A town on a small island in the Indian Ocean once acquired a voracious appetite for English things. It was not a British colony, and it hosted neither an English Consulate nor a permanent English resident until the 1850s—fully two centuries after islanders began their relationship with the English. By consuming English goods, speaking English, and asserting an affiliation with Britain, the people of Mutsamudu town on Nzwani Island in the Mozambique Channel created an intimacy with a global power and parlayed their claims to a special, at times familial, relationship with Britain into economic and political support. Through various strategies of representation, Mutsamuduans claimed a moral proximity and similarity to the English that convinced Britons to view them differently, to imagine them as people in some way akin to themselves. For at least a century, Mutsamuduans were largely successful at using things that signified Englishness to direct imperial means to local ends.

This chapter seeks to reveal the efficacy of cross-cultural performances of similarity—a strategy of appeal that I call similitude—on the stage of global relation. It demonstrates how the strategic uses of imported symbols affected the producers of those symbols and ultimately their relation to Nzwanians. Nzwanians relied on similitude to affect relations with diverse foreigners, including Arab, French, and American visitors. But by exploring the extreme case of Nzwanian appropriations of Englishness, we can more clearly discern how the cultural appropria-
tion of symbols in even seemingly marginal locales has affected patterns of global interrelation.

STRATEGY AND GLOBALITY

One of the most important questions that analysts of global integration have addressed is how people who are too easily labeled the victims of global cultural homogenization conceptually transform imported materials, symbols, and ideas. Aviad Raz describes this analytical impulse as an attempt to augment scholarly focus on cultural imperialism with a consideration of the “reception” of global symbols. The entrance of such terms as domestication, hybridization, localization, and even the orthographically unwieldy globalization into vocabularies of analysis reveal the increasing attention given to reinterpretation in the global circulation of signs. Expanding on Michel de Certeau’s insight that the masses always renegotiate the meanings offered them, many analysts of reception have convincingly shown that meanings are rarely as transferable as their objects. The work of Aviad Raz, Mark Alfino and his colleagues, and Joseph Tobin, among others, suggests that even when such symbolically laden products as McDonald’s hamburgers or Hollywood movies circulate globally, their uses and social relevance can diverge dramatically among national, cultural, and gendered spaces. As James Watson has illustrated for McDonald’s in East Asia, things as simple as processed fast foods can easily lose both their associations with their place of origin as well as the cultural meanings given them in their home society. The strength of reception literature thus lies in its demonstration that symbols circulating beyond the boundaries of their places of origin are rarely simple copies. Instead, imported things are often socially and culturally reconstituted, and given compound local meanings and associations that are sometimes directly related to foreign meanings and sometimes quite distinct from them.

In its stress on the internal dynamics of cultural domestication, reception literature has yet to adequately address the possibility that cultural incorporations can be directed back at the source of their perceived fabrication and can even affect that perceived source, a phenomenon Michael Taussig referred to as the ability of the copy to influence that which it copies. While rationales for domestication are born of diverse, specific social circumstances, the effects of domestication need never be solely local. In championing the integrity of local interpretations, it is too easy to neglect the fact that incorporation is at times expressly desired to
develop a new kind of relation with the sources of such symbols. This chapter expands on reception literature by addressing the ways in which domestications of goods, etiquette, and ideas can work toward multiple, translocal, and reciprocal ends. Further, the Nzwani example points up an increasingly important topic in the analysis of global integration: the function of cultural domestication in fashioning global relations. In Nzwani we are confronted with a marginal, noncolonial polity that incorporated English symbols and, in turn, affected its relationship to an emerging superpower through a mastery of those symbols. By reflecting on the historical relation of Mutsamuduans to Englishness, we can perceive some of the ways in which (1) the simulation of sameness has worked on a global stage to accomplish specific ends and (2) how symbolic discourse has produced material dividends.

THE SIMILITUDE OF PRINCES

In early 1858, the British Political Resident at Aden, Yemen, received word of the arrival of an unexpected visitor, a man who would for almost a decade travel the world at the expense of the British Empire. The man’s name was Prince Abudin of Nzwani Island in the Comoros Archipelago. He claimed to be the son of the Sultan of Nzwani and was traveling to London in order to offer Nzwani to the British Government. As he had very little money, and arrived without slaves or retainers, the British agent offered to host him as an official guest of the British government. The agent spent a large sum to support Abudin during his stay and gave him transportation to Muscat, Oman, where the prince could find a vessel to return home. While he was in Muscat, the British agent there allocated additional monies for the prince’s expenses. Though he claimed to be heading home, the prince soon arrived in Bombay. There he was again put up at the British government’s expense. But he did not stay long. From Bombay, he traveled to Karachi, where the British administration gave him a stipend, even though he lived in the house of an exiled relative. After Karachi, near the end of 1859, the prince returned to Muscat. There he collected yet another official stipend and, according a government memo, “amused himself” by sending official telegraphs to various people in Karachi. After some time, he returned to Karachi, staying only briefly before arranging transport back to Muscat. Once there, Prince Abudin petitioned the administration to find him passage home. Instead of returning to the Comoros in 1859, Prince Abudin sailed from Muscat to Zanzibar. There he became well known and
respected by the European residents and claimed to be the King of Nzwani. As a result of the high regard in which Westerners in Zanzibar held the prince, the British consul offered him free passage back to Nzwani. In late 1860, Abudin was in Madras. In the interim, he had traveled to Réunion and then Mauritius, where he defrauded a friend of the British consul. In Madras he changed his name to Colonel Abudin and offered a formal cession of the Comoros Islands to the British government. By March he was in Sri Lanka, where he appealed to the British administration, claiming that all his resources were expended. The Colombo Government gave him money to settle his local debts and then paid for his passage to Aden.

