, March 2015. I wish to thank participants at all these conferences for their comments, and Christoph Brumann, Peter Kneitz, Mareike Pampus, and Burkhard Schnepel for detailed and extremely useful comments on a late version.

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“To build is in itself already to dwell”

Heidegger (1971: 146)

Introduction

In April 2010, the Eastern Africa Submarine Cable System (EASSy) was brought ashore on the Comorian island of Ngazidja, providing a long awaited broadband fibre optic link to the outside world. The cable came ashore at a beach at the town of Itsandramdjini, on the west coast of the island some five kilometres north of the Comorian capital Moroni. In return for allowing the beach to be used in this fashion, Comores Telecom offered the town funds to construct a fence around the beach. This fence was to serve two purposes: for Comores Telecom it would protect the cable from damage (accidental or otherwise) while for the town of Itsandramdjini it provided a means of controlling access to the beach, the only one within easy reach of Moroni. The beach is a popular attraction and large crowds arrive on Sunday afternoons to socialise, swim and play games. These crowds from Moroni have long caused friction, however. The townspeople, and particularly the elders, complain about an “undesirable” element, in particular young men changing and using the area behind the mosque opposite the beach as a toilet, and women swimming in indecent attire. It was hoped that the construction of a fence would mitigate these undesirable influences, and the local youth club, *Twamaya*, assumed responsibility for controlling access to the beach; it was also hoped that the imposition of an entrance fee (of 100 Comorian francs, about 20 euro cents) would dissuade the least desirable of the undesirables, as well as providing some revenue for beach management.

However, the construction of the fence caused problems. Almost as soon as the last three posts at the northern end of the fence had been placed they were uprooted and the fence flattened by the youth of Bandamadji, the neighbouring village, who claimed that they obstructed Bandamadji’s access to the beach. Subsequent confrontations between the youth of Bandamadji and members of *Twamaya* became heated and threatened to become violent; the elders were obliged to intervene, and they attempted to negotiate between the two parties. It seemed that reconciliation was imminent when, in the course of discussions, representatives of Bandamadji raised the question of the boundary between the two towns, suggesting that not only did the fence obstruct Bandamadji’s access to the beach, but that of the fence was constructed on Bandamadji territory. This outraged the elders of Itsandramdjini, who consider Bandamadji a much inferior town and for whom questions of town boundaries were of no concern, and they withdrew from the negotiations. The focus of the dispute shifted from the fence to the question of town boundaries and individuals from both towns began to attack properties in the other. Individuals were menaced and several physically assaulted; houses on both sides were attacked and one in Bandamadji was burnt down; cars were stoned on the main road and, finally, as residents of Bandamadji left their homes and sought refuge elsewhere, the army arrived and took up a position at the frontier between the two towns where they remained for three days in an attempt to re-establish calm.



Map 1: Itsandramdjini with quarters and the fence

This incident is now over but not forgotten – Bandamadji put up a sign marking the town and Itsandra responded likewise³ – and relations between the people of the two towns are not what they were before: forgetting will take a little longer. Regardless, these sorts of conflicts are not exceptional in Ngazidja, where disputes over land, as elsewhere, are regular occurrences: sometimes they are resolved swiftly, sometimes they sour relations between neighbouring villages for years (Sidi 2002). And while disputes over land are not unusual, I evoke this particular case since in Ngazidja it neatly encapsulates the importance of space in local social practice and in the production and reproduction of identities, on the island, within Comorian communities elsewhere, and between emigrant communities and the homeland. This was not a dispute over land ownership, or access rights, or any of the more prosaic (generally economic) differences that are usually at the root of conflicts over land. Indeed, this was not really a conflict over land at all: no-one suggested that the boundary between the towns be moved no-one really contested the location of the boundary at all. Rather, it was the status and the meaning of the boundary itself that was at issue. The dispute was based on (social) claims to (social) space and on the relevance of space for relationships between people: what social space means in the context of those relationships, how it has been produced by social practice in the past, and how it provides maps for practice in the future.

³ The two signs were carefully placed close to the boundary between the two localities, but not so close as to provoke further conflict. Note that such signs are virtually unknown in Ngazidja – I cannot think of any other town that announces its identity thus.

Space and Place

Despite my references to space in the preceding section, this dispute was about a very specific place, and a place is not a space. Indeed, many uses of the words “space” and “place” do not adequately distinguish between the two terms. In colloquial speech, they are often used casually, as if the meanings of “space” and “place” were self-evident (as they quite possibly are), but in the academic discourse they are sometimes used (or appear to be used, which is possibly worse) interchangeably or indifferently (“space and place *make* and are *made in and through* consumption,” Goodman et al. 2010: 5, emphasis in original). Many references to “space and place” do not reflect any real consideration of the meanings of either term, and even if there is a recognition that the two are not the same, it is either not made explicit (“a network of sacralized places constituting a common sacred space,” Willemse 2012: 89), or the distinction appears to be deliberately elided in an invocation of the ‘space/place’ couplet (“Is [the home] still defined as a distinctive space, as a place differentiated from other more public spaces/places by relations of love and affection?”, McDowell 2007: 133).

Although I suspect there is a certain lack of rigour involved here, the absence of a serious consideration of place in many currents of thought was a product of the post-Aristotelian denigration of the concept, not considered philosophically approachable by way of rational reflection. Space and time were the key philosophical concepts (and remain so: physicists and astronomers speak of spacetime, not placetime): like time, space was an analytical category of the first order, place was merely a specific (and therefore subsidiary, derivative) manifestation of space. Cracks appear in this philosophical façade in some of Kant’s reflections, but the rehabilitation of place as a concept worthy of attention in its own right only really occurred post-enlightenment, and even then only allowing space for place in certain, less rationalist traditions.⁴ Phenomenologists revealed a place that seemed to be prior to space (e.g. Heidegger 1971; Husserl 2002; Merleau-Ponty 2002; cf. Einstein 1970 cited in Malpas 1998) and geographers also drew upon the concept, but with different points of departure and different objectives (e.g. Massey 1994; Soja 1996;⁵ Tuan 1977). This is not the place for a history of the concept – Edward Casey (1997a) has done this quite thoroughly – but merely to indicate how the lack of a precise definition has in turn opened up a space for ambiguity, even a confusion of the terms “space” and “place”, and consequently not permitted the concept of place to make an effective contribution to spatial and platial⁶ analyses of the social, particularly within anthropology. Indeed, this lack of anthropological reflection is all the more curious since place would appear to be far more social a concept than space, and it has intrigued more than one scholar (e.g. Escobar 2001; Geertz 1996). Margaret Rodman suggests that the lack of attention to place “[goes] without saying” (presumably because it comes without saying: Rodman 1992: 640; cf. Bourdieu 1977: 167), and scholars often seem to be more concerned with explaining why place has not been the focus of inquiry rather than actually developing an analysis themselves (e.g. Agnew 1989; Malpas 1998).

⁴ See Casey (1997a, particularly 202–210 on Kant) for a competent and thorough account of the space (or lack thereof) accorded to place in Western philosophy.

⁵ Soja’s “thirdspace” seems to me to be another word for “place”.

⁶ Although the term platial has been invoked before I do not feel it need be a particularly complicated concept: as spatial is the adjective derived from space, so platial analogously refers to place. Although I do not use it in, for example, Chaudhuri’s sense (1995), I do think, *pace* Jeff Malpas (2003; cf. Elden 2003) that the term is a useful one. And I use “platial” rather than “placial” (cf. Casey, *passim*) since this similarly maintains the analogy with space/spatial.

