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Representation in Kenya, Its Diaspora, and Academia: Colonial Legacies in Constructions of Knowledge About Kenya's Coast

Jesse Benjamin

Abstract

This paper explores the construction of knowledge in Kenya in the context and aftermath of colonialism and underdevelopment. Those communities that were politically and economically marginalized in Coast Province over the past century were also displaced in terms of academic opportunities, resulting in fewer social science scholars from Mijikenda and other non-Swahili communities in both Kenyan and diaspora universities. Underdevelopment studies in Africa and Kenya are briefly reviewed, and the colonial history of asymmetric social relations at coastal Kenya is traced. Finally, key debates over identity and history are examined within this context and shown to be exacerbated by diasporic Kenyan scholars, further reinforcing trajectories of unequal social relations in Kenya.

Kenya and Histories of Underdevelopment

It has been common to discuss global patterns of uneven political-economic development since the 1970s in terms of the concept of underdevelopment. While the specific concept originated in Latin America in the 1950s and flowered in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it also has a historical trajectory in Africa and in pan-African scholarship, marked especially by the appearance in 1972 of Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (see also Arrighi, 1973; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1976). While concepts of underdevelopment originally centered on economics and global political economy, some of the earliest adherents of these concepts also pushed scholars to consider issues of cultural and intellectual
underdevelopment, and of the dangers of neo-colonialism, or colonialism by other (nonformal, extrajuridical) means (Ngugi, 1977, 1981; Rodney, 1990). Valentin Mudimbe (1988) later extended these arguments into a consideration of colonialism itself as a fundamental epistemological (or gnosiological) reorganization, with obvious implications for attempts at decolonization. The problem of underdevelopment, as a scholarly concern, was quickly and successfully extended to the specific historical study of colonial and postcolonial Kenya in the 1970s (Kitching, 1980; Leys, 1975; Swainson, 1980; van Zwanenberg, 1972, 1975; Wolff, 1974). However, little effort has yet been expended on analysis of issues of cultural or epistemological underdevelopment in Kenya, and even the more traditional underdevelopment of political economy approach has fallen largely by the wayside in recent, pro-Western, IMF-positive, post-colonial Kenya.

This paper looks at issues of intellectual and epistemological underdevelopment in Kenya, specifically in the coastal region. The basic argument is that a process of enforced underdevelopment at "the Swahili coast," initiated by the British after their standoff in the Giriama Rebellion of 1914, led to general infrastructural underdevelopment in Mijikenda areas, including educational underdevelopment. As a result, Mijikenda and other non-Swahili peoples, including the Giriama, produced fewer high school and university graduates, fewer professors and leaders, and therefore less public discourse and less academic knowledge. The result is an epistemological and cultural underrepresentation of non-Swahili perspectives at the coast of Kenya, which is intimately linked to a relative and ongoing political-economic underdevelopment in relation to Swahili and other newer actors at the coast. This conundrum, common to many of the world's subaltern peoples, is highlighted and exacerbated in the emergent patterns of Kenya's international diaspora, which allows the more privileged members of the nation state to partake of educational, professional, and other opportunities in the world economy, thereby perpetuating the asymmetric representation of Kenya's coastal peoples and their distinct positional narratives of history, identity, and social meaning.

While Mijikenda regions of the coast's immediate hinterland were pushed aside, the thin coast strip of ancient Swahili towns was incorporated closely into 19th century Busaidi slave trading and 20th century British colonial economies. With greater economic and political access and privilege, more Swahili graduated from local schools, attended universities and went on to become leaders, journalists, and scholars, meaning that Swahili perspectives are far better represented in the Western academy and its engines of knowledge production. In the postcolonial era of Kenya's history, the country's diaspora has grown steadily, particularly in the UK and the United States, and a portion of it consists of students and the professoriate. Due to these historical imbalances, and due to no fault of their
own, Swahili perspectives have come to dominate in the social sciences, while Mijikenda perspectives remain almost entirely subaltern. The predominance of Swahili narratives and their absorption into Western scholarly perspectives, coupled with the exclusion of Mijikenda and other marginal coastal people's viewpoints and epistemological outlooks, have led to a major imbalance in the ways knowledge of history, identity, and society are constructed about coastal Kenya and contiguous regions. As Kenya's diaspora grows, its internal patterns of uneven development are being replicated and perhaps extended abroad. These dual processes, of uneven diasporic development and of underdevelopment at both economic and epistemological levels, are the subject of this investigation.