In September of 1863, Prince Abudin, accompanied by his uncle Prince Muhammad (a.k.a. Mahmud Abdullah), finally made it to London. Prince Abudin (alias Colonel Abudin) was now Prince Abdullah. He and his uncle had found free transport to Paris via Madagascar and Cape Town. On their arrival in Paris, they were put up at the Grand Hotel and granted interviews with Lord Cowley, a senior agent of the British government. After a short time, they concluded their interviews and the government covered the bill. But the two princes were dissatisfied with their meetings and remained intent on traveling to London, presumably to offer Nzwani to the British government again. They applied to the Turkish ambassador in Paris for the sums necessary to continue to London and were soon on their way. Abdullah’s correspondence with Lord Palmerston of the Foreign Office while the two princes were in London makes it clear that the Nzwanians relied entirely on the assistance of the British government during their visit. The letters also reveal that the prince’s command of English was superb. The form, word-choice, and tone were typical of British official correspondence. These letters give insight into why British government agents around the world had been so accommodating of the prince: he used British social etiquette and a command of the written and spoken language to fashion an utterly convincing persona. Having failed to cede Nzwani to the British government, the two traveled from London to Cairo, where they offered Nzwani to the Egyptian government — again to no avail. Though Abdullah’s subsequent travels are obscure, Prince Muhammad arrived in Aden in late 1866. There he claimed to be the Nzwanian ambassador from Istanbul en route to Bombay to conclude a treaty of commerce. He reported that he had been robbed in Egypt and had lost all his possessions. As with Prince Abdullah eight years earlier, the consulate gave him free passage to Bombay.
Abdullah's story is remarkable, in no small part because of his success in winning the sympathies of so many British officials. But as fantastic as his story is, the prince's exploits are representative of a more common dexterity in self-presentation developed by Mutsamuduans to foster a variety of beneficial relationships with outsiders, and Britons in particular. The prince's actual name was Abdullah bin Alawi, son of a deposed sultan, and he had once represented his father as an ambassador to Mauritius.\textsuperscript{15} His multiple offers of Nzwani to the British were, no doubt, a ploy to unseat the reigning sultan. Prince Abdullah's successes, however, cannot be attributed to his royal birth, since none of the government representatives with whom he had contact knew anything of Nzwanian politics, much less that he was no longer a prince and had no authority to offer the island to the British. Instead, Abdullah's successes were attributable to his ability to replicate English etiquette and convince British administrators across the globe that he deserved certain privileges. Colonel Rigby, the British consul at Zanzibar, described Abdullah's success as the result of his mastery of three persuasive modes of self-representation: he spoke English "remarkably well," had a very "plausible" manner, and dressed in richly embroidered clothes.\textsuperscript{16} Consuls, agents, and individuals gave him money, accommodation, and transport simply because he was convincing, the validity of his claims evidenced in expensive clothing as well as "superior [social] attainments."\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, he never failed to present himself as a friend of the British Empire. By affecting a social image that reflected British etiquette back to Britons, Abdullah convinced myriad British agents that he was a political leader and ambassador. This gave him access to the submarine cable, stipends, free transportation across the Indian Ocean, the Eastern Atlantic, and the Mediterranean, and several months stay in Europe, part of that time in one of Paris' finest hotels. The prince, it seems, used his cultural dexterity to live an extraordinary life while pursuing his own political agenda.

Speaking English and appearing materially "plausible" was key to Mutsamuduan relationships with the English in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through a signification of Englishness, Nzwanians forged alliances, expanded the island's economy, and ensured their own political sovereignty. For most Mutsamuduans, things English, be they words or objects, were signs that reproduced for those who adopted them some of the qualities of what they signified: English "civility." By taking on the signs of an English elsewhere, Nzwanians like Abdullah reflected the perceived abilities of, and equated themselves with, the English. On Nzwani, English goods, in conjunction with nonmaterial signifiers, were
employed not only to affect local relationships (a topic that I address in chapters 2 and 4), but also to shape the way Britons perceived and related to Nzwanians. By superficially approximating Englishness, Nzwanians, rather than challenging the structure of imperial power, instead used the English for the economic, political, and military benefits they could offer.

By the time Prince Abdullah explored the British Empire, Nzwanians had long circulated in British circles. Though there seemed to be no institutional memory of them in Britain, Nzwanian diplomatic missions to London preceded Abdullah by almost two centuries. Further, Mutsamuduans had long used the codes and language of empire for their own ends. Mutsamudu became part of the English realm as neither a colony nor protectorate but as a sovereign state that aggressively appealed to the sensibilities of Britons. While Prince Abdullah was particularly dexterous, his successes exemplify the long-practiced Nzwanian strategy of similitude: a conscious self-presentation in interpersonal and political relationships that stresses likeness. As strategic replication, similitude bears a close resemblance to Homi Bhabha’s notion of colonial *mimesis*. But whereas Bhabha outlines mimicry as a strategy of replication that confronts and disrupts the authority of colonial symbolic discourse, similitude is a more general strategic *appeal* in the space of global interrelation that, through a claim to sameness, seeks to affect the perceptions and policies of more powerful agents. Moreover, similitude need not be subversive, confrontational, or limited to the colonial environment. Similitude is more commonly employed in circumstances of asymmetrical power beyond the boundaries of colonialism, often as an attempt to manipulate imperial representatives without necessarily challenging broad hierarchies of global relation. The cases of Hawaiian, Siamese, and Malagasy official relationships with Euro-American powers in the nineteenth century, to say nothing of Cold War and post–Cold War international relations, offer examples that resemble the Nzwanian strategies I describe below. As a mode of self-representation, similitude links symbols and claims to sameness in order to leverage relationships with the more powerful. Thus, similitude, like mimicry, is a strategy of the political margins.

