

Sihiri among the Swahili Muslims in Zanzibar:

An Anthropological Analysis of the Belief and Practice of "Witchcraft" in Zanzibar in Light of the Islamic View of *Sihir*

Caleb Chul-Soo Kim.*

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* Caleb Chul-Soo Kim : Associate Professor and Director of the Ph.D. Program in Inter-Cultural Studies at Africa International University, Located in Nairobi, Kenya

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NB: (1) Arabic words are transliterated, and both Arabic and Swahili words are italicized in this paper. (2) Some Arabic words that are commonly used among Muslims, such as *jinn*, *iblis*, *kāfir*, *du'a*, *dhikr*, *tawhīd*, and the like, have not been defined in this paper. See Kim (2004:74-102) especially for Muslim beliefs in jinn and devils.

ABSTRACT

본고에서는 스와힐리 이슬람 지역 중 유구한 역사를 갖고 있는 탄자니아 동해의 잔지바(Zanzibar) 섬을 중심으로 “시히리 (*sihiri*)”의 개념과 관습을 현상학적으로 기술하고 분석하고자 한다. “시히리 (*sihiri*)”는 아랍어 “시홀 (*sihr*)”이 스와힐리 이슬람의 종교문화적 상황에 토착화된 말이다. 흔히 영어로는 witchcraft라고 번역되고 그 뜻은 한국어로 주술(呪術)에 가깝지만 스와힐리 무슬림들의 역사와 삶의 양태가 서구나 동양의 그것과 매우 다르므로 이 단어들의 종교문화적 개념 역시 큰 차이가 나는 것을 볼 수 있다. 따라서 영어나 한국어로 내부인들의 개념을 정확하게 전달하기 어려우므로 본 고에서는 스와힐리 용어를 그대로 사용하기로 한다.

꾸란에서의 사용예와 하디쓰에 기록된 선지자 무함마드의 경험, 그리고 또 공식 이슬람의 가르침에 비추어 볼 때에, “시홀”은 “샤이판 (*shaiḥān*, 악한 *jinn*)”들과의 교통을 통하여 초자연적인 방법으로 이웃을 해치는 행위로서 심각한 죄이다. 영계에 접촉하여 개인의 욕심을 채우거나 원한을 푸는것은 악한 진들의 사주를 받는 일인 고로 신실한 무슬림들은 절대로 “시홀”을 행해서도 안되고, 또 이러한 “시홀”을 행하는 주술사들을 살려 두어서도 안 된다. 하지만 잔지바의 민속이슬람의 “시히리”에 대한 믿음과 또 그와 관련된 풍습들을 자세히 살펴보면, 대부분의 무슬림들은 공식 이슬람의 엄격한 가르침을 따르기보다는 이슬람 이전의 아프리카 토속적 전통을 상당히 그대로 답습하는 것을 볼 수 있다.

오랜 정착 시기를 지닌 대부분의 아프리카 시골 농경사회에서 처럼 잔지바 무슬림들도 자원이 제한되어 있다고 믿으며 (“limited good”), 따라서 자신들이 속한 사회의 삶의 평범한 기준치를 넘어선 부의 획득이나 사회적 지위의 상승은 제한된 자원의 불공평한 분배의 결과라고 믿는다. 그러므로 보통보다 많이 얻은 것들은 시기의 대상이 되어 저주(bewitchment)의 표적이 된다. 이웃이나 친척들 가운데 경제적 혹은 사회적으로 갑자기 흥하는 경우가 생기면, 이슬람 신앙이 약한 잔지바 무슬림들은 시기심이 발동하여 종종 “시히리” 주술 행위를 하고 싶은 유혹에 빠진다. 이러한 이들을 위해서 악의 봉사를 비밀리 해주는 주술사(sorcerer)들의 존재는 잔지바 사회의 어두운 구석을 더욱 암울하게 만들어 준다.

따라서 잔지바 무슬림들은 누군가 주술사들을 통하여 자신을 저주할지도 모른다는 두려움을 갖고 있다. 그런데 이에 더하여 “와차위”(단수는 “음차위”)라고 하는 초자연적 능력을 지닌 악인(witch)들에 대한 두려움 역시 심각한 현실이다. “와차위”는 동아프리카의 반투전통 개념에 그 뿌리를 두고 있다. 여기서 한 가지 혼돈을 피하기 위하여 유념해야 할 것이 있다. 잔지바 인들은 저주를 직업으로 하는 주술사(sorcerer)들과 존재 자체가 악하며 초자연적으로 악한 힘을 갖고 있다고 믿는 악인(witch)들을 구별한다. 그런데 이 구별을 하면서도 잔지바 스와힐리 사람들은 그들을 모두 다 “와차위”라고 부른다. 본고에서는 이 두번째 범주의 “와차위”를 심도있게 논의한다. 이 “와차위”는 사회의 모든 악의 화신들로서 인간의 보통 능력으로는 대항할 수 없는 존재들이다. 물론 이들의 실질적 존재 여부는 현대 과학적인 방식으로는 증명되지 않지만 잔지바 무슬림들의 생각 속에는 당연한 현실로 늘 존재한다. 잔지바 무슬림들은 개인이나 공동체의 재난의 원인을 이 “와차위”의 “시히리,” 즉, 이들의 저주 내지는 주술의 결과로 본다.

“와차위”에 대한 문화적 믿음과 이에 따른 두려움은 자신들을 저주했을지도 모르는 “와차위”를 찾아내고자 하는, 소위 “마녀사냥(witch-hunting)”이라는 고질적인 사회적 병폐도 야기한다. 정통 이슬람에서는 알라를 신뢰하고 고난을 감내하며 자신들의 선지자를 따라 살고, 절대로 이방인의 방식으로 저주나 악을 갚지 말라고 가르친다. 그러나 이러한 이슬람의 공식적인 가르침은 평범한 잔지바 무슬림들에게는 지키기 힘든 과제이다. 그래서 수많은 잔지바의 보통 무슬림들은 아직도 이렇게 아프리카 전통에 닿아 있는 “시히리” 패러다임에 의거하여 삶을 살아가고 있다.

그리스도인들은 이러한 패러다임 속에서 살아가는 잔지바 무슬림들의 정신세계를 깊이 이해하고 그들의 삶의 딜레마를 긍휼의 시각으로 바라볼 필요가 있다. 이러한 이해와 긍휼함이 전달 될 때에 잔지바 무슬림들도 기독교에 대한 편견을 좀더 내려 놓고 그리스도인들의 이야기를 경청할 수 있을 것이다. 열정과 지식이 균형을 이룬 선교적 접근들이 더욱 많아지기를 바란다.

● Key Words : Islam, *Jinn*, *Sih̄r*, *Sihiri*, Swahili, *Uchawi*, Zanzibar, *Wachawi*, Witch, Witchcraft

INTRODUCTION

Non-Muslims tend to understand Muslim life and culture based on Islamic duties stipulated by the official Islamic *shariah*. They often fail to notice realities that most ordinary Muslims experience in daily life. Christians also often perceive Islam through the lens of its doctrinal differences from Christian beliefs rather than through lived experiences. A closer look at everyday Muslim life, however, will disclose a dualistic way of life.