One reason for this would appear to be the ‘global turn’. Just as place became an object of interest, it “dropped out of sight in the ‘globalization craze’” (Escobar 2001: 141), although I think it is more accurate to say that place has itself been globalised. Thus Rube Gielis (2009: 282) claims that “transmigrants reside in several places simultaneously”; Hugh Raffles (1999: 324) thinks that “places travel with the people through whom they are constituted”, while Doreen Massey (2005) also suggests that even the most static places move; they are not alone in making such claims. Although the lack of a consistent concept of place is certainly partly responsible for such claims, I am nevertheless suspicious of these sorts of analyses, suggestions that places are no longer relevant in our ephemeral, globalised world, or that they are transnational, globalised and ubiquitous (e.g. Appadurai 1995; Brickell and Datta 2011; Featherstone et al. 2007; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; even Massey 1994, 1999). It seems (perhaps worryingly, cf. Bourdieu 2002), that the scholar, constantly on the move, jetting from office to conference to field site, iPhone in hand, fumbling for the frequent flyer card that will let her into the airport lounge, forgets that not everyone is quite so mobile, nor so anxious about mobility. But this does not mean that places have been dissolved in the frenzied contemporary world: we still move from place to place.

Others see places as having been linked to an older, modern (even pre-modern) way of being in the world: when we were all living peacefully enmeshed in a dense web of social relations, treading narrow paths over familiar hills, herding our sheep. Today we all live in a whirl of cyberspace, we have family and friends on other continents but no longer know our neighbours: our places are virtual (Morely 2001; Skop and Adams 2009; Leander et al. 2010). But many of these works seem to miss the point that a place is a place. Websites are not virtual places; they may have spatiality, but they are not places. To call virtual spaces ‘places’ is to lose the physicality and the embodiment that is an essential characteristic of a place: it is a denial of platiality. Place – fixed, geographical place – remains relevant, and places remain relevant – I may sit in my German office skyping with a colleague in the UK, but my office is still a place. Certainly it is less imbued with meaning, for me at least, than my kitchen at home, but this does not obviate the essential platiality of my office.

Bearing these remarks in mind, then, and recognising that although there is now a growing body of work in anthropology that deals specifically with place, (e.g. Englund 2002; Gielis 2009; Lems 2014; Ottosson 2014; Toussaint 2008), I still feel that the term has neither been adequately conceptualised, nor adequately differentiated from space, and I would like to explore some of the characteristics of place before returning to the Comoros.

First, places exist. While I understand the appeal of the rhetoric, I fail to see how there can be a “non-place” (Augé 1995): I cannot truthfully say I have ever been to, or in, a place that is not one. Certainly, places have different meanings for different people; some places are more socially imbued (a temple?) than others (a toilet?); and there are places that hold very little meaning for most people who pass through them, but very little meaning is not no meaning at all. All places have some meaning for everyone and deep meaning for some. In this I agree with Jeff Malpas when he states that “place is *integral to the very structure and possibility of experience*” (1998: 12, emphasis in original), regardless of what that experience might be (even taking a lift to the departures level at the airport). Marc Augé misses the very point that he appears to be making, that places are social productions. His service areas on the *autoroute* might be “non-places” to him, but they are not so to others. Not only is the service area likely to be perceived as an exotic place by a Papuan on his first visit to France, there are also those for whom these places are deeply meaningful: think of the communities of people who work in these service areas, who may have

been colleagues for several years, whose daily routine, whose social world, unfolds in these places, who have coffee and lunch together, who share gossip, who fall in love with (or fall out with) each other. Anyone who has seen the film *The Terminal* will be well aware that airports are anything but non-places. Only nowhere is a non-place for everyone, and despite rhetorical claims to the contrary by several country music singers, I suspect that no-one has ever been nowhere.

Places are of course social, but more importantly, and as just noted, their meanings are shifting and contingent. Doreen Massey is quite right in challenging the idea that places have “single, essential, identities”, arguing that they are “constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations” (1994: 152, 154): Kilburn, a fairly typically multicultural suburb of London, has no “single sense of place, which everyone shares” (1994: 153), but rather is a different place for different people. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) correctly emphasises the subjective, experiential character of place, confirming that place is socially constructed and that apprehending it takes time, while Rodman suggests that places have multiple meanings, invoking “a multivocal dimension of place, (...) the idea that a single place may be experienced quite differently” (Rodman 1992: 647). This may seem obvious, but it allows us to avoid the “places move” and “several places at once” discourses.

Places therefore do not move, and we are only in one place at a time; but different people can be in different places in the same space and the same time. In a lucid discussion of the idea of place, and contra positions that invoke “the end of place” or “the erosion of place” (Simonsen 2008: 13), as well as those that suggest that places are mobile, Kirsten Simonsen grapples with the possibilities for a reconciliation of the contingent and fluid character of place with spatiality and the fixedness that place (as a geographical concept) implies. But we can have a global sense of place (cf. Massey 1994), in that places can be (re-)produced by other places, elsewhere, without suggesting that places themselves move. As I will discuss below, places can be fluid and dynamic and yet anchor us, giving us a sense of security or identity, if only because identities, and the social relationships that underpin them, are also fluid.

The implication of this is that places change, both socially and physically. Few would dispute the temporality of place although perspectives differ. For Doreen Massey places are processes (Massey 1994: 155), “integrations of space and time” (Massey 2005: 130), while for Tuan “place is a pause in movement” (1977: 138, cf. 179). Just as a different space implies a different place, so a different time also implies a different place. Places change, or perhaps more accurately, they disappear to cede their time (and their space) to other places. That place is a conjunction of space and time is not, I think, contentious (cf. Casey 1996): how often do we revisit a place and say, “it’s not what it was, it’s not the same place any more”. Through time, space is (always) reconfigured to give the specific place that occupied that space a different aspect, different characteristics, that are both socially significant and culturally imbued, and which may so alter the character of the place that it becomes, effectively, a different place. In June 2015, I strolled down Berlin’s Friedrichstraße for the first time in almost 30 years and I can attest that it was most certainly not the same place – how could it have been? It was not even in the same country – and yet (if my map is to be believed) it occupied the same physical space. Indeed, it is the fact that we find different places in the same space that even allows us to apprehend both time and space: as things in which different places can exist. In a sense this allows us to define space: it is where places exist.

Places are corporeally perceived. We all live in places: we have no choice. This is what it means to live: to dwell (cf. Heidegger 1971). Tim Ingold’s (2009) disquisition against space seems to hold

no grudge against the concept of place. Rather to the contrary, he (correctly) sees place as embodied: “Places, in the first case, are actually constituted by the movements to, from and around them (...) People not only move between places, but also form them by movement itself. By the interweaving of routes over time or concurrently, a place is made” (Lee and Ingold 2006: 76, 78). This is of course necessary but not sufficient: people form places by doing rather more than moving, but certainly motion, *qua* the intersection of space and time, is a prerequisite for a bodily understanding of place. But embodiment has further implications. Places need to be of an apprehensible scale in order to be experienced bodily. Place is “the immediate environment of my lived body – an arena of action that is at once physical and historical, social and cultural (...) There is *no place without self and no self without place*” (Casey 2001: 683, 684; emphasis in original; cf. Casey 1997b). While I am not entirely convinced by Casey’s analysis (particularly of habitus: cf. Entrikin 2001), I agree that it is through habitus, through our panoply of cognitive and embodied dispositions, that we approach place. This goes some way towards answering questions of boundaries (Dirlik 1999; Escobar 2001, Massey 1994). Although (a) place does not need a boundary as such, there are constraints on places imposed by our bodily knowledge of them: the embodied character of place means places are physically limited in space. Thus, a city cannot be a place since we cannot apprehend it in its entirety, both because it is too big and because it is too diverse, it has too many meanings: it is many places. A place is something that is immediately, corporeally, and sensually apprehensible.