Kenya's Coastal History and the Rise of Asymmetric Social Relations and Cultural Representations

While elements of contemporary coastal social cleavages in Kenya are naturalized back into the past as though they have always been there and are therefore immutable, three major historical events of relatively recent times have shaped the primary inequalities of the present. First, the rise of Atlantic-style chattel plantation slavery at the coast of East Africa emerged in the 19th century. Second, the failed Mazrui Rebellion opened the way for the establishment of a formal British colonial administration in 1895. Finally, the Giriama Rebellion of 1914-1915 led the British colonial office to decide to concentrate its development efforts elsewhere, especially in central Kenya, the Rift Valley, and the so-called White Highlands. The first event shattered the ancient historical ties and symmetry between coastal peoples, especially between the Swahili and Mijikenda. The second event saw the advent of formal underdevelopment by means of colonial appropriation, violence, and displacement. And the third event became the basis for the even harsher relative isolation and displacement of Mijikenda regions to the immediate interior of the now predominantly Swahili coastal strip, setting up a pattern that remains intact today.

The societies we know today at the coast of East Africa as Swahili civilization have existed in continuous development and articulation over the past two or more millennia, and have always been characterized by heterogeneity and complexity, although scholars are not in total agreement as to the articulation of that complexity (Allen, 1993; Horton & Middleton, 2000; Kusimba, 1999; Mazrui & Shariff, 1994). The ongoing interpretive disputes have as much to do with the politics of the present as with those of the past. However, most agree that the distinct ethnic or national identity groups known today as Swahili and Mijikenda, the former being more concentrated at the coast and relatively more powerful, the latter being more numerous and located more in the immediate
hinterlands, were historically one and the same peoples, with the same origin myths (Shungwaya), and parallel if not the same age-grades, secret societies, and other cultural elements.

As in the case of many neighboring Kenyan peoples now posed as opposite, or mutually exclusive peoples, the separation and distinction are actually colonial inventions having much to do with divide and rule politics. This has been shown for the Kikuyu and Maasai peoples by Carolyn Martin Shaw (1995). Much like the Kikuyu and Maasai, Swahili and Mijikenda represent less separate peoples than partially distinct elements within a cultural continuum in which different constituencies allied with one another across regions and economic modes of production in general and negotiated partnerships. Specific urban-based Swahili clans had ties with specific Mijikenda subgroups, such as the relationship between the Mazrui of Mombasa and the Kauma Mijikenda, which dates back at least four centuries. The Mazrui were an exogenous Swahili group of Omani origins who localized and became part of the coastal elite, gradually spreading their suzerainty along the coast north and south from Mombasa. They were allied with the Kauma in the interior, who provided military alliance, agricultural and trade items, and wives for immigrant men. These partnerships were known in local terminology by the term *Mjomba* (Ki-Swahili) or *Mudzomba* (Ki-Mijikenda): basically uncle or cousin relationships. The issue in dispute today is who was the uncle and who the niece or nephew.

In 1837, another Omani clan, the Busaidi, who had been expanding in coastal power and presence, defeated the Mazrui in a pivotal battle in Mombasa and began an era of rulership in East Africa. Backed by the British military and underwritten by Banyan financiers out of India, they built an empire based in Zanzibar during the middle of the 19th century. The Zanzibar economy was based on chattel slavery, consisting in both the export of slaves from the coast and their exploitation in coastal and offshore island plantation production of cloves, copra, and other crops. While the British historical narrative claimed that this slavery was indigenous, ancient, and the result of Arab exploitation, its intensification was in fact a result of Atlantic abolition. The fact is that the French and British simply moved their slave trading activities into the Indian Ocean when abolition impacted in the Atlantic. They operated through local agents until the abolition of the Indian Ocean slave trade could pave the way for formal colonial rule.