**Articulations of Globality**

One might not immediately imagine a small island in the Mozambique Channel, roughly equidistant from the East African mainland and
Madagascar, as a cosmopolitan locus of cultural and economic interchanges stitching together Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. But the fact that a man like Prince Abdullah, with little formal education and few resources, could have such a strong command of the English language, be so well versed in the politics of the British Empire, and have such a nuanced understanding of the imperial administrative system of which he was not a subject suggests that Nzwanians were not isolated. Many European travel accounts relate that in the town of Mutsamudu a “curious” experiment in Anglo-global integration commenced in the seventeenth century. Actually, Nzwani’s particular cultural bricolage had even greater historical precedent.

Centuries before and for centuries after the first English vessel visited the island, Nzwanians were well integrated into the Indian Ocean’s economic and cultural flows. Almost everything on the island had traceable provenance outside of it: the African, American, and Asian crops cultivated, the language spoken (Shinzwani—closely related to Swahili, with heavy borrowings from Arabic, Malagasy, Gujarati, and Persian, as well as Makua, Yao, and other East African languages), and the ancestors of Nzwanians themselves, who arrived from places as distant as Southeast Asia, southern Arabia, and Central Africa. They used Indian, Mediterranean, and American currencies. They were Muslims living at the southern reaches of the dar al-Islam, well integrated into networks of Islamic scholarship, and many performed the hajj. In addition to Shinzwani, many islanders spoke Arabic, Malagasy, Swahili, and multiple East African languages. They imported clothing and other consumer goods from Madagascar, India, and the Persian Gulf. When English visitors began describing Nzwanian globality, they noted that islanders regularly traveled to Madagascar, the East African coast, and India. Nzwani’s position between markets in northwestern Madagascar and the East African coast meant that merchants not only transshipped goods, but they also created small emporiums where goods might be perused by visiting western Indian, southern Arabian, Persian Gulf, or East African merchants. Nzwanians depended on the sea, and they wrote their cultural relation to oceanic exchange into the local material environment. J. Ross Browne described a mosque in Mutsamudu whose walls were painted with naval charts. “[F]rom all I could gather from Selim [his guide],” Browne wrote, these, “show the latitude and longitude of the seven heavens, the true bearings of the infernal regions, the rocks, shoals, and sand-bars to be avoided by a soul bound heavenward.” Many Mutsamuduans even added an evocative feature to the outside of their homes that referenced
their oceanic connections: on the upper stories of their houses Nzwanians affixed the bows and sterns of ships. Houses themselves could thus simulate sailing vessels. Added to this translocal sensibility was the Atlantic trade, which would become particularly important in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the middle of the nineteenth century, fifty to sixty European or American vessels visited Mutsamudu each year.

In the seventeenth century, Nzwanans developed a new set of global relations when it became an important refreshing station for European vessels plying the route between India and Western Europe. The political elites of Nzwanans, as well as local farmers and traders, appreciated the commercial possibilities inherent in the regular arrival of large merchant vessels searching for provisions. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Nzwanans had begun to exploit its position as a way-station between Europe and India, finding an increasingly large market for local products, particularly meat, fruits, vegetables, and grains. Nzwanians had long exported rice as far north as Pate (Kenya), coconut oil to the southern Arabian coast, and they regularly traded with Lusophone merchants based on Mozambique Island. But in the European traffic, Nzwanians found an immediate market for local produce that incurred virtually no transportation expense. Eager to maintain these economic ties, Nzwanians forged a particularly strong relationship with English visitors in the early eighteenth century. Capt. H. Cornwall wrote in 1720 that Nzwanians, “affect[ed] the English very much, to whom they shew [sic] an Abundance of awkward Civilities.” For nearly two hundred years, Nzwanian-English relationships would hinge on two factors: convenience and similitude. For English captains, the island offered an ideal locale to refresh and collect provisions for their onward journeys. For Nzwanians, the regularity of English visits was a boon to the local economy, giving people across the island, and wealthy landowners in particular, the opportunity to exchange produce for cash and sometimes even directly for goods, though this was increasingly less common by the early nineteenth century. The second factor, similitude, proved to be a lucrative tool for Nzwanians in expanding and solidifying narrow English interests in the island.

In the late eighteenth century, when an English vessel arrived in Mutsamudu, it was greeted by Prince George, Lord Baltimore, Admiral Blankett, Lord Rodney, the Duke of Rottenberry, Lord Gloucester, and many other recognizable British personalities. And yet the famous personalities hardly looked like their namesake dukes and lords. English vis-
itors described them as wearing turbans, long robes, and short jackets with gold or silver trim. One visitor to Mutsamudu described Nzwanian title-holders as looking like “all Orientals.” Though appearing “Oriental” to English visitors, Nzwanians signified Englishness in their names and miscellaneous English apparel. In addition to taking famous names and titles, like duke, lord, lady, and king, Nzwanians constantly reminded English visitors of their similarity to Nzwanians, whom the English called “Johanna-men,” Johanna being the unorthographic Anglicization of Nzwani. As early as 1689 the phrase “Johanna-man, Englishman, all one” had become a common dictum among Nzwanians and would, over the next one hundred and fifty years, appear regularly in Western accounts of the island. English visitors were constantly told of their oneness with Mutsamuduans, so that the phrase’s use became an overt reminder of Nzwanian claims to similarity and alliance with the British.

