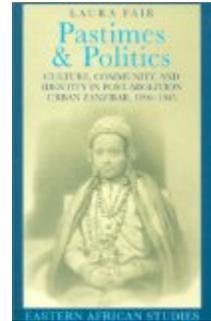


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Laura Fair. *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-Abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890-1945*. Oxford: James Currey, 2001. xvi + 370 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-0-85255-795-2; (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85255-796-9.

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## Cultural History Achieves Center Stage for Zanzibar

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The year was 1928. Zanzibar's most famous songstress, Siti binti Saad, and her band of lute-players, drummers, and fiddlers were on their way to Bombay to make their first recording on gramophone disc. Already, she had risen from the lower ranks of society and transformed nineteenth-century *taarab* praise music, once the exclusive cultural property of the island's aristocrats and of the Arabic language, into a very public, newsy, slyly oppositional commentary in Swahili. Between the wars, her songs and performances—mostly for ordinary people but also before elites—helped in the creation of a new Zanzibari identity.

Binti Saad makes her debut in the very first paragraph of Laura Fair's uncommon, well-wrought book. If this was a strategic decision about how to engage the reader immediately in the "pastimes and politics" of urban Zanzibar, it works. It is also an auspicious occasion for a singer to lead an African history monograph. But it is far more significant because Fair can use the singer to define her title—to establish cultural performance and its politics as her main interest. Fair goes on to explain, "pastimes and politics were not discrete categories of experience in the lives of Siti's contemporaries; they were intimately connected" (p. 9). Indeed, her main goal "is to integrate 'traditional' historical accounts of changes in social status, economic patterns, and colonial politics with a less traditional examination of changes in dance, music, fashion and sport" (p. 9).

This work covers the period from the 1890s to the end of the Second World War, making it mostly about the twentieth century. The social processes it covers, termed "manifold changes" by Fair, constitute the emergence of a post-slavery and immigrant-rich Zanzibar society. Much of the narrative and analysis is centered within an increasingly populous, urbanized Zanzibar, particularly in Ng'ambo, a working class sector boasting over 20,000 dwellers by the early 1930s.

Although Fair tells us of the larger political evolution of Zanzibar, her main story derives from the fluidity of identity—of collective definition and individual definition—among its people. She pursues a wide range of identity issues, including the significance of the old classification of *mwungwana* (freeborn, Muslim, well-bred) and *mshenzi* (non-Muslim, rural or slave); the 1910-1920s desire to be seen as Swahili; and the shift in the mid-1920s to ethnic identifications. In the 1930s, another identity maneuver occurred as "Shirazi" identity grew in popularity, and spread rapidly into the 1940s. It is this mutability of identifications that provides Fair with a fascinating field in which to work. Also, it gives her a compelling backdrop against which to analyze particular cultural moments.

Four sizable chapters cover the playing out of the identity theme. They arrive none too soon, because the introductory chapter, sixty-three pages in length, threatens to divulge the riches of the later chapters.

In chapter 2, "Dressing Up: Clothing, Class, and Gen-

der in Post-Abolition Zanzibar,” Fair traces the performance aspects of dress, demonstrating that Zanzibari men and women altered their clothing differently to project personal and class aspirations. For example, some men (specifically young men) took to wearing Western caps, jackets, pants, and shoes, creating a dandyish effect, and coming close to their colonial overlords’ dress, while “Swahili” women left behind the somber kaniki associated with country folk for the vivid, more stylish, printed kanga. Soon, dressing-up earned Zanzibar a foreign observer’s sobriquet of “the Paris of the Indian ocean.” Typical of the point-counterpoint cultural politics of the coast, mainlanders quickly demurred by deriding Zanzibari vanity.

Chapter 3 examines agitation against the land-rents system instituted by the colonial administration, an agitation that broke out into the 1928 strike. For readers wanting a clearer cultural analysis, as in the dressing-up chapter, the ground-rent controversy and popular uprising might seem too dense and conventional. But Fair is adept in identifying the strike’s cultural matrices, as when she pinpoints the input of Ramadan observances in fomenting grievances (pp. 151-153) and women’s roles as organizers.