It was during the brief, but devastating 60-year period of chattel slavery in East Africa that the ancient ties between coastal communities were ruptured and reshaped. A new social hierarchy came into play in which race was the key signifier, and African identity meant enslavability, whereas Arab or European identities meant potential membership in the slave-owning and therefore the ruling classes. It was in this context that African identity, Africanity, and African
history first came to be actively denied in this region, and new genealogies and histories were written by those who could claim them, in which exogenous ancestries took precedence. These included narratives based on real historical relationships, such as ties to Persia (Shiraz), Arabia, India, Egypt, Turkey (the Ottoman Empire), and elsewhere, but involved a major exaggeration of such ancestries coupled with the denial of African roots.

This is the context in which many Swahili started to identify as Arab and deny African roots. Indeed, Swahili of various ranks, that is, coastal residents with Islamic affiliation and cultural affinities, could claim Arab identity and thereby escape enslavement, if not participate in the booming slave economy. However, latter-day Mijikenda and other non-Muslim coastal peoples were relegated to the new categories of black, pagan, and African, and increasingly subject to capture and enslavement. Needless to say, this ruptured the Mjomba relations that had pertained at the coast and literally saw coastal individuals enslaving their own extended family members and former associates in the middle and end of the 19th century. Elderly informants I spoke with during fieldwork from 1990 and 1992 actually remembered the fear generated by the potential of being captured during the period of slavery at the coast and spoke of people who never returned after visiting Mombasa and other coastal areas. The institution of slavery was only abolished in 1907, whereas the trade was curtailed in the 1870s. The social dynamics of hierarchy during this era were slow to dissipate and can still be seen in many ways.

The Mazrui elite suffered a brief displacement when defeated by the Busaidi, but were soon incorporated into the new Swahili and Arab elite, where they prospered during the rapid accumulations of plantation production at the coast. As Zanzibari accumulation started to come apart at the end of the 19th century, the British were poised to dominate the region. The Mazrui made one last effort to reestablish their hegemony at the coast, in the Mazrui Rebellion of 1895. Its suppression by the British led to the establishment of a British protectorate under the aegis of the Imperial British East Africa Company, the foundation of later formal colonial rule in Kenya and surrounding areas. During the Mazrui Rebellion, Mazrui ties with their Kauma allies were briefly reinvoked, although the response was ambivalent. It was their slave and former slave allies to the north of Mombasa that provided the greatest support, although this too was ambivalent, as all social ties were fluid and constantly renegotiated.

British colonial rule ensued, but followed an uncertain path at first, with tension between a growing white settler population in Kenya and an unenthusiastic commitment from the Home Offices in London. One of the early ideas was to develop a white settler and corporate plantation economy at the coast, adjacent to the major shipping lines of Mombasa and the wider Indian
Ocean. As a result, efforts were made to co-opt recently installed and loyal regional chiefs, and thereby extract forced labor from recently displaced peoples whose lands were being expropriated. As this practice escalated, resistance grew, especially in the largest and most impacted of the Mijikenda subgroups, the Giriama, whose rebellion has been well recounted by historians (Brantley, 1979, 1981; Temu, 1972). Mijikenda means literally "nine villages," and reflects the nine communities that make up the Mijikenda people, who share traditions, origin myths, language (despite dialectal variances), and other cultural elements.

The Giriama were stirred to rebellion by Me Ketilili, an elder, prophet, and spiritual leader who is still celebrated in song and story. Although the rebellion was ruthlessly confronted by tripod-mounted, machine gun–wielding British troops, the result was largely a standoff, with many dead on both sides, and the British unable to control the populace and extract the labor they wanted. Giriama used guerilla fighting tactics and arrows dipped in a traditional neurotoxin formerly reserved for elephant hunting. British fighters so much as scratched by such arrows were doomed to death within a few seconds, and this fear contributed to the British failure. The British never forgot their defeat and subsequently punished the region with planned underdevelopment, the effects of which are still being felt today.