Bearing these remarks in mind, I believe we still require a conceptual framework with which to approach constructions of place and the place of place in space, as it were. Although not historically prior to the return of place to intellectual thought, Henri Lefebvre’s *La Production de l’espace* (1974: English translation *The Production of Space* [1991]) serves as an urtext both for spatial analysis and, despite him not explicitly theorising the word, concepts of place, largely because it prompted a rethinking of space and place as not simply physical and philosophical concepts, but (in a fusion of, or a bridge between, the two perspectives) as fundamentally social in character. Lefebvre’s central problem is to suggest a theory of space that can explain how space is at once a locus for the production of social relations and the product of those very same relations. This led to his elaboration of a conceptual triad (“*dialectique de triplicité*” *ibid.*: 33, 38–39, and *passim*) that permits an analysis of the production of social space: they are related in a tripartite dialectic in which each is mediated by and through the other two. My particular interest in drawing upon Lefebvre (and I emphasise that I use Lefebvre as a point of departure) lies in the possibilities for using his three spatial categories for an analysis of place. His three concepts are as follows:

Spatial practice (*la pratique spatiale*) is the production and reproduction of social relations. “The spatial practice of a society secretes that society’s space (...) ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion (...) this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of *competence* and a specific level of *performance*.” (*ibid.*: 33, 38, emphasis in original). In other words, spatial practice refers to the way spaces are socially produced (and reproduced) and how social relationships are mediated by spatiality. Spatial practice both informs and is informed by the two following concepts.

Representations of space (*les représentations de l’espace*) are conceptions of space, “tied (...) to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to frontal relations (...). Conceptions of space tend (...) towards a system of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs” (*ibid.*: 33, 39). Members of society share these *representations of space*, which serve as tools for their interactions with space and in space: this is how actors think space; representations of space are those signs and symbols

that subsequently both frame and are framed by spatial practices. Websites and dreams – “virtual spaces” – are two examples of representations of spaces.

Spaces of representation (*les espaces de représentation*).⁷ This is “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols” (1991: 39, emphasis in original): these are spaces in their concrete symbolic forms, “embodying complex symbolisms” (ibid.: 33) that shape practice and contribute most concretely to their own reproduction, which are alive, fluid, and dynamic, but by the same token, ephemeral, mutable and manipulable. Spaces of representation “tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs” (ibid.: 39). They are, in a certain sense, the antithesis of representations of space; I suggest that *spaces of representation* are places.

Lefebvre’s tripartite analysis of space provides us with the tools to consider the relationships between the spatial and the social.⁸ In what follows, I invoke his dialectic to explore the way spaces and places are constructed in Itsandramdjini before turning to look at how Comorians carry their spatial practice beyond the island, with reference to the particular case of the Comorian community of Zanzibar.⁹ As I hope will become clear, spatial practice is fundamental to Comorian ways of being. It is of course not the only principle of social organisation, but spatiality and spatial belonging are often invoked as tropes for other principles of social organisation. This is particularly true of the case I will discuss below of a dispute between quarters that was formulated in spatial terms even though other conceptual systems (social hierarchies, for example) were relevant. In order to draw out these nuances of spatial and social principles of organisation, I will begin with an overview of the town of Itsandramdjini. I will then turn to the implications of spatial practice for identity construction.

Itsandramdjini

The Comoro Islands, lying off the coast of Mozambique and formerly a French colony, are part of the Swahili cultural zone: Islamic, their social and cultural points of reference lie on the African mainland, in the Arabian Peninsula and on Madagascar. Ngazidja is the largest and most westerly of the group. However, there are differences between Ngazidja and the Swahili coast. If its language, Shingazidja, is related to Kiswahili, the two are not mutually comprehensible. Descent group membership and inheritance and succession are matrilineal, residence after marriage is uxorilocal and marriage is preferentially hypogamous. Ngazidja also has age systems.

Itsandramdjini, one of Ngazidja’s larger towns, sits on a rocky promontory overlooking a small bay that was formerly an important port: the town was historically (and in many respects remains) one of the more cosmopolitan of the island, participating in the western Indian Ocean trading networks and home to scholars of renown throughout East Africa. The town is divided into three

⁷ For some reason Lefebvre’s translator, Donald Nicolson-Smith, renders “*les espaces de représentation*” as “representational spaces” (1991: 33, and passim). Although I refer to this translation, I prefer to maintain Lefebvre’s original formulation, and his original rhetoric (cf. Shields 1988). Likewise, Nicolson-Smith’s translation of *dialectique de triplicité* as “conceptual triad”, is not particularly satisfactory, although I will use it.

⁸ I part company from Lefebvre insofar as I extend his analysis beyond the urban and capitalist contexts with which he was concerned and, at least implicitly, I reject the scale of his spaces of representation – his places.

⁹ In Zanzibar the people of Ngazidja are referred to as Comorians, both because historically the island has been called, and often still is called, Comoro, and because the vast majority of Comorians in Zanzibar trace their origins to Ngazidja. Comorian is thus a synecdoche for people from Ngazidja. The people of Ngazidja are properly referred to as Wangazidja, but for the sake of simplicity I will throughout this paper refer both to the Comorians of Zanzibar and to those of Ngazidja as “Comorians”.

quarters, each socially distinct; in Shingazidja¹⁰ they may be referred to as either *mraya* (quarter) or *mdji* (village¹¹), depending on the context. To avoid confusion I use neither to refer to these particular spatial units, but refer to them simply as “quarters”. I will use the words village or town to refer, in a purely geographical sense, to settlements that are physically coherent and distinct from surrounding unbuilt areas (or, in the case of towns that physically abut one another, such as Itsandramdjini and Bandamadji, from neighbouring urban spaces that are socially and politically quite distinct), without any particular social connotations beyond that of using “village” to refer to settlements with small populations and “town” to refer to larger settlements. The word *mdji* has a social sense, however, referring to the social village, a residential unit that has an independent identity in a ritual context. This is generally identical to the physical village, but not always: in a few cases where this is not so (and Itsandramdjini is one such case) it can refer either to the physical town or to the social town (i.e. the quarter) depending on the context. I will use the word rarely, but when I do it will refer to a social village regardless of its physical or demographic characteristics. In Itsandramdjini this is the quarter of Harumwamdji.¹²

Harumwamdji (“within the town”) is often referred to as the noble or free quarter; historically its inhabitants were engaged in agriculture and trade, some were religious leaders, most were slave-owners. It is the largest quarter, both in terms of area and population,¹³ and it is the quarter that represents the town in relationships with other towns and villages, a fact which has occasionally caused conflict (locally) and misunderstanding (particularly on the part of foreigners). Indeed, it is the town – the *mdji* – as far as external relationships are concerned. It is also the quarter which concerns me here both because it is the town’s dominant quarter and because it is the quarter that adjoins Bandamadji. However, Itsandramdjini has two other quarters, Befuni, the fishermen’s quarter, also known as Mrambwani (lit. *mraya ya mbwani*, “quarter on the shore”), and Mirereni, further inland and on the southern edge of the town, euphemistically known as the servile quarter since it was formerly the quarter where the slaves lived.