In 1783, Sir William Jones wrote that Nzwanians spoke English, “and some appeared vain of titles . . . We had Lords, Dukes, and Princes on board, soliciting our custom, and importuning us for presents.” While they were “too sensible to be proud of empty sounds,” Jones concluded, they “justly imagined, that those ridiculous titles would serve as marks of distinction, and, by attracting notice, procure for them something substantial.” Jones deduced what seems more obvious in hindsight: that many Nzwanians received real dividends from this strategy of presentation. One of the most telling indicators of this is the fact that people with such titles became well known among English travelers. English visitors who had heard of the Duke of Gloucester or the Prince of Wales often asked for them on their arrival in Mutsamudu. The English traveler J. Richards, for example, was disheartened when he arrived at Mutsamudu nearly seventy years after Jones and asked for Lords Rodney and Nelson, only to be informed that those names had gone out of fashion. At the height of their popularity near the end of the eighteenth century, English titles were a key means of fostering recognition. To enhance this effect, Nzwanian title-bearers often had their names engraved in gorgets of copper or brass worn around their necks, sometimes complimented by English epaulets on their shoulders.

Those who introduced themselves with recognizable names, like Duke Drummond or General Martin, were usually businessmen seeking clients among the crew of an English vessel. They acted as hoteliers or contractors, offering accommodation, provisions, meals, and laundry services. Though some visitors assumed that the famous personalities performed
the tasks themselves, and were thus highly amused by such ludicrous titles for menial laborers, the famously titled men usually farmed out the work. For example, they might contract with English vessels for certain quantities of produce or livestock, which they would then supply from their own estates or buy from the estates of others. Jones describes these contractors as “Banas,” or men of significant standing in Mutsamudu. “Bana Gibu,” for example, was a vegetable and egg wholesaler who, because of his business dealings with English visitors, had taken the title “Lord.” Other visitors confirmed that Mutsamuduan appropriations of English titles of rank were not random. Anton Hove wrote that English title-holders were “such enthusiasts of these [titles]” that “if perchance one of them was called a captain, and had a title of a general, he took it as a great disgrace to his class, and replied, with displeasure, that he had a higher dignity.” Nzwanians depended on such titles to convey a certain image to Europeans and to other Mutsamuduans, though the extent to which such titles were important in intra-Nzwani social relations is unclear. An indicator of the way in which titles were employed to impress an image of Nzwanian similitude on Britons is a letter sent to Earl Russell from the Nzwani court. Though the signers’ names are recorded similarly in the Arabic and English drafts, the author—possibly the famous Prince Abdullah—gave the titles of each signer in English and translated these as Minister, Member of Parliament, Chief Justice, Commissioner of Police, and Magistrate.

Another essential strategy for Mutsamuduan self-presentation was that each contractor kept numerous letters of recommendation written by previous visitors to the island. Though Mutsamuduans could not always read these, they usually pressured captains, crews, and ships’ passengers to write letters on their behalf. Such attestations to the good services of particular contractors could be instrumental in drawing the attention of a prospective client. For example, the English visitor Sir James Prior was impressed when Mr. Pitt and the Duke of Portland came on board his vessel and presented papers written by several previous customers that praised the men for their services. So important could these letters be to the livelihoods of Mutsamuduans that some Nzwanians insisted on them. Bombay Jack, who served as pilot and interpreter on many English vessels, refused gifts from the crew of an English vessel and instead wanted only, in addition to his fees, a written testimony of the services he performed while aboard. Such letters of recommendation—thousands of which were collected between the seventeenth century and the 1870s—were kept for decades, even centuries.
Nzwanian claims to similarity with the English were also given weight as early as the mid-eighteenth century by competence in the English language. Early European reports of the island mention interpreters, but by the middle of the eighteenth century, visitors commented that Mutsamuduans generally understood English “very well” and spoke it intelligibly. William Jones was surprised at Nzwanian competency in English, especially when he showed an Arabic manuscript in his possession to a cousin of the king, who proceeded to explain it in English. En route to Zanzibar in 1864, Bishop Tozer was amazed to find everyone on Nzwani Island so “wild” to learn to read and write English. Nzwanians deepened this intimacy of relation by, Captain Rooke explained, never failing to ask about the health of the English King. In the early nineteenth century, this was the signature greeting of Nzwanians. When an English survey party was presented to the Sultan of Nzwani in 1823, the sultan’s first question was, “How is King George and my good friends in England?” On the street, people greeted English visitors with diverse pleasantries. A visitor to the island in 1812 wrote that people followed him eagerly asking “innumerable questions respecting our health, welfare, appetite, slumbers, and [a] variety of others, equally friendly and unmeaning,” and asked “after the health of their good friend King George.” By the mid-nineteenth century, not only was English widely spoken, but Nzwanians were writing in English using Arabic characters. In 1849, Richards wrote that, “almost everyone I met with wished me a “good morning” and wished to shake hands with me.” Prior wrote that some who had taken the names of famous Britons “inquired affectionately after their name-sakes in England, begged their compliments on our return, and promised the best reception should they at any time visit Johanna.”