When land was formally adjudicated at the coast, Mijikenda peoples were purposefully excluded, while Swahili and Arab claims, especially those of respected patricians, were widely accepted, setting up a new pattern of postslavery, social hierarchy based on landed capital (Cooper, 1980). When a gravel and then a tarmac road was built to accommodate the growing nonrail traffic in the region, it was located at or near the water's edge, where it benefited the coastal people and further isolated the majority population of the coastal interior. The absence of landed capital and the infrastructural components of road and communication networks contributed to lower educational attainments over the coming decades—a key to the academic representational issues discussed below. Further, as Frederick Cooper illustrated in his landmark study, *From Slaves to Squatters* (1980), following the dissolution of slavery, the British colonial administration propped up the former planter elite by allowing them to maintain their lands, which they then made productive by allowing former slave and Mijikenda "squatters" to live and produce on them for a share of the crop. These were the primary elements in the political economy of underdevelopment of the coastal interior region in the colonial and postcolonial eras.

Cooper (1980) rightly called the colonial arrangement at the coast an uneasy balance, because legally the tenant farmers could be displaced whenever the landowners found another means to capitalize on the value of the land itself. The late 1980s and 1990s saw massive evictions along these lines as the descendants of
slave owners sold their lands, which had become valuable at the coast due to their proximity to Mombasa and the growing tourist economy. This is precisely what my own research in the 1990s focused on, in the form of a village level case study of eviction displacement, 25 miles north of Mombasa (Benjamin, 1992). This context of social upheaval and ongoing inequity makes the simmering debates over identity and history exceedingly meaningful and relevant to contemporary society and politics in Kenya today.

**Key Debates at the Coast of Kenya Today: De Facto Swahili Nationalism Versus Mijikenda Perspectives**

The key debates at the coast of Kenya today are a direct result of the history just recounted, and they are central to issues of contemporary identity and historiography—historiography as distinct from history, because the way in which history is written at the coast has been so powerful in the shaping of the present and its interpretation. It is the revision of historiography in the 19th and 20th centuries, under the aegis of Busaidi and British slave and colonial economies, that shapes contemporary struggles. Social cleavages that emerged during these dual 60-year periods not only shaped the present, but led to a projection of new hierarchies into the past, in order to naturalize these arbitrary social constructions. The two major areas of contention are (1) are the Swahili African or Arab, or if both, which identity is primary, and to what extent? And (2) at what point did Islam and/or a patrician Arab elite become ascendant at the coast? Varieties of Swahili answers to these questions have attained a hegemonic status in the postcolonial era, being absorbed into the hegemonic perspectives of the West generally, while Mijikenda standpoints continue to be absent from popular discourse and remain in a largely subaltern status discursively.

In the precolonial era at the coast, African and Arab identities, as much as they existed in those terms, were able to coexist in a nonexclusive and nonhierarchical relationship, essentially preceding the imposition of Western epistemological constraints. Multiplicity as the norm was interrupted, as we have seen, by the rise of a racial chattel slavery system in which racialized Africanity and Blackness became serious liabilities. This occasioned a shift in identity by most who could attain it, from African to Arab identification, most often facilitated by ongoing participation in or adoption of Islamic ritual practices. Thus, the racial hierarchies that first emerged out of the apartheid Atlantic forge became ascendant in East Africa in the 19th century and changed little in nature during the colonial era ending in 1963. Families and distant kin networks were now divided along unassailable racial boundaries.
A seeming turnaround occurred in the postcolonial period, when a massive census shift occurred in the reverse direction, as thousands of self-identified Arabs began to identify as Africans in expectation of anti-Arab and pro-“Black African” sentiment in the Independence context (Salim, 1975). As Salim explains, this took the form of a native/nonnative identification shift that had two levels of meaning. The primary designation for the African, encoded Black population during the colonial period was “native,” but with the ironic twist that this did not also imply indigeneity, or native rights and claims to the land and its use. Racially “nonnative” Arabs, Indians, and most Muslim Swahili were recognized juridically as indigenous claimants to coastal lands. Under the de facto independence dictatorships of Presidents Kenyatta and Moi, Africanity rhetorically reclaimed its pride of place in national discourse, but in full neocolonial allegiances, all inherited privileges gained from the colonial era were to remain untrammeled. This was as true for white settler privilege as it was for the lesser, but relative and real, Arab and Muslim privileges enjoyed by the coastal elite, except that certain up-country Kenyan elites, especially those tied closest to the halls of government power, began to gradually displace coastal elites with their newfound economic leverage and political connections. While Swahili scholars have therefore rightly decried their postcolonial displacement (Mazrui & Shariff, 1994), their relative privilege vis-à-vis other coastal peoples continues largely unrecognized. Thus the Mijikenda, the displaced subaltern of a displaced former Swahili elite, remain largely out of view in the coastal scramble for power, even though they are a numeric majority.