Muslims often experience an internal tension between the obligation to seek “orthodox” Islamic ideals and the desire to satisfy their felt-needs in “popular” ways.¹ It is often observed that this tension results in the disintegration between Islamic religious ideology and cultural life. While many Muslim folks seek to comply with religious requirements by *shariah* and try their best to remain as sincere Muslims, they are simultaneously inclined to continue many cultural practices that do not seem compatible with the Islamic ideologies. Islamic mandates and pre-Islamic local customs coexist in most parts of the Muslim world, although the degree of allegiance to old cultural traditions differs from locality to locality.

1. Helpful materials on popular (or folk) Islam have been written by a few Christian writers, among whom are Bill Musk (1989), Phil Parshall (1983), David Maranz (1993) and Rick Love (2000).

Swahili Islam in Zanzibar is a good example of this syncretistic religio-cultural phenomenon. It is my conviction that Swahili Islam consists of cultural domains that are characterized by the synthesis of different religio-cultural elements. Among such domains, the “Domain of Total Synthesis” (Kim 2004:59–60) refers to a cultural area that demonstrates the complete mix of all the different elements. Swahili Islam is overall a result of historical religio-cultural amalgamation of African traditions and Islam thus, many customs in Swahili society mirror the characteristics of the total synthesis. This amalgamation must be due to the African hospitality that embraced and accommodated Islam into the existing African cultural heritages throughout history.

Among many Muslim cultural features in Zanzibar, the belief in *sihiri*, which is often ambiguously translated as “witchcraft,” is quite prevalent and retentive. The belief in *sihiri* is, like the jinn-possession healing ritual (called *ngoma ya kupunga majini/mashetani*), a prominent religio-cultural representative of the Domain of Total Synthesis. Thus it would be almost impossible to grasp the Zanzibari worldview without apprehending the cultural mechanism of the belief in *sihiri*. Thus, this paper attempts to describe and examine some of the Swahili beliefs and practices of *sihiri* in light of Islamic teachings on *sahr* (the Arabic word from which the Swahili word *sihiri* stems) as well as by compar-

ing it with its traditional African (especially Bantu) counterpart, *uchawi*.²

II. *SIHR* IN THE OFFICIAL ISLAMIC TRADITION

In the first half of this paper, I will describe the usage of the word *sihr* in the Islamic scriptural context as well as the standpoint of Islamic scholarship on *sihr*. Unquestionably this will provide the reader with a helpful understanding of the Islamic-religious background of the Zanzibari belief in *sihiri*. This exploration will also help to disclose the cognitive gap between the Islamic “orthodox” teaching of *sihr* and the traditional belief about *sihiri* in Zanzibar, which will be part of the discussions in the next half of the paper. This will also help the reader glimpse the extent to which the Zanzibari Muslims have blended or integrated Islamic teachings into pre-Islamic African traditions.

2. It should be noted that I use different terms for what may be called “witchcraft” contextually throughout this paper. This is because the term “witchcraft” is too broadly used in literature to deliver a clear picture of it in different contexts. Cf. Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar (2004:149). Therefore, the word “witchcraft” will be avoided as much as possible. Instead, contextual words will be used: *sihr* in the official Islamic context, *sihiri* in the Swahili or Zanzibari context as derived from the Arabic *sihr*, and *uchawi* in the pre-Islamic or African-traditional context. Zanzibaris use both the words *sihiri* and *uchawi* interchangeably. However, it is intriguing to observe my Zanzibari informants prefer the former over the latter, especially when they consign more of an Islamic attribution to the notion of witchcraft; hence, the word *sihiri* would suggest a certain degree of its Islamic connotation. In contrast, *uchawi* seems to denote an evil practice that is entirely pagan and to carry a somewhat contemptible tone due to its pre-Islamic origin. NB: The Arabic *sihr* is also used in a folk Islamic context, as among the Arabic speakers in Egypt, just as *sihiri* is used in the Zanzibari context. Cf. Barbara Drieskens (2008:137–139). I believe that each word carries its own peculiar cultural schemata based on the cultural context in which it is used. Also see Ciekawy (1998:122–123) for different conceptualizations of local words for “witchcraft” in the Kenyan coastal context.

1. *Sihr* in the Qur'an

The Arabic root for the Swahili word *sihiri* is SHR. 'Abdul Omar's *Dictionary of the Holy Qur'an* lists a number of English translations for *sihr* (a verb-noun of SHR). Perhaps the most popular translation of this word is "witchcraft" or "sorcery." Among the various translations of this word listed in the dictionary are "eloquence," "seduction," "falsehood," "deception," "turning of a thing from its proper manner to another manner," "anything the source of which is not quite visible," "showing off falsehood in the form of truth," "crafty device," "mischief", "mesmerism", and "hypnotism" (2008:250-251). This list shows the extent to which the Arabic word is being used in the Qur'an and how it can be interpreted. These variations of the meaning also make evident that *sihr* in the Qur'an is used in a broader sense than the fuzzy English words "witchcraft" or "magic". The list provided by 'Abdul Omar's dictionary indicates that the word connotes any unorthodox practice or religiously deceptive exercise that is deviant from the orthopraxy stipulated by *shariah*.

The active perfect form of SHR appears two times in the Qur'an, meaning "cast a spell". Its verb-noun (*sihr*) is mostly translated as "sorcery" (about 28 times). Another verbal noun *sāhr* appears about 22 times meaning "sorcerer". The passive participle also appears 4 times, each time translated as "bewitched". In any of the cases the connotation is always negative in the Qur'an; all the forms are used to suggest an evil-intended, malicious action with the help of supernatural powers. An exam-

ple of the evil nature of *sihr* can be well illustrated by the story of Moses' encounter with Pharaoh's magicians in Surat *Al-'A'rāf* (7) *Aya* 103–121, which recalls the story in Exodus 7.

Muslim commentators on this passage recognize the existence of magical power that the magicians or sorcerers used. However, some prominent scholars tend to interpret the accounts of the bewitchment of eyes symbolically rather than literally. In Surat *Al-'A'rāf* (7) *Aya* 116, Egyptian magicians “bewitched the eyes (*sahru a'yuna*) of the people” or “put a spell upon people's eyes”³ when they threw their stick. Abul Maududi interprets the word *talqafu* (it swallowed) in *Aya* 117 in a way that implies that Moses' staff undid the magic that the magicians had performed to make their staff appear like a serpent (1984:106).⁴ In a similar tone, Ibn Kathir also believes that the magicians performed a magic that deceived the eyes of people; it was an “illusion” (2000a:136–137).

According to these commentators, the emphasis of the message in this Quranic text is to expose to light an evil power or satanic deception that dares to compete with Allah's power. The main theme here is the condemnation of the sin of *shirk*, which is an attempt to revolt against God's sovereignty and thus to defy the oneness of God (*tawhid*), the core value of Islam. The story of Moses' success in the power competition recorded in the afore-

3. The translation in the parentheses is from *Qur'an Majeed*, software by Pakistan Data Management Services (www.pakdada.com), 2012.