Harumwamdji is further subdivided into four “sub-quarters”, which I shall refer to as *mraya*, and which have a social significance in ritual contexts as well as being important in shaping perceptions of space. They are Mtsangani, Buntsini, Mzishe and Shongodju. Each of these *mraya* has a *bangwe*, a word often glossed in French as *place publique*, a public place (*sic*), although strictly speaking they are not public. Although the name is increasingly being applied to a variety of spaces, historically the *bangwe* is a physically enclosed space within the built-up urban fabric. The *bangwe* of Mtsangani is the exception here, being an open space facing the beach, but all three within the upper part of Harumwamdji are within the town and of similar size, a dozen metres by perhaps half that. All three lie at the junctions of several alleys, and all three have some or all of the architectural features historically associated with the *bangwe* (see Damir 1999; Gilibert and Turvani 1999). They have seating in the form of stone benches built into the walls against at least

¹⁰ For the sake of clarity, in what follows I invariably use the singular form of all words in Shingazidja.

¹¹ Or town: there is no distinction in Shingazidja. The term city (“*cit *”) has sometimes been used to translate *mdji* in French-language scholarship, partly (as I understand it) with a view to invoking the Greek concept of the city state as a socially and politically autonomous unit. The analogy is not helpful and to impose it in such a radically different social context is misleading. This is all the more true in English: a Comorian *mdji* is certainly not a city in any English-language usage of the word.

¹² The word *mdji* is also used to describe a group of men in the age system. I do not use the word in this sense in this text. See Blanchy 2009; Walker 2010.

¹³ Respectively, about 8 ha and perhaps 2500 inhabitants. This is an estimate, since the census makes no distinction between quarters. The population of Itsandramdjini was 3437 in 2013.

one side of the *bangwe*; two still have ornamental stone gates. Not unexpectedly, the *bangwe* has important social functions, which I will return to below.

In the middle of the quarter lies Ziraruni (“three ways”), the *paya la mdji*,¹⁴ located at the junction of three alleys leading into the three *mraya* of Mzishe, Buntsini and Shongodju. Ziraruni is not a proper *bangwe*, but it is the central space of Harumwamdji, both physically and socially: it serves as a meeting place for the entire quarter, a covered passageway with raised seating on both sides that, historically, was where the elders of the town sat when meetings were convened. The roof bears inscriptions in Arabic, while suspended from it are a number of objects including dried animal skins: both provide protection for the town generally and assemblies in the *paya* specifically.

Physically, the town is compact and somewhat concealed from the outside world – indeed, it is perhaps surprising for a first time visitor to find such a dense urban fabric hidden behind the row of houses lining the main road – tightly packed stone buildings, most one storeyed, but many now with two storeys and some even three, line narrow streets and alleys. Buildings are contiguous such that the passer-by is confronted with a continuous wall; but behind this wall there may be a garden or courtyard. Even where there are open spaces, the pathways that lead through or past those spaces are paved and bounded and no longer rough tracks as in the past and provide social boundaries delimiting the space as effectively as a solid wall would do.

The older houses (*kurabwe*, “stone walls”) are built of blocks of the island’s ubiquitous black volcanic rock cemented together with lime mortar made from coral and generally roughly plastered and whitewashed with the same lime; the roofs of the buildings were formerly thatched with coconut palm fronds but today corrugated iron is the norm. The layout of a house varies, but the basic dwelling is a simple two-room plan comprising one front room, the entrance room (*ukumbi*), in which guests are received, and one back room (*shumba*), for sleeping. Wealthier families add rooms, and some of the larger houses are built around a courtyard, itself walled off from the alleys outside and entered through a gate. Many houses have a terrace in front of the house, which serves as a reception area for guests who are not invited into the house, and the cooking area (*dziho*, “hearth”) and washing and toilet facilities are located outside, behind the house.

Changes in construction methods and in house layout are a result of new techniques, new materials, new influences, and new aspirations. Concrete bricks and cement mortar and render are now standard construction materials. Although there is a recognition that concrete is inferior to stone, costs preclude the use of the latter, particularly given the increased size of contemporary houses; if it is used, this will generally only be for the foundations. Kitchens and bathrooms are increasingly being built within the house while constraints on space prompt the increasingly common upwards expansion with a second storey; houses with three storeys, unknown in the past, are now appearing in the town. Aspirations towards a second storey, seen as necessary both for accommodation and status see most new houses being constructed with flat roofs, steel reinforcing bars protruding vertically from the tops of the ground floor walls in anticipation of a storey yet to come.

The urban fabric is not uniform, however, for if this profile is typical of Harumwamdji, it shifts as the pedestrian moves to the south and the west. Two-storey houses become rare; in Befuni *kurabwe*, many of which are old and thus of real stone rather than concrete, continue to dominate, although they are generally smaller than those found in Harumawamdji due to the lower incomes

¹⁴ Literally “kitchen of the town”.

generated by fishing. Not all the pathways in Befuni are paved, and there are more open spaces in the quarter. These spaces are often occupied by *nyumba ya ntsi*, "houses of the land", made of woven coconut fronds, and similarly roofed. This style of construction is generally used only by the very poor or for *vala*, bachelor houses,¹⁵ and most of the *nyumba ya ntsi* in Befuni are indeed *vala*; for whereas the other quarters have agricultural land outside the town proper on which young men may construct their houses, the fishing families of Befuni have no such land and are therefore constrained to build them within the quarter.

Mirereni appears to be relatively affluent, more so than Befuni: the stone houses are new and generally large, certainly larger than the average Befuni house; *nyumba ya ntsi* are rare and open spaces are rapidly disappearing. However, the absence of old stone houses in the quarter is not so much a reflection of newfound wealth but rather the result of a ruling by the residents of the quarter of Harumwamdji – formerly the owners of both the land and the residents of Mirereni – that forbade slaves and their descendants from constructing stone houses. Consequently, all houses were *nyumba ya ntsi*. This ban was first contested in the 1950s and since then many of Mirereni's residents, particularly those who have been successful in business or in the public sector, have built stone houses. Many of the remaining houses in Mirereni are of corrugated iron (*nyumba ya toli*), more solid, if more costly, than *nyumba ya ntsi*.

Outside the walls of the town, new urban spaces with very different aspects represent the extension of the social town onto former agricultural land: large houses, almost all built for the women of Harumwamdji¹⁶ sit in spacious walled gardens. These houses are French in inspiration: living room, dining area, kitchen, three beds and two baths, terrace and garage, the descriptions would roll easily off the tongue of a Parisian estate agent. The *dziho* is no more, the toilet is inside the house, the windows are glazed, the stove runs on gas (power cuts *oblige*), the furniture imported from warehouse-style stores on the urban periphery of Paris and Marseilles or, increasingly, Dubai and Dar es Salaam. As they are built upon, these lands, whether purchased or inherited, are gradually incorporated into the social fabric of the town: they become places.

Transformations in the physical aspect of the town are therefore constant. Houses are renovated and replaced: they are indeed re-placed. Places are reworked to become new places within the spaces that they create, spaces that are given shape by the places that hold them. And these places have different meanings for different people. As Mirereni is no longer a slave quarter, the places in the quarter are also different: rather than representing servitude and poverty, some of them now represent wealth and freedom. For the younger generation, this has always been Mirereni; but for the older generation the past and the present are structurally related in ways that represent changes in the status of the quarter's inhabitants, for even if they are no longer slaves, and no longer live in slave houses, their past social status permeates the place: why else would all the houses be new?

¹⁵ At puberty a boy will move out of the matrilineal home and into a *vala*, where he will remain until his marriage. His mother's home will remain a social focal point, however, as he will eat his meals there and be involved in the welfare of his sisters and their children.

¹⁶ The construction of a marriage house for a woman is *de rigueur* in contemporary Ngazidja and the island is scattered with houses in various stages of construction.