**THE VALUE OF LIKENESS**

Nzwanian similitude was not haphazard replication. It was a strategy born of Mutsamudu’s particular political economy. The Owen nautical survey party sponsored by the British government reported that after greetings and reminders of likeness, Mutsamuduans regularly interjected requests for business relations or donations that played on sentiments of reciprocity and comraderie. For example, Prior was approached by Bakamadi, a man well versed in English matters who had spent time in Cape Town. Bakamadi’s knowledge and questions reveal the dividends of similitude for Mutsamuduans. After talking with the crew about English
concerns and stunning them with his understanding of English affairs, he requested to be retained as a merchant “in preference to others.” Moreover, he invited the crew to his house, wishing them to meet his wife and to serve them, “as good roast-beef as any in England.” Bakamadi used his cultural knowledge to create individual economic relationships with Englishmen winning preference through his cultural faculty. The Nzwanian court developed even more elaborate appeals to English visitors. Over decades of rigorous questioning, close observation, and travel in the British realm, the elites of Mutsamudu amassed detailed information about England, its military power, economic expanses, and colonial possessions. The eighteenth-century English traveler Henry Grose wrote that the sultan insisted on visiting all the European ships that put in at Mutsamudu. “[H]e always expresses a great desire of knowing the name of everything that is new to him,” Grose recalled, “and as he has a tolerable smattering of the English tongue, is very inquisitive concerning our wars in Europe.” This compilation of information about the British Empire allowed Mutsamudans to impress English visitors. Jones was astonished by the questions Alawi, a cousin of the king (and possibly Prince Abdullah’s father), asked regarding the independence of the United States, “the powers and resources of Britain, France, Spain, and Holland, the character and supposed view of the Emperor; the comparative strength of the Russian, Imperial, and Othman armies; and their respective modes of bringing their forces to action.” On his arrival in Mutsamudu in the early nineteenth century, Prior was met by Nzwanians who hoped for peace in Europe, “abusing Bonaparte with as much cordiality as if they had been tutored by some of the London editors.” “One of the most inquisitive,” Prior recalled of Bakamadi, “expressed his joy, that his Royal Highness the Prince Regent made so good a governor . . . and to our utter astonishment, asked whether an illustrious reconciliation had yet taken place.”

In 1821, Prince Ali invited an English reverend to what the reverend described as an English-style dinner. The prince met him with his usual “urbanity of manners,” and the guest found the table set with knives, forks, plates, other English tableware, and roast beef. Though Nzwanians generally ate with their hands out of large, communal wooden trays, the prince, following British etiquette, took up the utensils. When William Jones met the king, they spoke for some time about English matters. Immediately thereafter the king attempted to convince Jones of the profitability for the Bombay Government of annually sending a merchantman to Mutsamudu to trade, emphasizing the cheapness of local
commodities. The request surprised Jones. He wrote of the “enlarge-ment of mind” such a proposition evidenced, which he could have hardly expected “from a petty African chief.” Since Jones had already learned of the enormously complex economic relationships Nzwan maintained with neighboring islands, mainland ports, southern Arabia, and western India, his surprise to find an “African chief” interested in soliciting a stronger commercial relationship with Bombay suggests something of both Jones’ preconceived image of East Africa and the strong impression Nzwanian similitude made on English visitors in consequence of such preconceptions.

While the strategy of similitude employed by Mutsamuduan political elites mirrored that of merchants, the stakes of Britons’ personal interest in the sultanate often could be much greater than simple economic exchanges—they could entail the safety and sovereignty of the state. When Prior first met Sultan Alawi, the monarch immediately “praised his friend, good King George, Sir John Cradock, Captain Beaver, and the whole English nation abundantly; in fact, everything English was admirable,” according to Prior’s report. Sultan Alawi, on receiving the officers of the infamous British man-of-war Nemesis in the early 1840s, asked about the Queen and Prince Albert, “and whether an heir to the throne had yet been born.” According to William Bernard, the captain of the Nemesis, the sultan was “not a little curious to know if the Thames Tunnel was finished.” In Bernard’s eyes, Sultan Alawi, as a result of his knowledge, amenity, and inquisitiveness, “appeared to be a very well-bred and courteous young man.” Much like local businessmen, the sultan used his intimacy with things English for specific ends. After asking these questions, Sultan Alawi “alluded painfully” to the distressed state of the island. He would later appeal to the English for pecuniary and military assistance, and such petitions became increasingly common during the nineteenth century. The sultan’s attendants also solicited passengers aboard visiting English ships to contribute something toward improving Nzwanian navigation, and, Grose reported, “by way of persuasive example, [they] produce several lists of persons who have subscribed to that purpose.” Such appeals could yield as much as 30–40 Maria Teresa dollars (MT$, standard currency in the western Indian Ocean) per ship for the government coffers. More important, sultans regularly appealed to the English for military aid. As early as the late seventeenth century, Nzwanians were asking English captains to intervene in inter-Comoros conflicts. After a conversation with the prince and brother of the king, who spoke English well, the English visitor John Ovington
remembered, “When he had a while considered the strength and power of the English arms, and the native valour of our [English] puissant prince, he heartily wished he had been in a nearer neighborhood to his dominions, that by securing an alliance with him, he might engage his arms in crushing a troublesome offensive enemy [the sultan of neighboring Mwali Island].” Such subtle appeals for support became stronger as Nzwani-English relations grew more intimate, and in the eighteenth century the English gave military assistance to Mutsamudu on multiple occasions. Grose wrote that the English were treated “cordially and fraternal” because of English aid in Nzwani’s campaigns against its neighbors. It is equally likely that such cordiality and fraternity motivated English intervention in the first place.