Following her biography (and the mini-biographies for band members), Binti Saad re-appears in chapter 4 in an exploration of her music and its role in negotiating power through her use of the *taarab*. Fair claims Binti Saad and her band “used their skills as performers to give poetic form to the often trenchant critiques of economic and political power that circulated in Ng’ambo during the period between the two world wars” (p. 167). She also argues that the songs often proposed “alternative ways to structure personal and social relations.”

In this chapter, Fair carefully examines twelve songs. (A Swahili version is given, a publisher’s gift to language connoisseurs.) She discusses first their context. Fair describes Binti Saad’s nimble cultural tactics in promoting herself: she gained acceptance by the island’s elite through singing in Arabic and adhering to the time-honored *taarab* formula, while expanding her versifying in the equally demanding Swahili mode of composition. Through the songs, Binti Saad was a formidable critic of unjust power. For example, in “Kigalawa” (named after a fisherman’s dugout canoe), which was performed before the sultan, she quietly rebuked him for his mean treatment of her band in the past. In “There is No Loss,” she mocked a wealthy Arab, whose corruption as colonial official caused his downfall. In “The Police Have

Stopped,” she took on the judicial decision that had allowed a wealthy businessman to go free after murdering his wife. Other songs are also striking for their protest against the mistreatment of women from a range of statuses, from spouses to lovers.

Closing the book is a chapter on the rise of football as a sport, extending gender analysis to the issue of masculinity. From the time the *Official Gazette* in 1920 said “the enthusiasm for football among the natives shows no sign of diminishing,” the sport has become a multi-purpose institution catering to the desire for males to congregate; a place for collecting gossip; a venue for ethnic, intra-Swahili, and racial rivalries; and an incubation chamber for nationalism.

One of the most interesting aspects of Fair’s book is the way it is located firmly within coastal-studies historiography, while surpassing it at the same time. One can see the clear imprint of work by scholars such as Fred Cooper, Jonathan Glassman, Margaret Strobel, Sarah Mizra, and Abdul Sheriff. Still, this book goes deeper than previous studies in providing a rich factual account of a variety of coastal cultural phenomena. Glassman’s work is closest to Fair’s in subject, but the latter abstains from too much theory—she inserts bits of theoretical insight only as needed to advance her argument. (She also makes use of insights from African-American studies on women singers, and the ideas of black women of the 1920s on sexuality. In her chapter on football, she builds upon C. L. R. James’s 1963 classic, *Beyond the Boundary*, an investigation of cricket’s role in spawning nationalism in the colonial Caribbean. All of this is salutary.) The localisms, specifically the micro-ideologies of Zanzibar everyday life, are always the main focus of inquiry.

Still, Fair’s analysis could have done with a lighter or subtler touch at times. Going back to Binti Saad, one wishes for a succinct profile of her total repertoire. Were all her songs social and political critiques, with a strong populist slant? Fair notes that her songs were “the lived physical reality of average women and men, rather than the saccharine sweet romantic idealism” (p. 211) of post-World War II *taarab* songs. If this was the case, did Binti Saad have rivals that took up romantic themes? What were their themes? In addition, one wonders if Fair’s reading of Binti Saad’s songs is too present-minded. Even back in the 1920s, she seems to have had nearly perfect pitch for today’s gender advocacy.

On balance, this is an impressive book. Fair succeeds in marrying political and economic history with cultural narrative and analysis. For this reason, the book has

much to tell us about how this type of study is done. As the grip of social history and political economy on African history is loosening, Fair's book will serve as a model to the way forward. More important, her work has a lot to tell us about Zanzibar's complex grid of social and cultural interactions. Nowhere is there a better depiction of a coastal cultural and identity system in ceaseless mutation.

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