4. See the same account in 20:69 and 26:45.

mentioned Quranic Sura (especially in verses 103–122) denounces the falsity of the religion of the Egyptian king, who was represented by his official magicians or sorcerers. Thus, *sihr* in this context refers to the deceptive power, whether being religious or supernatural, that challenges Allah's sovereignty and his prophets.

The word *sihr* was also used when pagans accused and criticized the prophet Muhammad. As shown in Surat *Yūnus* (10) Aya 2, disbelievers accused Muhammad of being a sorcerer (*sāhir* the verb-noun form).⁵ This indicates that the whole society, including the Quranic narrator and non-Muslims (or pagans), had already recognized *sihr* to be an evil practice and *sāhir* (sorcerer) to be an evil practitioner. It is interesting to note that the Quranic narrator sets two opposite values in sharp contrast: Muhammad's prophethood and sorcery. It is quite clear that this was a rhetoric deliberately intended to put the strongest stress upon the authenticity of his prophethood. Conversely, the idea of sorcery was employed to point out the obvious fallacy and deception found among disbelievers or those who rejected Muhammad as a prophet sent by the true God. In this regard, the word sorcery (*sihr*) is regarded as something that devils (*shayahn*) teach, as indicated in Surat *Al-Baqarah* (2) Aya 102. Inferring from the context of the Qur'an, a lethal weapon that the devil uses is

5. In fact, there are a number of places in the Qur'an that record vehement accusations made by the prophet's opponents. His contemporaries accused him of being a liar, forger, fairy-teller, soothsayer, possessed poet, and mad (or jinn-possessed) man (6:33; 16:24; 21:5; 25:4–5; 37:36; 52:29; 69:42; 15:6; 23:70; 44:14, etc.).

whispering lies into human thought so that people may disbelieve and disobey God (7:20, 200 20:120; 114:4–5 cf. Kim 2004:82–83). Thus, apostasy is always understood to be an outcome of devils, and *sihr* is a manifest work of the devil. Sorcerers then are always liars with eloquent speeches and cunning wits, as indicated in a number of Quranic verses (cf. 7:109, 112; 10:79; 26:34; 40:24).⁶ People fear their magic practice (7:116), and a sorcerer (*sāhir*) is often considered possessed by jinn (51:39, 52).⁷

2. *Sihr* in the Hadīth

The Hadīth does not provide many examples of *sihr*, but there is one famous story of *sihr*, by which the prophet himself was once affected. The story seems worth quoting here for the purpose of analysis:

Narrated Aisha: Magic was worked on the Prophet [literal translation – “the prophet was bewitched”] so that he began to fancy that

6. In these verses, the phrase “well-versed sorcerer” is an idiom that refers to an eloquently deceitful sorcerer. That the Pharaoh used the same word to accuse Moses shows the negative perception of the sorcerer in the time of Muhammad.

7. The Qur’an also records a couple more accounts that are conceptually related to the *sihr* belief and practice: the “evil eye” and “envy.” These two concepts should be treated as closely related to the problem of *sihr* in the orthodox traditions of Islam because they provide reasons for the practicing of *sihr*. Regarding the evil eye, however, the Qur’an does not directly mention it. Ibn Kathir indicates in his commentary on Surat *Yūsuf* (12) *Aya* 67 that Jacob was worried about the evil eye of Egyptians against his sons (2000b:188). He also asserts that the clause “would make you slip with their eyes” in Surat *Al-Qalam* (68) *Aya* 51 means that unbelievers would “affect you [Muhammad] by looking at you with their eyes (that is, the evil eye)” (2000c:125). These eyes are full of jealousy and hatred, and their effects are real. It is only with Allah’s protection that Muhammad could survive them (2000c:125).

he was doing a thing which he was not actually doing. One day he invoked (Allah) for a long period and then said, “I feel that Allah has inspired me as how to cure myself. Two persons came to me (in my dream) and sat, one by my head and the other by my feet. One of them asked the other, ‘What is the ailment of this man?’ The other replied, ‘He has been bewitched,’ the first asked, ‘Who has bewitched him?’ The other replied, ‘Lubaid bin Al-A’sam.’ The first one asked, ‘What material has he used?’ The other replied, ‘A comb, the hair gathered on it, and the outer skin of the pollen of the male date-palm.’ The first asked, ‘Where is that?’ The other replied, ‘It is in the well of Dharwan.’ So, the Prophet went out towards the well and then returned and said to me on his return, “Its date-palms (the date-palms near the well) are like the heads of the devils.” I asked, “Did you take out those things with which the magic was worked?” He said, “No, for I have been cured by Allah, and I am afraid that this action may spread evil amongst the people.” Later on the well was filled up with earth (*Sahih Al-Bukharī* Vol. 4:490).

Al-Bukharī records another narration of the same story with a few more details on what happened to the prophet. He was bewitched (passive form *suhira*) “so that he used to think that he had sexual relations with his wives while he actually had not” (Vol. 7:660). The same Hadīth verse also comments, “Sufyan said: That is the hardest kind of magic as it has such an effect.” Based on these two records of the Hadīth, we can feature a few important facts pertaining to the belief and practice of

sihr in the time of Muhammad. First, the Prophet Muhammad himself recognized the existence of a certain form of witchcraft or sorcery, called *sihr* in Arabic. His experience of a psychological confusion was diagnosed as bewitchment when he met with two men (presumably angels) in his dream, and his problem was solved through Allah's intervention without recourse to any pagan healing method. This episode shows that the prophet actually hinted at the possibility that anyone could be bewitched witchcraft is real. At the same time he also set a model as to how Muslims should deal with witchcraft. They ought not to resort to any heathen method to deal with bewitchment but to observe Allah's commandments and guidance as taught in the Qur'an and Hadith.

Another feature to note is a social dimension that inheres in the belief and practice of *sihr*. Apparently, there was someone (a person named Lubaid bin Al-A'sam) who intended to harm the prophet. The Qur'an records a number of accounts in which his contemporaries constantly accused him of being a liar, forger, fairy-teller, soothsayer, possessed poet, and mad (or jinn-possessed) man (6:33; 16:24; 21:5; 25:4-5; 37:36; 52:29; 69:42; 15:6; 23:70; 44:14, etc.). This Hadith account of *sihr* must reflect such animosity against the prophet. *Sihr*, then, was a malignant action taken to hurt adversaries out of spite, hatred, or jealousy.

Related to this, there was also a black magic or occult element in the Hadith *sihr*. As noted in the quotation above, the prophet's enemy used certain materials, such as "a comb, the

hair gathered on it, and the outer skin of the pollen of the male date-palm,” to cast a magic spell in order to hurt the prophet. One of the methods that he employed to curse the prophet appears to be a sort of what anthropologists often call “contagious magic,” in which anything that has once been a part of, or in contact with, the intended victim is used for bewitching (Hand 1997:183–184; Lehmann and Myers 1997:241 Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiēnou 1999:70). Although the story in the Hadīth does not report whose comb and hairs the perpetrator used, it is conjectured from the context that they must have belonged to the prophet. In any case the deed described in the text was obviously a certain type of black magic.