Daho and Hinya

The urban spaces of Itsandra are surprisingly rigidly delineated¹⁷ and each actor has a place within them. Every individual has his or her primary point of reference in the *daho*, which has both a social and a spatial meaning: a *daho* is both a representation of space and a space of representation, a place. The word *daho* is usually translated as house,¹⁸ although with a semantic field that also embraces both the English word “house”, in a genealogical sense, and “home”, as an affective category. Socially, *daho* refers to the lowest order of matrilineal kin – what classical anthropology would have called a minimal lineage (Fortes 1945) – a sub-unit of the *hinya* (clan), rarely more than a few generations deep, indeed, whose founding members may still be alive. Spatially, the *daho* is generally a single house, sometimes a small cluster of houses, occupied by the women and children of the kin-group and the women’s husbands. Although a dispute can give rise to new *daho*, the origins of the *daho* are generally spatial (indeed, practical) rather than social, in that a *daho* is usually founded when a new house is built to accommodate part of a kin-group when that group has outgrown the original house. As some members of the lineage (for example, those of the lineage segment of a younger sister) establish a new *daho*, the name of the new house will come to stand for that kin-group, which is itself, of course, now a *daho*.¹⁹

Each *hinya* is therefore composed of a number of *daho*, lineages, each living in a *daho*, house. The *daho* is thus a socio-spatial focal point, a point of reference for the kin-group, the place where all members of the *daho* can claim belonging, to which they may return to eat, to sleep, and to live, whether they be boys who do so on a daily basis or older men, divorced, who no longer have a marital home.²⁰ It is an inalienable space, a space in which all members of the *daho* have rights: it is part of a category of immovable property, known as *manyahuli* (Le Guennec-Coppens 1987; Mas 1979), inherited through the matrilineal line; it is also however, and importantly, a space that has been socially transformed through spatial practices: it has been both created and produced: it is a place. The platiality of social anchoring is very real, there is an embeddedness in the place itself, manifested in the burial of the placenta, washed and wrapped in a cloth, close to the *daho* (cf. Damir 2008). This physical linking of the living individual to the soil both confirms belonging, since it depends upon a continuity through the female line, a claim to the place where one’s maternal ancestors’ placentae are buried, and affirms belonging, by staking a claim in the future of the place.

There are a number of *hinya* in Harumwamdji, and each is composed of a number of *daho*. These *daho* are scattered across the four *mraya*, producing a spatial interpenetration of the town’s different *hinya*. Relationships between *daho* and between *hinya* are manifested concretely in daily practice as individuals find themselves physically and socially embedded in their own *daho*, but spatially juxtaposed to the neighbouring *daho* of different *hinya* in the wider community while being socially juxtaposed to other *daho* of their own *hinya* in other places. The cohesiveness is thus particular (socially and spatially in the *daho*), spatial (proximate to other *hinya*) and social

¹⁷ In the early stages of my fieldwork I mapped the town and its divisions, and would amuse myself and others by hopping from one foot to the other astride an imaginary line as onlookers cried “Befuni! Mzische! Befuni! Mzische!”

¹⁸ The physical structure is more likely to be called a *nyumba*. As one informant put it, “a *daho*’s not a house, a *nyumba* is a house. A *daho* is a home.”

¹⁹ Although it is usually the case that the place-name comes to stand for the kin-group, occasionally this is reversed as the name of the group (that is, its founder) is applied to the physical house.

²⁰ There is an element of shame in a divorced man returning to the *daho*, since once they reach puberty the men of the *daho* are expected to at least sleep elsewhere even if they are expected to eat at the *daho*; but there would be even more shame in a divorced man returning to a *vala*.

(proximate to other *daho* of their own *hinya*, spatially removed). There is a coherence across the entire quarter, precisely as a result of this spatial diffusion of kin-groups. Rather than members of an (ideally) endogamous *hinya* restricting their spatial and social movements to a given *mraya*, they are instead embedded in a quarter-wide network of relationships that is interwoven with similar networks of individuals from other *hinya*. All have cause to move (both socially and spatially) throughout the entire space of the quarter.

This coherence is reinforced in the context of ritual marriages, for if the *daho* of the bride is responsible for organising the bulk of the activities, both the *hinya* and the *mraya* are inevitably involved. The *daho* is, of course, specifically represented by the parents (including the father, who has married into the *daho* and lives there) and the maternal uncle, as well as other men and women of the *daho*. But beyond the *daho*, the women's activities, and particularly the dances, are generally organised by *mraya*, and this spatial point of reference extends the activities, in the first instance, to members of other *hinya* rather than to kin in other *mraya*: here belonging, participation, is spatially defined. This spatial definition is similarly extended to the men, meals for whom are prepared by the *daho* and served in the *mraya*, although the scope of men's networks means that these meals are eaten by men of all *hinya* and all *mraya* of the quarter: socially this is the entire *mdji*.

Although the *daho* is predominantly a woman's space (both physically and socially: "the *hinya* is for the boys, the *daho* is for the girls", said one woman) it is a focal point for married men, too, and although uxorilocal rules of residence and a man's consequent commitments to his wife and children circumscribe his relationships with his own *daho*, they do not replace them: he retains the right to cultivate his *daho*'s land; he retains an interest in the well-being of his matrilineal kin, particularly his sisters and their children; and, as noted above, it is to his *daho* that he returns in case of divorce. And, of course, these contradictions dissipate if his marriage is *daho*-endogamous, although endogamy within the *daho* (as opposed to the *hinya*) is the exception rather than the rule.²¹

Aada

Ngazidja identities are produced through ritual practices that frame an individual's progress through life, binding him or her into a variety of groups defined by reference to kin, age, and space. These ritual practices are known as *aada*, or more fully *aada na mila*, "custom and usage". *Mila* here is customary law, or "usage", to distinguish it from *aada*, "custom"; more completely *mila* is *mila na ntsi*, literally "usage and land". Land, *ntsi*, is neither the space of production of *mila*, nor the space within which *mila* is embedded, nor is it even the space produced by *mila*. It is rather the space *with* which *mila* unfolds: *mila* and *ntsi* unfold together. They are, together, specific instances of space and time revealed through place and practice.

Although *aada* in its widest sense refers to all forms of customary practice, it is generally used in a vernacular sense to refer to what is often called the "*grand mariage*",²² an elaborate and costly ritual sequence that represents a change of status in the age system: of a man, from child to elder, of a woman from daughter to mother. Note that the marriage ritual is a customary one and that these are social statuses, acquired irrespective of the couple's legal marital status, identity as genitor or genetrix, or age: a couple may be in their 60s, married under Islamic law for 30 years

²¹ See Walker (2005, 2010) on matrilineal parallel cousin marriage in Ngazidja.

²² It is not irrelevant that one of the terms used in Shingazidja is *hwenda dahoni*, "going to the house".

and have adult children and yet still be “children” or “daughters” according to custom. Likewise, a woman engaging an *aada* marriage will be assimilated to the status of “mother” and will be expected to become a biological mother fairly swiftly if she is not already one. The performance of his *aada* entitles a man to a number of rights and privileges, and entrusts him with certain responsibilities, most importantly the right – indeed, the duty – to participate in the political process in the village and, more widely, on the island in general. This includes the right to speak in public and to make decisions concerning matters of public interest.