The English expanded the Nzwanian sultans’ military capacities by constantly providing gifts. In the late eighteenth century the established “custom” of the king from each English vessel was two barrels of gunpowder, plus cash. The sultan kept letters from the British Admirals Renier and Blankett, who had visited the town in the 1790s, requesting captains of warships to give powder and arms to the local government. The island’s most consistent supplier, however, was the Governor and Council of Bombay who, for example, in 1808 sent powder, muskets, flints, musket-balls, and even cannons to Nzwani. In the early nineteenth century, the Government of Bombay sent biennial presents of arms and ammunition in acknowledgment of assistance given by the Mutsamuduan government to East India Company ships. As an example of the windfall of armaments a single vessel could bring the sultanate, when the Nisus arrived at Mutsamudu, it gave the king muskets, powder, musket cartridges, brass swivels, ball, and flint. The captain, moreover, distributed muskets and ammunition among the elite men of the town, “according to their rank.” The Sultanate of Nzwani was at times dependent on this assistance. It is no coincidence that when munitions were most needed, Nzwanians both claimed their greatest affinity for the British and made the greatest gestures to evince friendship. For example, most of Nzwani’s cattle were killed by Malagasy raiders in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and the ones that survived were for a time earmarked by the sultan to provision English East India Company ships. An English captain wrote that Nzwanians did not kill cattle for their own consumption, “it being expressly prohibited by the King, who looks up to the Company as his only friends.” While the sultan no doubt promulgated the sumptuary law to ensure both British interest in the island and Nzwani’s economic stability in a time of distress, the cap-
tain’s interpretation of the action—that it was born only of great admiration and friendship—indicates the persuasiveness of Nzwanian strategies of similitude. When Sultan Alawi was faced in 1839 with a rebellion led by a Malagasy refugee resettled on Mwali Island, he wrote to Mauritius, the Cape, and Bombay requesting assistance. His letter to the Governor of the Cape appealed to British generosity “in return for the faithful adhesion of his family to Great Britain, and the hospitality of his people towards all British subjects.”

In addition to stressing reciprocity, Sultan Alawi traveled to Calcutta to address the Governor-General in hopes that the East India Company would take possession of the islands, “which,” a visiting English captain wrote, “he felt [he] could no longer hold without assistance.” It seems Alawi was willing to hand over the administration of the island, merely asking for himself an annual stipend out of the island’s revenues. As Captain Bernard put it, the king would, “rather give up the island altogether to the English,” than see it lost to the rebel. This kind of action greatly impressed the commander of the British warship *Nemesis*, W. H. Hall. And such impression, as with names, breastplates, and stockings, brought consequences. Though he had no mandate to interfere, Hall decided that the *Nemesis* must in some way aid the sultan. The solution was to give Mutsamudu an English flag to fly over its citadel which, once raised, would be saluted by the *Nemesis*. The *Nemesis* commanders, moreover, drafted a threatening letter to the rebel leader explaining that the sultan was an old ally of the English and that they would not allow the taking up of arms against him.

**THE AESTHETICS OF APPEAL**

Through similitude, Nzwanians appealed not only to British strategic or economic interests, but also to the sensibilities and moral sympathies of Britons. In many conversations with Britons, Mutsamudans explained their ideas and actions using metaphors and comparisons they imagined British visitors might know well. When Major Rooke asked about the rebellion on Mayotte Island (which had been a tributary of the Sultan of Nzwani) in the 1780s, Mutsamudans told him that Mayotte was simply “like America,” an analogy sufficiently explanatory for the visitor. During a series of Malagasy raids in the 1810s, which devastated Mutsamudu and threatened the mainland, an English visitor asked why Nzwanians chose not to face the invaders in the field. Bombay Jack, a well-traveled pilot and broker, replied, “Why do not the English march
to Paris?—Why does not Bonaparte go to London?” The travel writer H. Ross Browne was annoyed by the fact that Mutsamuduan women rarely entered male public spaces when visitors were present. He decided to see what Mutsamuduan women were “made of” and in the process badgered an old man with questions about Nzwanian purdah. After Ross Browne insulted Mutsamuduan women several times, the old man lost his patience, “Got damn! de devil you, sir! We great people; we all de same as English. Syed Mohammed [the sultan] all de same as King George. Suppose I go to your country, I no talk so. I no want to see your d—d women! If it de fashon of de country, very good; I like to see, very well. If it no de fashon, what for I want to see your women?” Offended by Browne’s insistence on breaking a local social code, and in order to both defuse the situation and force Browne to be more respectful, the old man reminded the sailor of the likeness of Nzwan to Europe. At a moment when the cultural differences between the West and Nzwan were most evident—that is, in contrasting forms of gendered seclusion—the Mutsamuduan man claimed an equality with and similarity to the American (whom he thought was British) that simultaneously acknowledged difference and claimed likeness.