This report of the prophet’s experience of *sihr* in the Hadīth deserves close attention, because it provides a theoretic foundation for the Islamic official stance with reference to how Muslim communities should deal with *sihr* or “witchcraft”. As numerous anthropological works have already evidenced, witchcraft has been tenaciously practiced across societies with diverse styles and different methods throughout history. Today, even in the Islamic world various Muslim versions of it are observed despite the fact that Islam has ever since denounced and prohibited it. Then, an intriguing question can be raised: how has the Islamic world dealt with this ever resilient evil practice? At this point, it is necessary to briefly review how an “orthodox” Islamic teaching addresses and condemns the practice of *sihr* before looking into Swahili beliefs about *sihr* (called *sihiri* in Kiswahili) in Zanzibar. The next section presents an Islamic scholarly view on *sihr* based

on teachings offered by a well-known Muslim scholar in this area.

3. An Islamic Scholarly View on *Sihr*

An Islamic position on “witchcraft” is found in the extensively instructive book *The Jinn and Human Sickness: Remedies in the Light of the Qur’an and Sunnah*, written by a Muslim scholar Dr. Abu’l Mundhir Khaleel ibn Ibrahim Ameen (2005).⁸ He argues that “witchcraft” (referring to *sihr*) is real, as he defers to renowned scholars like Al-Qurtubi, ibn Katheer, and ibn Qudamah (2005:183-184). According to them, witchcraft is responsible for human sickness, death, separation between spouses, and other miseries.

Ameen also affirms that all kinds of witchcraft practices actually have one common ground although many traditional Islamic scholars attempt to classify different kinds of witchcraft the commonality is that the person who performs witchcraft (whom Ameen calls a witch) “relies on the jinn and devils” (2005:184). In his Islamic view, the supernatural or extraordinary power to harm people comes from spiritual beings, which implies that the damaging power does not reside in the person. In short, the *sihr*, in a strict sense, is a work of evil jinn, and “witches” are their human agency.⁹ The witch is a person of the embodiment of all

8. This book was originally written in Arabic. Thankfully it was translated in English, and the English version has been consulted in my study.

kinds of evil, following the path of *Iblīs* and complying willfully with his instructions (2005:190–191); he or she is entirely a servant of the devil.

It is presumed that the original word for the English translation “witch” in Ameen’s book was *sāhir*. If so, in light of the whole context of his book, it becomes obvious that the word includes all practitioners who perform either harming or healing by resorting to jinn power and using charms and amulets (cf. 2005:200–201). If strictly following this concept of witch as defined by Ameen and his sympathetic Islamic scholars, we have to admit that even Swahili *waganga* (traditional healers, *mganga* in singular) should be lumped into his category of “witch.” Ameen believes that “the most correct scholarly opinion” is that “witches are to be killed, and it is permissible to shed their blood without asking them to repent first” (2005:192; cf. 201).¹⁰

Being an orthodox Islamic scholar, Ameen prescribes the following instructions for faithful Muslims. In order to prevent and protect from any witchcraft, a Muslim must recite the Qur’an. Approaching any sorcerer to resolve problems is only to invite more jinn to worsen the existing situation (2005:197). A sincere Muslim should keep strengthening his or her faith by performing *dhikr* and *du‘a*. Following the prophet Muhammad’s teaching, Muslims may eat a special date called *azwah* every morning, and this will protect them from being harmed by poison or

9. Ameen even condemns astrologers who attempt to read signs by studying stars. To him astrology is also a kind of witchcraft (2005:185), a corrupt belief that a *kāfir* would do (2005:189).

10. Even *Zar* (or *Sar*) cults are condemned from this Islamic viewpoint (Ameen 2005:195).

witchcraft (2005:210-211). In the event that they are affected by witchcraft, Muslims should recite *ruqyah*,¹¹ such as the whole chapter of the first Sura (Surat Al-Fātiḥh), Ayat Al-Kursī (2:255 alias the “Throne Verse”), Surat Al-A’rāf (7:117-122), Surat Yūnus (10:81-82), Surat Tāhā (20:69), Surat ’Ikhḷāṣ (112), and Surat Al-Falaq (113). Ameen also recommends the use of cupping therapy, following the prophet Muhammad who is believed to have used cupping on his head for a cure when he was bewitched (2005:224).

Ameen believes that the main cause of most of the physical and psychological illnesses is *sīhr*, and this is always associated with jinn. He also asserts that dead souls have no influence at all over the living. Even regarding the famous story of the many mysterious deaths among those who participated in the excavation of the tomb of Tutankhamen in the early twentieth century, he argues that it was primarily jinn who had been assigned to keep the tomb and their witchcraft power that were responsible for the mysterious deaths (2005:249-250). This is a quite popular view among traditional Islamic teachers and scholars with regard to *sīhr*.

The Islamic view of “witchcraft” and jinn as seen in Ameen’s teaching is also held by devout Swahili Muslims in Zanzibar. However, as far as ordinary people are concerned, it is quite

11. *Ruqyah* means incantations, “which are used to ward off evil or harm” (Glassé 1989:339). For more details on the Muslim use of *ruqyah* in warding off evil and exorcizing, see the section on *da’wah* of Hughes’ dictionary (1994:72-78).

intriguing that copious non-Islamic elements coexist with the strict Islamic teaching in the Zanzibari society. Apparently most of the non-Islamic elements must have come from African (especially Bantu) traditions. And we may well assume that this is true even with other Muslim societies along the Swahili coast in East Africa. In the next sections, I will explore some of the non-orthodox aspects of the Zanzibari *sihr* (called *sihiri*) based on my hands-on fieldwork conducted recently in Zanzibar.¹²

III. *SIHIRI* AMONG THE ZANZIBARI SWAHILIS

As a religious localism, Swahili Islam exhibits a colorful amalgamation (*mchanganyiko*) of official Islamic features and pre-Islamic traditions (*mila*) plus Arabic-Muslim customs in various areas of ordinary Swahili life.¹³ Certainly, not every cultural domain in Zanzibar shows an even proportion of these three major religio-cultural ingredients ; however, apparently almost all cultural beliefs and practices display a palpable synthetic nature.¹⁴ Although all the three religio-cultural elements are not present as distinctly as in the jinn-possession healing ritual, the cultural domain of *sihiri* may well flaunt an almost seamlessly woven

12. Even after the completion of my doctorate in 2001, I have continued to revisit Zanzibar to collect more field data. The most recent visit was in August 2012.

13. According to one of my key informants, Ali Abdalah, the mix of many different cultural elements is the most important feature that represents Zanzibari society.

14. For some examples, see Kim (2004:58–68).

tapestry of a local Islam whose cultural paradigm is profoundly seated in a perpetual African-traditional worldview.

1. Jinn as the Author of *Sihiri* : An Islamic Substratum

Most Zanzibari Muslims both fear and abhor *sihiri*. This attitude toward *sihiri* is not different from that of the first Muslims in the time of the prophet Muhammad. The same has been observed in Ameen's teachings as well. Zanzibaris also firmly believe that all practices and effects pertaining to *sihiri* have to do with malicious (or evil) jinn or mashetani (plural of *shetani* in Swahili). The main reason for this religious sentiment against *sihiri* is derived from the Muslim belief about the evil jinn, who represent disbelief (*kufir*) and apostasy (*irtidād*) in Islam, hence being the author of the evil practice of *sihiri*.