The central state apparatus of the new Kenyan government largely adopted in an uncritical fashion the colonial anti-Arab bias, which blamed Arabs alone for the slave trade and naturalized slavery as ancient and as an essential or biological element of Arab being. This was seen and can still be seen in many of Kenya’s primary school texts (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1996, 1998a; Mazrui & Shariff, 1994). In the post-Independence period, scholarship that began to prove the African element and indeed basis of coastal and Swahili civilization began to displace racist colonial historiography, which had denied African contributions and given any credit allotted to exogenous elements such as Arabs, Indians, and Persians (Chittick, 1968, 1980a, 1980b; Kirkman 1954, 1957, 1964, 1965). The denial of African presence and the exaggeration and extension of Indian Ocean agency in East African history accorded with the apartheid framework in which native Africans were enslaved and colonized, while Arab and Asian elites were incorporated into lower but elite colonial administrative positionalities.

Almost as soon as this revision started to take place in the Swahili world, scholars began to decry what they thought was too strong a reversal, which some started to say was as extreme as had been the colonial bias. Some felt that exogenous elements in coastal history were now being underestimated, although these generally continued to attract the most attention. Many Swahili scholars are now arguing that the Arab element of the culture is being underestimated, and they wish to assert its significance (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1996, 1998a; Mazrui & Shariff, 1994). In a global context of generalized orientalism, so powerfully explicated by Edward Said (1978, 1993), assertions of previously disparaged Arab agency in world history will be generally welcomed, but this is a specific instance where reclaiming Arab contributions is done at the expense of a still devalued African presence, which in truth is far from recovered and recentered. Mijikenda, Pokomo, Taita, Segeju, Dahalo, and other non-Swahili, non-Arab perspectives from the coast remain almost absent in academic representations, even in the rhetorically pro-African contemporary national context in Kenya.

The second debate revolves around the dating of Islam as a dominant element in coastal society. As the Islamist Busaidi contingent gained power in Zanzibar, both they and their British handlers projected this newfound, 19th century ascendancy into the past as a natural state of coastal affairs. Islam is known to have appeared at the Swahili coast soon after its emergence in the Arabian Peninsula, and mosques appeared at the coast early on as well, certainly by the eighth century. However, the colonial conflations of presence with dominance have been largely corrected in the best archaeological literature (Chami, 1994-95, 1998; Horton & Middleton, 2000; Kusimba, 1999), and this correction is supported in the firsthand historical accounts of Ibn Battuta and others (Freeman-Grenville, 1962; Hamdun & King, 1994). David Sperling (1985, 1988) showed that Islam was rarely dominant beyond the narrowest of coastal corridors and the cluster of urban centers before the middle 19th century. This corrective but still much debated perspective allows for a Mijikenda presence and even predominance in coastal societies until the past 150 years and shifts the conversation over contemporary entitlements in profound ways, again explaining why this remains a largely subaltern if majority (at the coast) viewpoint.