Investments in the material environment of Mutsamudu were often the result of strategies of similitude. It was common for Mutsamuduans across social status lines to ask for a great variety of things from visitors, like shoes and stockings, hats, a sword, a uniform coat, or other English signifiers. Prior claimed that such objects were “productive of no slight degree of envy to the possessors,” though he did not qualify this conclusion. At the very least, such iconic goods contributed to the images of similitude Mutsamuduans wished to project for their English guests. Stockings and hats could act much like gorgets or letters of recommendation to draw the attention of English visitors who might assume that the possessor had some particular relation to other Englishmen. It seems Mutsamuduans used English clothing to achieve commercial ends, attracting customers by evidencing cultural similarity. Much as with language and clothing, Mutsamuduan home decor reflected, created, and reinforced a variety of socioeconomic relationships. When foreign visitors were invited into the homes of Nzwanians, they were generally only given access to the semipublic, male-only reception rooms. Among the wealthy, these rooms were often furnished with sofas, couches, high-backed chairs, pillows, sometimes even chintz or satin mattresses. But English material culture was prominently displayed, at least when English people visited. Prince Ali placed an English bedstead and an oak
table in his reception room, and this duly impressed English visitors. Mutsamuduans often lined the walls of their reception rooms with arms and small mirrors. In the 1820s, Prince Ali’s reception room boasted more than one hundred looking glasses in gilt frames. His guest, Rev. Elliot, also described “Round pieces of time, many of which were gilt,” “nailed to the walls and ceiling, and several china basins were stuck in, bottom upwards.” Interspersed between these were prints “daubed over with the brightest and most gaudy colours, which served to fill up every vacancy throughout the walls and ceiling, so that it was impossible to distinguish what the latter consisted of, but upon the whole it gave the room an air of comfort.”

Elliot wrote that many other houses were furnished in the same manner as Ali’s, including a profusion of Chinese pictures, which homeowners were very keen to praise. Browne visited the house of Muhammad Deshari, a Nzwanian businessman living at Majunga (Madagascar), and found the house, though built of bamboo, whitewashed like the houses of Mutsamudu. The walls were covered with Chinese plates, American-looking glasses, Arabian fans, flags of other nations, Chinese pictures, copper plates with inscriptions, and Egyptian “relics.” The congregation of so many objects from across the globe, things that had rich symbolic potential—to represent connections with distant places and to incorporate images of China, England, America, and Arabia into individual personalities—impressed visitors. Even though Britons often considered such decor gaudy, there was something about the accumulation of familiar exotic objects (British consumers likewise collected Chinese plates, Oriental “curios,” and Egyptian “relics”) that gave English visitors like Rev. Elliott “an air of comfort” in an unfamiliar locale.

This was not coincidence. Mutsamuduans both impressed their neighbors with “exotic” objects and used such imports to create certain familiar comforts for their English guests. On visiting Prince Ali’s house, members of the Owen survey party were served refreshments with silver sugar-tongs, spoons, and a “handsome display” of cut-glass tumblers. While they enjoyed refreshments, the prince called in a man who sang “God Save the King” for the guests. The sultan filled his reception room with the porcelain common to other urban homes and added to this festoons of English bottles. Such goods were important to Mutsamuduan self-images, both in their representation to outsiders and to their neighbors. When Americans began trading at Nzwani in the 1830s, they found local tastes more diverse than they had imagined. Chairs, glass lamps, plates, cups and saucers, mirrors, and clocks all found buyers in
Mutsamudu. When the British government approved the establishment of a British Consulate on the island in 1858, the sultan requested not just English arms, but also British soldier’s coats. The sultan soon had hundreds of men armed and clothed, according to the consul, “after the European fashion.” The sultan did not simply want to defend himself; he wanted symbols of British military power to represent his own ability. In the future, this mimesis of English military culture would duly impress English visitors.

The desire to capture symbols of Englishness reached such an extreme that some Nzwanians even attempted to possess English women. A wealthy Mutsamuduan was once so intrigued by a young Englishwoman on board a vessel that he sought to purchase her. He offered MT$5,000 to the crew for the woman—nearly ten times the price of an expensive Ethiopian concubine—but was informed that, “she would fetch at least 20 times that sum in India.” The wealthy Mutsamuduan yielded, lamenting that such a high price was much more than he could offer. The possession of an Englishwoman would have been unique in eighteenth-century Mutsamudu, even though Mutsamuduans regularly purchased concubines, sometimes even eastern European women exported from the Ottoman sphere. But the commodification of the young woman, both by Englishmen (even though they were perhaps only having fun with the wealthy men) and Nzwanians, suggests that signifiers of Britishness were indeed more exchangeable than we might imagine in hindsight—that, with certain means, Nzwanians believed that even English people could be incorporated into the Nzwani social environment. Subsequent English travelers probably would have been offended to see a Mutsamuduan man with an English concubine, and the attempt to acquire an Englishwoman was therefore probably a social strategy intended to impress other Nzwanians, but the wealthy man’s attempt reveals the breadth of Nzwani attempts to command Englishness.

Mutsamuduans were masters of cultural dexterity and sometimes relied simultaneously on languages of equality and clientage in their appeals to the British. Though they reminded English visitors that they were “one” with them, they also proclaimed themselves vassals, unofficial subjects of Britain. When the sultan attempted to supply Captain Beaver with provisions at public expense in recognition of British efforts on his behalf, the captain declined the offer. At this, Bombay Jack, according to Prior, “fell on his knees, . . . declaring he would not rise till permitted to supply our wants. . . . ‘Englishman,’ said he, ‘give me everything, now me give to the English.’” Though Prior’s account may seem indulgent of
British self-importance, the performance of clientage had a dramatic effect on the English. Touched by the incident, Prior believed that “[t]he most laboured effusion of eloquence could not express more.” The twin claims of equality and clientage reached seemingly paradoxical extremes when several sultans offered Nzwani to British representatives as a colony. In 1839, when Mwalian rebels threatened Mutsamudu (see above), Sultan Alawi, perhaps through Prince Abdullah, appealed to Sir William Nicolay, the governor of Mauritius, in a way that simultaneously employed many of the well-established Mutsamuduan tropes of clientage and friendship:

The Sultans of Johanna consider themselves as under the contract of the King of England, and they have so considered themselves from the time of their forefathers until the present time. Everybody knows that we are the Allies of the English, and that we are, of old, the subject[s] of the King of England. We are unable to repay you for the favors you bestow on us, but God will repay you for your goodness, next to God. We Pray for you as our best friends. Do not leave us, and do not forget us, for if you abandon us, we perish; our lives, our families, our property.