One of my key informants, Ali Abdalah, emphasizes that devils are behind all kinds of *sihiri*.¹⁵ He points to the Quranic teaching, especially Surat Al-Baqarah (2) Aya 102, which states: "Sulaimān did not disbelieve, but the Shayātīn(devils) disbelieved, teaching men magic and such things that came down at Babylon to the two angels, Hārūt and Mārūt." Here the word "magic" is *sihr* in Arabic. Based on this verse, it is argued that all magic power comes from devils; even healing power (*uganga*) can be obtained through contacting jinn, though not desirable.¹⁶

15. Ali is a geography teacher at Kiponda Secondary School in Stone Town.

16. Elsewhere, I discussed some significant aspects of *uganga* in terms of African-traditional worldview (Kim 2010).

In short, *sihiri* is a wicked practice that is always associated with the malevolent power of evil jinn. According to Ali and other informants, people who deny the intrinsic connection of the *sihiri* practice with jinn simply do not understand this truth because of their lack of the Islamic faith.

Another informant, Muhammad Ali, who is currently an *mganga* (traditional healer) at age 49 from Pemba Island,¹⁷ told me an interesting story that shows how jinn are involved in the practice of *sihiri*.¹⁸ He once diagnosed his father with bewitchment by someone from another family of his grandfather (Muhammad's grandfather had two wives, and the first wife bore Muhammad's father). The other family hated his father out of jealousy (*uwivu*) and bewitched him by burying (*kuzika*) an amulet (*hirizi*) in front of his door.

Muhammad and Ali concurrently explain that the reason to bury an amulet is to attract jinn. Once catching the attention of a certain jinni, the sorcerer usually instructs the jinni to harm so-and-so. This is how Muhammad's father got sick. Muhammad was even able to see the pathogenic jinni.

Once Muhammad diagnosed the cause of his father's problem, he prescribed spiritual medicines (*dawa*), which were made out of some herbs. However, another powerful counteraction was

17. Pemba Island is located about 50 km. to the north of Zanzibar Island. These two islands make up the main part of the state of Zanzibar in the United Republic of Tanzania.

18. The interview with him was carried out at Kiponda Secondary School in Stone Town, Zanzibar, during the morning of 22 August 2012.

yet to be performed to undo the effects of the bewitchment cast by his enemy. He first recited the Qur'an to his father, and then cut some leaves from a particular shrub and put them into the mouth of a chicken. The chicken was given to the father, and he was instructed to say the following words with a vengeful desire (*nia*) to counteract the effects of the bewitchment: "It is not the chicken that I cut, but the *sihiri* wherever it is; what happens to this chicken is what will happen to the person who did the wicked *sihiri* to me."¹⁹ So it is believed that doing such a ritual as counter-cursing will send back the negative effects that were originally intended for the victim to the sorcerer who performed that *sihiri*.

Muhammad emphasizes that jinn are always involved throughout the course of practicing *sihiri*. In the case of his father, the amulet buried in front of his father's house lured a malicious jinni, and the jinni did a favor for the perpetrator. Then, the counter-witchcraft defeated and sent the jinni back to the sender, and at this overturn the jinni blamed the sender for his almost being "killed" by the counteraction. Muhammad says that the jinni could have killed the sender.²⁰ As illustrated in this story, all my informants affirm that all the effects of *sihiri* are the work of malevolent jinn. This is the view generally held not

19. Muhammad's words are as follows: "*Mimi sikati kuku, nakata ule uchwi au sihiri po pote ilipo, nayo yote atakayokuja kunifanyia mimi ubaya basi katika kama huyu kuku.*"

20. Muhammad also says that people often "own" or keep some jinn as their "pets" and use them to harm others. See also Kim (2004:110–111).

only by devout Muslims but also by ordinary folks as well as *waganga* (traditional healers) in Zanzibar.

2. *Sihiri* and the African-Traditional Concept of *Wachawi* (“Witches”)

Although Zanzibaris generally maintain a basic Islamic postulate about *sihiri*, copious pre-Islamic African elements are still detected as one looks deeply into the Zanzibari belief in *sihiri*. So it is not surprising to see that most of the beliefs about *sihiri* among Zanzibaris are not much different from the beliefs about *uchawi* (“witchcraft”) in other parts of East Africa.²¹ The only difference seems to be the Islamic postulate that evil jinn are the authors of all kinds of *sihiri* activities. This Islamic position on *sihiri* could have been added to the traditional understandings of *uchawi* that already existed.

While holding the Islamic view of *sihiri*, Zanzibaris actually conceptualize it in a broader sense than the Islamic traditions usually teach. Much of the concept of *sihiri* still reflects the African-traditional notion of *uchawi*. Although Zanzibaris usually use both the words *uchawi* and *sihiri* interchangeably, there are slightly different linguistic nuances between the two, as I have indicated earlier (see note 2). The word *uchawi* seems to carry a more African-traditional tone than the word *sihiri*, the source of

21. For more information on “witchcraft” in East Africa, see John Middleton (1992), Norman Miller (2012), and Michael Kirwen (2005:203–238). Cf. Evans-Prichard (1935: 1937).

which is Islamic-Arabic. As derived from the Bantu lingual line, the word *uchawi* points to its African root,²² and it also distinguishes an African cultural outlook from the Islamic religious outfit. In the following sections, I will discuss two important cultural assumptions, which I believe have stemmed from African traditions related to the belief in *uchawi*.

(1) The Social Aspect of *Sihiri* and the Notion of
“Limited Good”

One of the distinctive features of *sihiri* is found in its social dimension. Although *sihiri* is always associated with jinn, its main player is indisputably people themselves. Simply put, *sihiri* always occurs as a social issue. It is social members who practice it; they do it because of their grievances with other members in society. Jinn are like brokers that go between people who lean on the jinn’s power to achieve their malicious goals. Although jinn are perceived to be the source of spiritual power, it is actually people who buy and use the power against one another. As we have seen in the case of the Swahili healer above, the main reason for such clandestine, malicious *sihiri* activity pertains to social problems between families in a polygamous society. The second family of Muhammad’s grandfather envied the first family, who had many children and cows, and eventually the envious family performed *sihiri* to harm Muhammad’s father, who was

22. There are also Swahili verbs for “bewitching,” such as *-loga*, *-anga*, and *-pagaza*. These are used in different contexts, but they all refer to the action of *uchawi*.

part of the first family, because of their uncontrolled jealousy and hatred.

Such a story of bewitchment as told by Muhammad is actually very common in East Africa. One of the main reasons for bewitchment is the cultural belief that natural resources are limited. Anthropologists label such a cultural notion as “limited good” (Foster 1973:35–36 Bowie 2000:220; cf. Brain 1981:12). Members of a society assume that their good is severely limited and static: “one person’s gain with respect to any good must be another’s loss” (Foster 1973:35). This collective sentiment has been widespread, particularly among peasants in East Africa, and it often causes or aggravates social tension. Perceiving “their socioeconomic and natural environments to constitute a closed system” (Foster 1973:35), peasants hardly expect any of their family members, relatives, or neighbors to suddenly gain exceptional wealth or high social position.