Swahili Versus Mijikenda Perspectives and the Role of the Kenyan Diaspora
Perhaps the most widely known African scholar of the past 50 years, Dr. Ali Mazrui, is a Swahili born in Mombasa, specifically to the Mazrui clan. A complex mix of pro-African, but also Anglo-African perspectives, Mazrui has written extremely widely on all matters African and African diasporic, not entirely without controversy (for example, Mafeje, 1995a, 1995b, 1998). However, he has devoted very little of his productivity to writing about his home area, and when
he has done so (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1996, 1998a; Mazrui & Zirimu, 1998), it has been in relatively uncritical terms that somehow have gone largely unchallenged. Much of this work has centered on Swahili linguistics (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998b; Mazrui & Zirimu 1998) and has asserted the primacy and centrality of Arabic beyond the consensus of the linguistic community (Ehret, 1995, 1998; Nurse, 1982; Nurse & Hinnebusch, 1993; Nurse & Spear, 1985). Mazrui and his coauthors have resorted to somewhat crude reductions in denying African and Mijikenda contributions to coastal civilization and history, as I briefly illustrate here.

In terms of its epistemological investments, *The Political Culture of Language* (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1996) is strangely direct. From the outset, the authors deploy conceptual categories in their analysis that stem directly from the colonial grid of knowledge. Their project is organized around the idea that there are “stages” of human development, and that the wider the spheres of travel and contact the greater the degree of fulfillment in terms of one’s human potentialities. Within this framework, they seek to explore what role Kiswahili might have played in such processes for East Africans and other speakers of the language.

They begin by outlining the following model of social change:

First, the wider the arena of social interaction that a person is involved in, the closer that process is to the kind of change that does justice to the potentialities of the human person as a social creature. Thus, an individual constrained only within his or her village has not as yet experienced the full scale of his or her potentialities as a social creature. Secondly, an individual who feels comfortable only in his or her clan is being still held back from full realization of his or her potentialities as a human being. Thirdly, an individual whose allegiance is incapable of transcending ethnic affiliations has yet to experience the human potentialities inherent in a more complex network of allegiances and competing loyalties. And finally, an individual whose horizons are limited to the borders of his or her own country or society is not yet sensitized to the international implications of social existence. (1996, p. 3)

Clearly, this schema employs a unilineal, progress-based conception of human development that was the basis of colonial anthropology and colonial-Western knowledge more generally. It is evolutionist in its modernist notion that greater geographic contact equals greater fulfillment of human potential. The authors thus erect a village/clan/ethnic-group/nation-state/international-sphere hierarchy
along which all peoples can be placed. Against this formulation, they then set out
in the rest of their work to show that Kiswahili is of vital significance because it
helps propel its speakers further “forward” along this continuum. Working within
a simple either/or logic, they seek to know “whether Kiswahili has played a role in
expanding the capacities of East Africans as social creatures” (Mazrui & Mazrui,
1996, p.3). Of course, this may not in fact be an either/or determination.

There is also the false assumption that greater geographic reach in human
contact can be equated with greater social complexity, again building on
fundamental principles of 19th century evolutionary theory. Mazrui and
Mazrui’s theoretical base therefore raises a number of questions. Why cannot
villagers possess an international awareness, read local newspapers and listen to
the radio, and critique the IMF and other global political economic forces that
result in unemployment, price hikes, currency devaluations, and other elements
of structural adjustment? Do the authors really believe that one must travel
internationally to reach one’s full human potential, or is it sufficient to have an
awareness of international issues? Do they really believe that there are people
without awareness beyond their immediate social sphere, who are thus locked­
in solely at the level of the village? Or are they claiming that the issue is where
one’s primary affiliations lie, in which case why should international connections
in and of themselves surpass more local associations and ties? According to
their logic, the most fully human people would appear to be the imperial British
colonizers of the 20th century and their next of kin, the CEOs of multinational
corporations. Who else has such range of social contact?