The principal rituals of the *aada* marriage last for nine days and while some are concerned with the marriage itself, the most time-consuming are meals: a variety of social groups must be fed during the *aada*, groups that are defined both by age and by spatial belonging. Both the centrality of this sequence of meals and their spatial character is reflected in colloquial references to *aada*: “I don’t recall eating at your house” is a common remark addressed to someone who claims rights to which, through not having performed the *aada*, they are not entitled. Eating at these meals is a right enjoyed by all men in the village who have entered the age system, and the meals are prepared by the bride’s family. This constraint, for technical reasons alone, would seem to suggest that bride and groom ideally be from the same village, and, indeed, the requirement is that a couple marrying in the *aada* be from the same *mdji*.

Consequently, inter-quarter *aada* are rare. One that began in 1997 illustrates why. In this case, Omar, the groom, was, like his mother and his mother’s mother before her, from Mirereni; his *hinya* is a Mirereni *hinya* and he was thus of servile origin. However, the bride (let us call her Safia), was from Mzishe, one of the *mraya* of Harumwamdji. The ritual concerned was the *mambizo*, an event which for the sake of simplicity may be glossed as “engagement”. It is, in Itsandramdjini, an essential pre-requisite to the full *aada* ritual and is usually done at least a year before the main *aada*.²³ The majority of the events posed no real problems. Since the bride was from Harumwamdji, the formal ceremony, the *madjilis*, was held in the Mtsangani *bangwe*, the only *bangwe* with sufficient space for the entire town to attend; some events (women’s dances) took place in Mzishe, while others – men’s dances such as the *tari la meza* – took place in Mirereni, since this was the groom’s quarter. However, when it came to the *keso*, problems arose. The *keso* is a ritual meal for the groom’s age cohort, the *mnamdji*, which pays his admission to the rank of *guzi*, the senior grade of *mnamdji*; the question was, who would eat it? Since two groups of *mnamdji* – indeed, two age systems – were involved, one in Mirereni and one in Harumwamdji (which are distinct and independent *mdjis*), they could not be one and the same group of individuals, as required by the *aada*. In normal circumstances, the distinction is not even one that needs to be made: the meal is cooked by the bride’s family for the *mnamdji* of the quarter who are, of course, the groom’s *mnamdji* since bride and groom are from the same quarter. This is important since the bride’s and groom’s family alike have obligations towards the *mnamdji* that need to be acquitted jointly. If the two groups are not one and the same, then the question arises as to who receives a meal and, conversely, what the other group receives.

The originally proposed solution to the dilemma was that the *keso* be for the *mnamdji* of Harumwamdji and that the *mnamdji* of Mirereni would receive a goat and some money in lieu. However, this proposition met with resistance from both quarters. First, and prosaically, the *mnamdji* of Mirereni had contributed to the costs of the *keso*, if not paid for it outright, and were

²³ Some couples may take many years to accumulate the requisite funds to proceed to the main *aada* sequence; others, wealthier ones, may do both in the same year, although this is unusual and slightly frowned upon.

not prepared to see the meal eaten by others. Second, if Harumwamdji ate the *keso*, it would imply that Omar was to be admitted to the rank of *guzi* in Harumwamdji and clearly this was not going to happen since the *mnamdji* of Harumwamdji would not have accepted him into their ranks – his origins in a servile quarter are not irrelevant here. Third, if the *mnamdji* of Mirereni did not eat, Omar would remain indebted to them since he was required to provide them with a meal: custom prescribed a *keso*, and they would accept nothing less. Fourth, if Omar did not provide his *mnamdji* with a *keso*, he would not be admitted to the grade of *guzi* in Mirereni, and would thus logically not be able to later proceed to the *aada* proper. He would therefore never be entitled to the status of elder, denying him authority in his own quarter, indeed in his own *daho*. Fifth, if Omar were to be admitted to the *mnamdji* of Harumwamdji, this would imply his eventual admission to the rank of elder in that quarter, thereby giving him power over the descendants of his ancestor's former masters, also clearly unacceptable. Finally, to these problems should be added the fact that the meal was being prepared by the bride's family and unless the meal was to be physically dispatched to Mirereni (an unlikely although not impossible solution) it would have to be eaten in Mzishe: even if it were to be accepted that the meal was destined for Mirereni, would the *mnamdji* of Harumwamdji stand aside and let the *mnamdji* of Mirereni – their erstwhile slaves! – into their quarter to eat in their stead while they went hungry?

One obvious solution might be to suggest that they all eat together, and this was proposed by one of the two factions that emerged, arguing that it was imperative that they eat together if the *mambizo* were to have any significance. The opposing faction steadfastly refused – it would be unthinkable for them to eat with slaves. In the end, and largely in view of the refusal of Mirereni to eat in Harumwamdji,²⁴ the issue was resolved, although not entirely satisfactorily for most involved, as originally intended: the meal, prepared by the bride, could only properly have been eaten by the *mnamdji* of her own quarter, some of whom indeed did so (others refused). The *mnamdji* of Mirereni, in recognition of their rights, were given money in lieu of food, the subtext being that they could then use this money to prepare a meal if they chose to do so.

If this solution resolved the issue between the quarters, there remained an internal dispute among the *mnamdji* of Harumwamdji, for some of them had nevertheless refused to eat. The latter maintained that the *keso* was properly for the groom's *mnamdji*, and should have been eaten by Mirereni, while one of those who did eat explained that if the *mnamdji* had refused to do so it would have been an insult for the family of the bride. "We are all brothers of the girl. We must eat what she cooks for us," he told me. Each faction fined the other and three weeks later the matter was referred to the elders, for arbitration. To my knowledge, the issue was never resolved: structurally there is no solution. Talking about the episode later, I asked a friend why it had even occurred. Quite simply, he explained, "Omar is not of our *bangwe*".

This example highlights the importance of spatial belonging, clearly illustrating how spatial practice is intended to draw together, as far as possible, representations of space and spaces of representation – places. The inscription of social practice within local spaces require *aada* rituals to be anchored in very specific spaces, to take place in particular places, respecting pre-existing spatial configurations and reconstituting those spatial configurations through practice: (re)creating places. Omar cannot do other than marry in his own quarter; the *mnamdji* cannot eat elsewhere; the bride can only properly fulfil her role if both Omar and the *mnamdji* are of the same quarter. That

²⁴ The refusal was a face-saving refusal, of course, since the *mnamdji* of Harumwamdji would not have permitted them to eat in the quarter.

this marriage was the first *aada* that anyone could recall between these two quarters might appear to be at least partly explicable by differences in status; but the dilemmas are formulated spatially, despite a widespread acknowledgment that Omar was of servile status.²⁵

This insistence on spatial belonging lies at the core of *mila na ntsi* and gives context to all other practices, including that of the *mna daho* marriage. *Mna daho* literally means “lesser house”, and these are legal marriages under Islamic law that have no particular customary significance and whose only rituals are Islamic: they are not *aada*. *Mna daho* marriages between Harumwamdji and Mirereni are not uncommon and are quite unremarkable: there is no conflict of any kind since there is no spatiality to the rituals that accompany them: they are not customary rituals. Unconstrained by *mila na ntsi*, therefore, *mna daho* marriages permit unconstrained spatial fluidity as a counterpoint to the *aada*.²⁶

In contrast, the *aada* confirms the spatial characteristics of the quarter through a ritual reaffirmation of belonging, requiring that participants refer to their spatial points of reference as they enact their rituals – dances for women of the *mraya*, ritual commensality within the quarter; but at the same time it rejects social-spatial practices that do not conform to the norms. Cross-quarter *aada* are not simply frowned upon; they are neither perceived as being complicated, nor are they specifically forbidden by *mila na ntsi*; they are quite simply rendered impossible to enact correctly through the specific requirements that those who prepare the food and those who eat it are engaged in a reciprocal relationship within the *mdji* that sees each filling the other’s role in succession.