In this social milieu, a certain type of social pressure is introduced to function as a cultural regulator that controls people to retain the existing egalitarian status quo.²³ So it is quite common to see various types of “witchcraft” operate as a social controller for this purpose in different sedentary societies. This

23. Witchcraft is not a cultural phenomenon observed only in Africa; it is also found among villagers in the West. However, witchcraft is hardly practiced in societies that are not sedentary, where people believe the sources of good to be open or unlimited. Some African societies such as Bushmen and Pygmies do not practice witchcraft because of their mobility as hunters or food-gatherers (see Bowie 2000:232–235, 251; Brain 1981:13–16). Witchcraft is also rare in highly urbanized societies, where the family structure has moved from an extended family system to a nuclear one. In such societies, alternative methods of social press are observed, such as ostracism in place of witchcraft.

is precisely what happens among peasant Muslims in Zanzibar. According to my informants, people are tempted to practice *sihiri* because they wish to thwart others' success (*kuzuia fanyiko ya wengine*) (Kim 2012:254). Members of society would not feel psychologically stable unless they see all members maintain, or stay as close as possible to, the average level in almost every aspect of their cultural life. Any level of life higher than the average lifestyle will alarm others and provoke jealousy.

(2) Two Categories of *Wachawi* in Zanzibar

Another important characteristic of *sihiri* has to do with the African concept of a group of odd people classified as *wachawi* (usually translated as “witches,” plural of *mchawi*). As in many East African societies (mostly peasantry), Zanzibaris also believe in the existence of *wachawi*. When ordinary Zanzibaris undergo severe life challenges either collectively as a community or individually, they tend to hold the *wachawi* responsible for their misfortunes. A close examination of their conceptualization of *wachawi* will also help to better understand the kind of psychocultural world in which Zanzibari Muslims live.

However, we should be careful not to confuse the official Islamic idea of witches with popular beliefs about the same, as already discussed above. The official Islamic teachings strictly condemn anyone who contacts jinn for their private gains as a witch. So it is not just sorcerers but also witchdoctors that are supposed to be denounced. But, in practice, ordinary folks in Zanzibar do not treat traditional practitioners (*waganga*) as

a sorcerer or witch in accordance with the Islamic teachings, even though they have the suspicion that *waganga* can become witches owing to their ability (*uwezo*) to contact jinn and manipulate their power. Notwithstanding somewhat uncertain distrust and Islamic warnings, the general perception among Zanzibaris is that *waganga* are spiritual healers who can fight for them against *sihiri*, and are thus often revered by ordinary folks.²⁴ Even intellectuals like Ali are quite reluctant to censure the practice of *uganga* with jinn power.

However, the tone changes drastically when Zanzibaris begin talking about *wachawi* in its full sense from their popular viewpoint. Here again, we need to be careful not to be perplexed by the local usage of the word *wachawi*. Swahili speakers in Zanzibar use the word to refer indiscriminately to two different categories. So outsiders often get lost in conversations unless they pay attention to the context in which the word is used. The first type of *wachawi* to which the word refers is those who practice *sihiri* on someone's request. These practitioners are sorcerers who are repugnant to the whole society but can be known at least to those who request *sihiri* against their enemies.²⁵ Certainly it is taboo and even dangerous to expose their identity to others.

24. Despite Islam's official strict warning against the practice of contacting jinn, the Swahili *uganga* (spiritual healing practice) is flourishing in Zanzibar. This is also very true of the coastal towns of Tanzania, such as Dar es Salaam and Bagamoyo.

25. The person that requests *sihiri* is called *mteja* (client), and the sorcerer is nicknamed *fundi*, meaning skillful expert, due to his or her knowledge and ability to manipulate jinn to harm the client's enemies. It is commonly admitted that any traditional doctor (*mganga*) can become a sorcerer.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that this sorcerer-type of *wachawi* can be identifiable in spite of their clandestine practice, thus less mystical, as illustrated in the case of the Islamic prophet's experience of *sihr*. Apparently, there exist sorcerers in Zanzibar who provide their services for evil purposes.

At the same time, Zanzibaris use the same word *wachawi* to denote another class of odd people, who are believed to possess a mystical power and whom ordinary people cannot identify.²⁶ They are believed to do innumerable numinous things for the purpose of evil in society. These *wachawi* in the second category are equivalent to the "witches" as popularly understood in English. It is apparent that Zanzibaris differentiate this witch-type from the sorcerer-type categorically, although they believe that any *mchawi* can be both. As generally assumed in East Africa, the *wachawi* of the witch-type are wicked people who possess evil qualities inherently in themselves. Unlike sorcerers who may perform *sihiri* on their customer's request, these *wachawi* always do evil and exert immoral influences upon society. Whereas the sorcerer-*mchawi* "uses material objects in a magic way to harm his or her victims" (Middleton 1992: 181), the witch-*mchawi* can harm others with his or her own innate evil power. This second type of *mchawi* is also called *mwanga* among Swahili speakers, and he or she is the embodiment of all evil, as unpredictable, vicious, cruel, ferocious, violent, and atrocious as

26. These *wachawi* may be identified only when an extremely powerful *mganga* (witchdoctor) performs divination. Their curse or bewitchment can be thwarted or counteracted only through a proper performance of *uganga* (healing) by a powerful *mganga*.

mashetani (devils).²⁷ In general, mystical abilities and immoral behaviors are attributed to the *wachawi*, such as the ability to come out of their body and travel in dreams, run naked at night, eat human corpses, drink human blood, cause disharmony between family members, and so forth. This kind of understanding of *wachawis* commonly shared by both Zanzibari Swahilis and non-Swahili Africans in East Africa.²⁸

(3) The Zanzibari Concept of the Witch-*Wachawi*

One of my informants, Hasan Suleiman, told me a very interesting story, which demonstrates what Zanzibaris believe about the *wachawi* of the second category.²⁹ One day, an *mganga* (traditional healer or witchdoctor) was invited from the mainland Tanzania to stay in Hasan's village (Makunduchi) to provide healing services (*uganga*) for local people. But he was soon attacked by local *wachawi* with their power of *sihiri/uchawi*, which made him unable to sleep at night or eat properly. Having not been able to resist and overcome the spiritual attack that made his life unbearable, he eventually had to leave the village. Hasan and my other informants (Ali and his friend Yusuf) say that the *mganga* was forced to move out and go back (*ame-*

27. Middleton differentiates between *mchawi* and *mwanga* the former refers to the sorcerer while the latter to the witch. However, as he also admitted (1992:181), this distinction is quite equivocal. They casually used the word *mchawi* throughout our conversations, referring to both witch and sorcerer.