The Foreign Office did not take Sultan Alawi up on his offer. In fact, even though several sultans offered the island as a colony, Nzwanians never became subjects of Britain. Perhaps such offerings of the island as a colony were meant as only symbolic tokens of Nzwanian alliance with the British. Or perhaps Mutsamudu’s political elites sought to use the British to ensure their own political longevity, albeit under a protectorate. Either way, the simulation of likeness, and at times even clientage, was a significant strategy. For Mutsamuduans, minor investments in material culture, language, and etiquette paid vital dividends until the latter part of the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

Mutsamuduans appealed to the British by domesticating and projecting fragments of Britishness. They obtained symbols of a significant global power that both represented and embodied an intimate relationship with empire. Thus, while English things were on the one hand locally relevant signs of particular access to an iconic power, they also reproduced images of Englishness for British consumption. In order to symbolically neutralize their significant religious, cultural, and social differences from English visitors, Mutsamuduans claimed to be like the English in limited ways. To this end, they used what they knew of Britons to appeal to British senses of reciprocity and morality. Mutsamuduans sought simul-
taneously to understand and, through the projection of certain self-images, manipulate British perceptions. By wearing English clothes, putting English furnishings in their homes, and serving English meals with English crockery to English visitors, Mutsamuduans reconfigured, at least in limited ways, English cultural geographies of the world and attracted significant English interest. The small island, so far from civilization in the mind of Britons, somehow became proximate for English visitors. Nonetheless, metropolitan British policymakers who had never visited the island took little interest in Nzwani. Individual Britons sympathized and allied themselves with Nzwanians, but official policies rarely addressed the island directly, despite its importance as a refreshing station and the fact that several sultans offered the island to Britain as a colony. British policymakers had no desire to claim a protectorate in Nzwani precisely because its political leadership already demonstrated an affinity for Britain. In the wake of the 1858 Indian Mutiny, Prince Abdullah’s appeals to British officials attracted little interest, since a friendly sultanate was far more appealing to the Foreign Office than actually administering the island as a colony.

Even Britons who visited the island were sometimes conflicted in their attitudes toward Nzwanians. The juxtaposition of the familiar and the exotic drew diverse responses. British visitors at times disparaged Mutsamuduans, though they showed an affinity for them and were quite concerned with maintaining Britain’s positive image in Mutsamudu. Some, like Sir William Jones, who recognized this duality of British perception, attempted to reconcile seemingly contradictory reactions to East African provision-brokers wearing English military symbols. The resulting justifications for affection toward Nzwanians reveal the power of similitude. Despite their criticism of Mutsamuduans, Britons accepted that they generally relished things English and took pride in, as one visitor wrote, “that unstained ensign”: the British flag. Britons might not have agreed that “Johanna-men” and Englishmen were one, but they privileged Nzwanians like Prince Abdullah in many ways, believing that the islanders were loyal to British interests and faithful to the empire in ways few others were. British captains, crews, and even administrators were often sufficiently enamored of Mutsamuduans to make their town a primary port of call for English vessels and to regularly supply Nzwanians with arms. What is important to recognize in these transactions is that most English representatives who assisted Nzwanians did not refer to the strategic or economic importance of Nzwani to Britain as a rationale for intervention. Instead, they justified their actions by recall-
ing the long friendship between England and Nzwani. Though a seemingly superficial reason for intervention, the moral economy of reciprocity was continually cited as the rationale for action by British visitors until the latter nineteenth century, when Nzwani seemed of little import to British foreign policy and was claimed by France. Even though Britons were hesitant to accept Nzwanians as clients, they regularly allowed Nzwanians to claim them as patrons.

Nzwanian similitude resonates with contemporary reflections on the reception of global symbols. In eighteenth-century Mutsamudu, cultural domestication was not reducible to simple coercion or cultural imperialism. Nzwanian desires for symbols of Englishness were in no way determined by the pressures of a colonial state. Nzwanians had their own particular interests in global symbols, and islanders used their collections of cultural signifiers strategically for specific ends. Contemporary popular as well as academic analyses of globalization too easily overlook the logics and effects of such actions. The Nzwani case additionally suggests that even when totalization or cultural homogenization seems evident, domestications may be working toward diverse ends, and the desires of minor players on the global stage may alter global relations. On Nzwani, a strategy of similitude used cultural symbols to gain material returns and cultivated a relationship with the more powerful by claiming to be in some ways like them. This is the concealed potency of similitude in the spaces of global interrelation: an ability to affect the powerful by appealing to their self-image.

Nzwani’s unique relationship with the British Empire highlights some of the ways goods and symbols have been used as a means of appeal in trans-societal relationships. But my reflections so far have not done justice to the complex, local, social meanings of imported goods. The next chapter uses the example of Mombasa in the 1850s and 1860s to consider how people in one town drew imported goods into local, social relationships and broader concepts of morality. More specifically, my frame is the social and psychological longings that stimulated demands for consumer goods and the community mores that restricted these longings. By scrutinizing the concept of desire in Mombasa at a time when diverse imported goods were becoming increasingly available, we can better understand the intimate dimensions of choice as well as the morality of desiring. It is to these social logics of consumer need in mid-nineteenth-century Mombasa that we now turn.