Comorian Spaces in Zanzibar

I have discussed elsewhere Comorian responses to mobility (Walker 2010): suffice it to say here that my hypothesis is that the historically constant and numerically significant arrival of foreigners on the island, particularly at the height of the slave trade, led to the development of particular strategies aimed at conferring and confirming belonging. Many of these strategies are spatially anchored and, as we have seen, both produce and are produced by the *aada*. However, the departure of people also poses a threat, both to those who leave, who risk losing social points of reference, and to those remaining behind, who risk losing people and who, at least in recent history, need to encourage the sending of remittances. Spatial practices are therefore carried into diaspora, allowing Comorians in other places to construct social maps – to establish spaces of representation – based on places in Ngazidja, providing a framework not only for spatial practice but for social practice more generally. These spatial practices in turn produce powerful incentives to return to Ngazidja and participate in the *aada*.

There has been a community of Comorian origin in Zanzibar since at least the mid-nineteenth century (Saleh 1936, Saleh 1995, Walker 2014), and in Zanzibar spatial affiliations have long been an underlying principle of Comorian Zanzibari social organisation. While Comorians in Zanzibar were not spatially organised in any particular way,²⁷ in the late nineteenth century, the Comorian

²⁵ Likewise, *aada* marriages between Befuni and Harumwamdji: they are structurally of similar status, and yet (at the time of my fieldwork in the late 1990s) the last marriage between the two quarters had been in the 1970s; the social obstacles to marriages were again framed in spatial terms.

²⁶ See Walker (2010) for strategies involved in *mna daho* marriages.

²⁷ Although it was recognised that Comorians lived in certain quarters of the town – Funguni, Kisiwandui, for example – their place of residence was not linked to their place of origin in Ngazidja.

community in Zanzibar was organised according to intra-community distinctions based on village of origin. These distinctions, rather than dissipating as Comorians integrated into Zanzibari society, developed and were formalised into a system of “counties” (*mji* in Swahili, effectively the same word as the Comorian *mdji*) that managed rituals (marriages and funerals) in particular as well as providing for community governance more generally. There were 16 or 17 counties, of which the top five (occasionally seven) in the hierarchy were generally represented on all occasions when the counties were consulted. They were named for the home villages or regions whence their members originated and both men and women were affiliated to them. Men generally adhered to their mothers’ counties, an instance of matrilineal principles of affiliation being retained in Zanzibar. The hierarchy of the counties was based on a fusion of principles, that of numerical importance and that of the status of the homeland unit. The largest and the most enduring of the counties was Mitsamihuli, whose formal identity lasted well into the revolutionary period and which is even invoked today as the only county that still has any significance in social relations within the community. Among the other counties were Bangwa, Ikoni, Moroni, and Mbadjini.

Each county had a “chief” (*shehe*) and a body of relatively formalised rules, which included “taxes” such as the *kata* and the *muongoleo*, respectively marriage and death payments, to be paid by a family to defray the expenses of the various ceremonies that the county would undertake on their behalf during the rituals. The implication was that marriages should ideally be county-endogamous for the same reason as in the homeland: those making the payments would naturally also wish to participate in the ceremonies that they were financing. Furthermore, these payments reaffirmed belonging to the county and established a cycle of reciprocal obligations that bound the county together over time and accorded it coherence as a corporate group.

While these practices might have been expected to fall by the wayside as the community became “Zanzibari”, the proximity of the home island, both physically and socially, contributed to their maintenance. Ngazidja is a migrant society *par excellence*, and the island’s population has, over the centuries, been both constituted and sustained by groups outside the island. It is particularly important, both socially and economically for Comorians at home to encourage a commitment on the part of the diaspora, and this includes exhorting members of the diaspora to contract *aada* marriages with local women (rarely men since residence is uxori-local) in the homeland. And while *aada* marriages are financially onerous, there are affective social and strategic incentives for Comorians in Zanzibar to maintain links with the homeland. Consequently, the spatial configuration of relationships in Zanzibar has been traced upon similar configurations in the homeland, and Zanzibari Comorian principles of social organisation were effectively a reproduction in exile of the spatially framed ritual practices of the *aada* at home.

The counties also had practical purposes. They served as a first point of contact for new arrivals from Ngazidja with no close family in Zanzibar and, for women at least, as rotating credit associations. They also permitted the constitution of a socially structured community in Zanzibar, an alternative to the more progressive (and legally constituted) Comorian Association, membership of which was not open to those who refused to renounce customary practice. This ban was inscribed within what was quite an explicit policy of “de-traditionalising” the Comorians of Zanzibar, but many were those who had no desire to renounce their links with the homeland and who maintained their practices. The community was therefore divided into two factions: members of the Association, who rejected customary practice and who were represented by the office-bearers; and members of the counties, who adhered to it and who were represented by their *shehe*.

Regular references to the counties in documents from the colonial period indicate that they were important and influential in the management of the community: county leaders were not only consulted by the leaders of the Comorian Association and its successors – despite their ideological differences – as well as by the French consul,²⁸ but their decisions were binding for members of the counties.

It is equally clear from recollections from the older members of the community that the various functions of the counties created social spaces structurally akin to the villages of home: social and financial solidarity, hierarchies of power, marriage alliances, ritual belonging. The embodied character of spatial practice was attenuated somewhat during the revolutionary period as both customary practices and travel to the Comoros were officially discouraged, if not banned outright – in Lefebvre’s terms, one might say that spatial practices were attenuated – but there has recently been a renewal of spatial identities, manifested in a resurgence in the performance of *aada* in the homeland by Comorian Zanzibaris, made possible both by increasing economic opportunities in Zanzibar and by the renewed possibility of travel. This renewal of links with the homeland reflects strategies of engagement both by Zanzibaris of Comorian origin who wish to affirm their identities (now tolerated in post-revolutionary Zanzibar) and by Comorians from the homeland who are also engaging with post-socialist Tanzania and who, prosaically, seek to establish contacts as they travel to Tanzania for business, education, or medical treatment. And if the more formal aspects of county affiliation have fallen by the wayside, it nevertheless remains true that most Comorians in Zanzibar today know from which villages their ancestors came, even though these ancestors may have left the Ngazidja a century or more ago and even if this sort of spatial identity is not made explicit. Spatial practices remain pervasive: representations of spaces remain alive.

In the colonial period, exhortations to perform the *aada* were regularly directed at the Comorian community in Zanzibar by kin in the homeland. Since Comorian marriages are ideally hypogamous, it was (and remains) acceptable for Comorian women to marry Arab men: from a Comorian perspective Arab men had low (Comorian) status but high status as being “authentic” Arabs;²⁹ from the Arab perspective, the women had low status and could thus be married by Arab men. However, it was difficult for men to marry outside the community: high-status Arab women were not available to them since Comorians were – with some exceptions – seen as being lower in status than Arabs, while Comorian men themselves preferred not to marry low status women of “African” origin. There was therefore a chronic shortage of marriage partners for Comorian men: they had little choice but to turn to the homeland. Uxorilocal residence rules and the various forms of spatial anchoring already described further constrained them to return to their native villages: Comorians in the homeland would not permit their daughter to marry outside the *mdji*, since aspirations to an *aada* marriage precluded such unions, but Comorians in Zanzibar who had maintained links with kin in the home village were acceptable. As a result, there was a regular movement of young Comorian brides from home villages in Ngazidja to Zanzibar, thus reconstituting the Comorian community in Zanzibar and contributing to the maintenance of the counties. These movements were frequently conditional on the understanding that the couple would later return to Ngazidja to perform their *aada*, as indeed many did.