28. For more information of East African understandings of witches, see note 21.

29. Hasan is an elderly person at age 83. He is from a village called Makunduchi located in southeastern Zanzibar. The interview was carried out in front of his house in Makunduchi on 23 August 2012.

hamishwa and *ametroshewa*, both being the passive tense with the indication of withdrawal by force). The informants ascribe the cause of his withdrawal to a group of people whom they call “big people” in the vicinity of Makunduchi.

These big people are *wachawi wakubwa* (great witches) according to my informants. However, they prefer to use a roundabout way to address them. Using metaphors, they call them *masheha*, *magwenge*, and *wigi*, all of which signify powerful *wachawi*. It is also interesting to observe their bodily motions when they address them and mention things that the “big people” do. They lower their voice warily and even show reverence for them. These behaviors indicate my informants’ belief that the *wachawi* can hear them with their supernatural power.³⁰ However, they are neither identifiable nor accessible. My informants say that they have never seen or met any of the *wachawi*; they certainly do not even wish to encounter them. Although they have never seen any of them, Zanzibaris “know” their existence. My informants say that these powerful witches are the primary cause of plagues and calamities in their community (Makunduchi in particular). They are believed to be able to even stop rain, which is the major lifeline for the whole community. The *wachawi* are such a great threat to the whole society that the community annually performs a ritual called *shomoo*,

30. This reminds me of my interview with Bi Mariam Fadhil in 1998, who had been the leader of *Mwaka Kogwa* (cf. note 31). She also lowered her voice and almost whispered to me and my assistant because she was afraid that the spirits that she served might hear our conversation.

which is intended to cleanse *sihiri* and remove all evil from the land.³¹

It is also commonly believed among Zanzibari folks that there is a center for *sihiri*. They believe that these “big people” or *wachawi* have their own guild, which is a supernatural secret society, called *Giningi*. *Giningi* is the headquarters of *wachawi*, as Said Mohamed, a Swahili author, indicates in his drama (1990:1–3). Omar Khamisi, another informant of mine, says that there are different locations, such as Bumbwini in Zanzibar and Cham-bani in Pemba, in which *Giningi* is found.³² This secret society of *wachawi* is believed to have its own government and constitutions that are hidden from the access of ordinary people. Hasan says that the “big people” in his region live in Kizimkasi, which is located in southern Zanzibar near Makunduchi. However, the *Giningi* should be understood to be a mythical place rather than a terrestrial location. Mohamed states in the introduction to his drama, “*Giningi* is located inside the heads (minds) of people of Zanzibar and Pemba” (1990:1).³³ It is a secret place which ordinary people cannot enter; it is only accessible to the members of the witch guild. It is a place that is feared and spoken about quietly and privately by peoples on the Swahili coast as well as

31. *Mwaka Kogwa* is the community cleansing ceremony conducted by the spiritual leaders of the Makunduchi community at the beginning of every year (according to their calendar). For a more detailed discussion on this, see Kim (2004:62, 117–119) and Echtler (2006:131–160).

32. Omar Khamisi is assistant director of the Zanzibari Archives. I called him on the phone on 10 October 2012 to verify the information that I obtained about *Giningi*, and he kindly confirmed it for me. See also Mohamed (1990:1).

33. The original words are: *Giningi imo ndani ya vichwa vya watu wa Unguja na Pemba*.

Zanzibaris (including Swahilis on Pemba Island). This also shows well how the image of *sihiri* lingers in the minds of Zanzibaris and what kind of world they actually live in as Muslims.

(4) A Comparison between the Zanzibari and the Non-Muslim East African Concepts of *Wachawi*

Although the popular representation of *wachawi* is shared among East Africans regardless of their religious affiliations, Zanzibaris apparently hold a view that is fundamentally different from other East Africans' understanding of *wachawi*. It is the Islamic influence that has contributed to their different conceptualization of *wachawi*. What then is the key element that differentiates the Zanzibari belief about *wachawi* from the non-Muslim idea about them in East Africa? It is the different understanding of the source of the innate power that *wachawi* possess, as I have already indicated when I was discussing the Islamic substratum of the belief in *sihiri*.

Both non-Muslim East Africans and Zanzibari Muslims believe that the supernatural power to harm others resides within the evil person (*mchawi*). It is traditionally believed in East Africa that the *mchawi* may be born with evil power or that a person can acquire the power of *uchawi* (witchcraft) by becoming callously evil.³⁴ In either case, the mystical power to harm is believed to

34. There are various folk theories about how one becomes a witch, but it seems that in general people believe that anyone can become a witch. This issue would be another huge topic to discuss in length, so I will defer it to a later time. For various views even among East Africans, see Kirwen (2005:204–214).

be inherently part of the person's nature.³⁵ However, people who believe in this are not sure of the source of the destructive power in the *mchawi*. It is often ascribed indefinitely to a mystery. There are many different opinions, which hardly contribute to a unified theory.³⁶ As Muslims, however, Zanzibaris believe that all *wachawi* attain their malignant power from *mashetani*, that is, evil jinn. A person may be born as a *mchawi*, but the source of his or her evil power still comes from *mashetani*. It must be the evil jinn that keep providing immoral and destructive forces for the evil people. Thus, the jinn world and the world of *sihiri* are very closely associated in the Zanzibari mind. They are not thought of separately in the Zanzibari Muslim worldview.

IV. *SIHIRI* AS A SOCIAL QUANDARY

Above, I have juxtaposed the official Islamic perspective of *sihr* with some of the Zanzibari beliefs and practices of *sihiri* to show the religio-cultural gaps between Islamic principles and Muslim life in Zanzibar. Thus far I noted that Islam soberly requires all Muslims to treat *sihr* (or *sihiri* in Swahili context) as a *ḥarām*, which is a sinful action and is thus prohibited in any

35. Even those who become *wachawi* by doing evil mercilessly are believed to attain this kind of inherent evil nature.

36. Even some non-Muslim East Africans believe that *wachawi* receive the supernatural power from spiritual beings, such as ancestors and nature spirits. However, a common view is that the source of power is unknown, often ascribed to evil itself.

Muslim community.³⁷ I also noted that official Islam does provide religious guidelines for fighting the *sihr*. Here, I will discuss the Quranic teaching that Muslims should cope with sufferings instead of blaming others for their misfortunes and why this teaching is not upheld among the Zanzibari.

According to the Qur'an, there seem to be three major causal agents for human afflictions: devils (38:41), people themselves (that is, their disbelief; 4:79), and Allah (2:155–156). By examining the Quranic verses that mention sufferings, one can apprehend that many of them are related to disbelief in the core of the Islamic theology, *tawhid* (oneness of God), and the defiance of the Muhammad's prophethood. People may suffer from disbelief or because of Allah's test for sincere belief. Allah may even allow faithful Muslims to suffer, but he knows everything that happens to believers (64:11).

This notion of Allah's absolute control with omniscience and omnipotence is the theological basis for Muslim endurance and the reason for trusting solely in Allah, hence total submission to him and his messenger (64:12). Muslims should know that Allah does not allow believers to bear burdens that they cannot carry (2:286; 6:152; 7:42; 23:62). So, as mentioned, sufferings are viewed as a divine test in official Islam the endurance of adversities will bring a great reward to sincere Muslims (2:155–156). Misfortunes should be interpreted and explained in light of this

37. The Arabic word *harām* should not be confused with *harām*, which refers to either a sacred place or a women's apartment (cf. Hughes 1994:163).

Islamic teaching. Therefore, Muslims should not be tempted by recourse to pagan means to overcome problems such as *sihiri*. If one looks for pre- or non-Islamic methods to deal with *sihiri*, this is a sin of *shirk* and deserves severe punishment by Allah.³⁸

Despite this stern warning in Islam, Zanzibari society perpetuates all kinds of beliefs in *sihiri*. It seems almost impossible to remove these beliefs from the minds of Zanzibari Muslims. Why are they so unable to do so despite their Muslim identity? There are numerous ways to answer this question from diverse theoretical perspectives, but I would like to propose an explanation from an anthropological viewpoint.

As inferred from the descriptions above, *sihiri* is like a cultural mirror that reflects how Zanzibari Muslims interpret misfortunes. Frequently, ordinary folks find it too difficult to cope with all sorts of plights in a strictly Islamic way. The religious requirements often sound too idealistic for them to fulfill; consequently, they seek remedies from non-Islamic sources despite stern Islamic disapproval of them. When life challenges appear uncontrollable beyond human capacity and unanswered by their official religion, people may very well go back to their original traditions to look for immediate solutions to their problems. Thus Zanzibaris tend to return to African traditional religions to deal with various issues of *sihiri*. However, it seems that Zan-

38. Since Zanzibaris are Muslims, explaining their view of causality only with an "interpersonal causal ontology" (to borrow Shweder's terminology, 2003:77) does not seem adequate in understanding the Zanzibari conceptualization of sufferings. It is more complicated than the interpersonal causality due to the complex mixture of Islamic ideas with the pre-Islamic African worldview.

zibaris do not find good answers from their pre-Islamic sources. The African tradition offers a religio-cultural paradigm that actually complicates the socio-cultural life of Zanzibaris. This paradigm may be called the paradigm of *sihiri*, and four traditional quandaries compose this paradigm: the belief in *sihiri*, the fear of the power of *sihiri*, the dread of alleged *wachawi*, and the trepidation of witchcraft accusation. This intricate religio-cultural paradigm seems to perpetuate the dread of *sihiri* rather than help commoners to overcome it. Life becomes more uncanny and unpredictable; it is increasingly like an atrocious spiritual battlefield.

Along with the cultural knowledge of *sihiri*, the fear of it is also transmitted to future generations through the process of enculturation, in which Zanzibari adults inculcate their children with their traditional beliefs and fears.³⁹ Thus, both the knowledge and fear of *sihiri* become an indelible cultural belief, and they are perpetual in spite of Islamic influences. In addition to this, the common suspicion of dreadful *wachawi* in their neighborhood increases the psychology of social fear and provides a good excuse for the boom of divination. The divination, in turn, often leads the society to practicing the so-called witch-hunting.

Witchcraft accusation is another social problem, which seems even more serious than the *sihiri* itself because it entails a com-

39. "Enculturation" is an anthropological term used to refer to the cultural process by which a social member learns his or her culture during childhood (normally from the time of birth till the entrance of puberty). Cf. William Haviland (1993:117-119).

plicated moral issue. This topic is so important as to deserve another lengthy discussion. While deferring the discussion to a later time due to the space limitation in this paper, I can at least share a glimpse from my recent fieldwork that witchcraft accusation appears much less prevalent in Zanzibar than in the mainland. It is probably because the whole community of Zanzibar Island is too small and crowded to lynch alleged witches in a clandestine way as is usually done in the mainland. It is also noteworthy that witchcraft was strictly prohibited during the regime of the first President of Zanzibar, Mr. Karume.⁴⁰ Based on Middleton's observation that beliefs in witches and sorcerers seem stronger in rural areas than in Stone Town, where the belief in jinn power is stronger (1992:182), we may well infer that witchcraft accusation could be more active in the countryside than Stone Town.

In sum, *sihiri* is a complicated cultural paradigm in Zanzibar. Islam condemns all practices relating to *sihiri*, but its cultural power seems invincible, and this paradigm becomes a social impasse. Khamisi, another Zanzibari informant of mine, laments

40. One file at Zanzibar Archives (*afisi ya makamo wa kwanza wa rais*) with the file number P4/1/28, shows some court cases from May 1969 to May 1970. There are 40 cases reported in the file, and the charges were as follows: (1) 3 people charged for raising leopard [for a witchcraft purpose] and sentenced to prison each for 10 years, (2) 1 person charged for killing his wife via witchcraft and sentenced to prison for 5 years, (3) 1 person charged for killing his uncle via witchcraft and sentenced to prison for 3 years, (4) 29 people charged for endangering others with witchcraft and sentenced to prison for 1 month up to 4 years, (5) 2 people charged for possessing witchcraft medicines and sentenced to prison for 1 year, (6) 1 person charged for simply practicing witchcraft and sentenced to prison for 1.5 years, and (7) 3 people charged for making themselves a witch and sentenced to prison for 1 to 2 years.

that people follow the old way because they lack true faith in Allah and his messenger. Apparently, an uncomfortable tension exists between Islamic idealism and a pragmatic realism regarding *sihiri*. Official Islam does not seem to sufficiently provide efficacious antidotes that can help the powerless to defeat this cultural nuisance in everyday life. Rather, an uncomfortable religious guilt irks ordinary Zanzibaris as they keep both old and new ideas arbitrarily. Having come originally from African-Bantu traditions, as has been affirmed by a number of researchers (cf. Middleton 1992 Allen 1993 Kim 2004), Zanzibaris will continue to struggle with this religio-cultural dilemma, despite their Muslim identity, unless there comes an innovative idea to revolutionize the syncretistic paradigm of *sihiri*.

V. CONCLUSION

All cultures and religions reflect the complex nature of the human mind. There is not a single culture that is simpler than the others. Thus, it normally requires a huge amount of effort to understand someone else's culture and religion. This is so true, especially when a non-Muslim researcher looks into a Muslim community whose religion is a long-held amalgamation of a number of religio-cultural elements. The Swahili Muslim society in Zanzibar should be the case in point. Among many cultural features in Zanzibar, the belief in *sihiri* and related practices certainly compose a peculiar cultural domain that

could easily perplex outsiders. They also actually formulate a very strong religio-cultural paradigm in terms of which Zanzibaris understand their world and interpret all occurrences in it. This cultural paradigm, however, poses many complex problems and questions, which may well entice more anthropologists and Islamicists into a serious investigation of this particular cultural domain. This being said, there seems to be a missional mandate assigned especially for Christians who desire to build a meaningful relationship with Zanzibaris; it is to seek a deep understanding of them, with a sympathetic attitude towards common human predicaments, rather than a superficial knowledge of their culture and religion. Furthermore, an incarnational approach to Zanzibaris who undergo various problems related to *sihiri* will also lessen cultural biases and balance Christian passion and intellect. In this way, Christian faith will also be presented and listened to with much less misunderstandings on the Muslim side as well.

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