²⁸ Comorians were French subjects and the French consul was usually the honorary president of the Comorian Association as well as serving as something of an independent arbitrator in (the many) disputes that arose within the community.

²⁹ Although Arabs have no status in hierarchies in Ngazidja, Arab partners are desirable for reasons linked to Islam, notions of “civilisation” (*ustaarabu*), and free (that is, non-servile) status.

Similarly, to perform the *aada* is to confirm one's place in society. While there is tension between Comorians in the island and Comorians in diaspora, often expressed as fears that members of the diaspora will return to make claims on land, there is also a desire to see the diaspora return, to contribute both socially and economically; likewise, there is a corresponding desire on the part of the diaspora to confirm their spatial belonging in the homeland. Few have forgotten the Zanzibar revolution, and while Comorians did not suffer to the same extent that others did, many prefer to maintain options elsewhere. In Ngazidja, performing the *aada*, in addition to confirming belonging, has very real material benefits: the right to eat at other *aada*, the right to participate politically, and the right to a house, since a house in the home village is a necessary prerequisite for performing the *aada*. To perform the *aada* is, implicitly, to have a house, a place in a given space: a home.

Producing Spaces, Building Places

In Lefebvre's terms, the counties of Zanzibar are representations of spaces, social representations of very real places in the homeland that provide a dialectic for spatial practice in diaspora and a future return to the places themselves in Ngazidja.³⁰ In Ngazidja, the spatial embeddedness of social practice is a direct response to the mobility of both Comorians and immigrants, a mobility that often threatens to undermine local practice. As a result, the constant construction and reconstruction within the town, as places are constantly being re-created in the same spaces, provides a social continuity through time that simultaneously reflects the changes brought about by interactions with the world: new building materials, in particular, but new requirements for spatial practices linked to demographic change or transformed social practices.

A certain spatial tension is nevertheless perceptible in the new houses outside the old walled town: the marriage house, this new place, is not fully socialised – it is “out of place” – and is often rented out.³¹ The daughter for whom it was built lives in Marseille while her parents continue to live in their own space in Harumwamdji which, over the years, will have become a different place: they will likely have demolished their old house and built a new “*maison*” in the same space, despite the fact that it is necessarily smaller than the modern villa outside the town. They are embedded in their space, both social and physical, in a way that renders it difficult to physically move. They have what Bourdieu calls a “practical systematicity” (Bourdieu 2002: 28), consistent ways of doing things. Places provide points of reference, they shape people just as people shape them, they emplace actors in social networks.

To return to Lefebvre, the production of space is, by definition, a process; but as space is produced over time, as it comes into being as a product, so has it already participated in its own production; and so will it subsequently continue to be a condition of its own production. In a (possibly intentional) echo of Bourdieu's definition of habitus, and although he does not make it explicit, it is clear that Henri Lefebvre's analysis of space establishes it as a (produced) product, predisposed to function as a producing product (1991; *cf.* Bourdieu 1977, 1990). In other words, space is socially produced through practice, but at the same time space frames practice as the condition of its own on-going (re)production. Social interactions in space are marked by a constant

³⁰ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss Comorians in France, but not surprisingly spatiality – and place – provides criteria for belonging within the Comorian community in France much as it does in Zanzibar, if not more so.

³¹ Itsandra being part of the greater Moroni urban area, there is a market for housing among the various expatriates posted to the Comoros.

struggle to achieve a coherent whole in which all three aspects of space work in concert: such coherence, when achieved, remains in fragile equilibrium that is in constant danger of collapse.

The places described above have been socially produced: in a very physical sense, following a set of codes for practice that are part of a shared social knowledge, a collectively held knowledge governing spatial layouts and construction techniques have produced the town that exists today. Houses, *nyumba*, were constructed in a style that was qualified “traditional”: rough-hewn blocks of rock, lime mortar, and render, thatched roofs; a two-room floor plan, a courtyard or terrace, a kitchen. Neighbouring houses follow similar plans, and, collectively, delineate streets and alleys, and in their turn these streets and alleys link the houses, *daho*, *hinya*. Between the houses, the occasional empty spaces, lie the mosques and the *bangwe*, the monumental spaces of the town: points of reference that are also equally social, equally spatial.

This (now largely imaginary, remembered) townscape is a representation of space. It remains fixed as a social point of reference: it is this space that is always reproduced in the imagination and is subsequently reproduced physically, even if construction materials have changed and the town has expanded. It is a space that governs, frames, and validates social practice, for even if the aspect of the quarter changes, the layout remains, traced on the ground for all to see. The roads, paths, and alleys, the *bangwe* rarely shift; the *manyahuli*, the land itself remains immobile, the *hinya* and *daho* remain in their places, in the spaces that they have produced, and which they continually reproduce. The town is a palimpsest on which social relationships are constantly being redrawn, but redrawn according to the constraints imposed upon them by the spaces in which they are embedded, even as they reshape and reproduce the places that bind them together. Houses are demolished, one by one, to make way for newer, larger buildings that fill the spaces, both physical and social, on which the old houses were constructed, which have an upper storey (imagined, if not yet real), which have kitchens and bathrooms: even the town’s Friday mosque, after much debate, was finally reconstructed on the site of the old one, demolished solely to be rebuilt because the men of the town eventually admitted that they could pray nowhere else. Places persist, reappearing as representations of space that in turn produce new places: the *nyumba* has gone, the *daho* remains, manifested in a new *nyumba*; the mosque has gone, the place of prayer remains, located in a new place in the same space.

Thus, the configurations of spaces remained fixed in the imagination while their representations evolve as the places evolve. These places narrate the social trajectories of the town’s individuals and groups: they are “the prose of the world” (Lefebvre 1991: 227); the fundamental symbolic characteristics of the town are remarkably stable, even if the places that frame them, and through which they are manifested, change, disappear, are re-placed. The four *mraya* are so firmly drawn in the collective imagination that it is possible to mark them out to within a few metres. The wealthy businessman remains a member of his *daho*: his house remains on the *manyahuli* land of his *hinya*; he prays in the same sacred space and he sits in the same *bangwe*.

And these places are carried into diaspora, mapped onto the social and physical spaces of Zanzibar. The counties are representations of space that provide a social space for spatial practice, practice in a space that is at once purely symbolic (for many county members have never been to Ngazidja, never mind their ancestral village) and very concrete, because these villages do indeed exist and may be physically navigated if the individual chooses to return. If he does return, then the representations of Comorian space that have been socially constructed in Zanzibar will be

reworked as spaces of representation and these spaces, symbolically invoked and physically placed, will then guide further socio-spatial practice.

So what of the dispute between Itsandramdjini and Bandamadji? As one might suppose, this dispute was as much about ritual practice, spatial practice, as it was about boundaries or access to a beach. Neither Bandamadji nor Itsandramdjini had any particular problem with the line drawn between the two towns: their problem lay more in what the line meant – or what it should have meant. It marked a spatio-ritual separation that could not be transgressed. Bandamadji and Itsandramdjini are particularly close, both socially and physically (the built-up area is contiguous), and while Bandamadji is the lower status town, it is not, and has never been, a slave town. It can therefore claim an equivalence of status with Itsandramdjini, and amongst other things, this could be seen as claiming the right to participation in the *aada* of Itsandramdjini. Although this would be unlikely to ever happen, there have been marriages between the two towns and at least one man from Bandamadji who had wives in both places had been under pressure from his Itsandramdjini wife to perform his *aada* with her. He did not, of course, but even the suggestion of such a thing would, from the perspective of the larger town at least, be unacceptable.

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