The schema only seems to make sense within the authors’ agenda to argue
the importance of the Swahili language. However, this too might have been
accomplished without recourse to such a colonial epistemology. Instead, they
proceed to argue that the process of “detribalization” (pp. 3-13, 177-186, and
passim), which they put in quotation marks, is also a signifier of progress, and
that here too Swahili acts as an agent for positive growth and change, in providing
a transethnic linguistic platform for communication. Their contention is that
“detribalization” is more about declining “ethnic behavior” than declining “ethnic
loyalties” and is synonymous with “a shift towards a more cosmopolitan style of
life” (p. 4). It is also a reflection of the creation of new, supplemental loyalties,
beyond the local. Thus, they argue, “Kiswahili has indeed facilitated both senses
of ‘Detribalization’” (p. 5). The very concept of “detribalization” is sociologically
problematic, built as it is on the colonial era notion of “tribe,” which has been
conclusively shown to be an invention and imposition of colonial-era divide-and­
rule tactics at the beginning of and throughout the 20th century. Ranger (1983),
Hobsbawm (1983), and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) are the recognized classic
works here, but Mafeje’s (1971) less recognized and earlier article on the subject
is still the most relevant critique of colonial anthropology and its tribal categories and should be viewed together with p'Bitek (1970) and Magubane (1971). Yet, for Mazrui and Mazrui, the (forced) movement of East African peoples from “peasants” to proletarians, from “independent rural cultivators to . . . members of the urban workforce” (p. 5), is seen as “detribalization,” and thus positive. The argument is erected on the false dichotomization of “traditional” peoples and those more “cosmopolitan.” James de vere Allen shattered the assumed colonial divisions between the rural and urban in Swahili society in East Africa specifically, as has long ago been shown to be the case elsewhere, in a series of articles and lectures delivered in the seventies (1974a, 1976b, 1976c, 1981).

Furthermore, while the role of Kiswahili for Muslims is discussed, its role for (supposedly) less “universalistic” cultures or religions is altogether ignored. Swahili is seen as widening the spheres of interaction for Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds. Yet, in assuming that Swahili is a Muslim culture, founded upon a local version of Islam, the authors ignore the role of Kiswahili in the lives of other local populations, such as the various Mijikenda groups, the Pokomo, the Bajuni, or the Oromo. Islam in East Africa has facilitated connections with Muslim cultures outside the continent via the Indian Ocean, but non-Muslim “interior” African peoples have also provided wider connections to peoples inside the continent, across the Taru Desert, and into the so-called Kenyan “highlands,” the Rift Valley, the highlands of Ethiopia, the Great Lakes region, the Congo Basin, and regions beyond, such as the Nile Valley. Colonial-era literature erased internal connections within Africa, treating all local cultures as atomized and bounded from neighbors, frozen in time, while seeing in Islam and thus the Swahili, an exception, external in origin and orientation, which therefore had to be seen as non-African. This is essentially the same set of divisions the authors are making, in a different context, and shows their unintentional affiliation with colonial epistemology, which likewise erased African and Mijikenda agency. Christianity, another recent factor of colonial imposition in East Africa, is similarly seen as a “detribalizing” influence. And so, Christianity, with its history in the slave traffic and especially its role in colonial settler and administrative cultures, is thus seen as helping “to broaden the social and human horizons of East Africans beyond the confines of their ancestral ways” (p. 6).

By further exploring the ways in which Kiswahili has facilitated the “detribalization” of East Africans in the above areas, and through urbanization, the military, race consciousness, national identity, and class formation, the authors conclude that this has in part brought East African people “closer to doing justice to their potentialities as social beings.” Thus, in celebratory tone, the authors state: “Detribalization can be part of the process of expanding human capacities to socialize beyond kith and kin” (p. 55), and to the (more evolved?)
“class loyalties,” in the emergence of which Swahili has been a “significant factor” (p. 55). Such evolutionist considerations provide the authors with the basis of their argument for Kiswahili as a transnational lingua franca of general scientific world import. Continuing in this line of reasoning, Mazrui and Mazrui write, “the European colonial powers helped in developing Kiswahili as a language of administration, but they fell far short of helping it to become a language of education and scientific analysis” (pp. 55-56). Thus, in the hope of building on this European colonial base, they advocate Kiswahili as “the most eligible single African language anywhere in black Africa for transformation into the first indigenous African language for modern science and technology,” a true “test case of whether technological advancement is ever possible in Africa without Westernization” (p. 56).

The authors advocate the movement of East Africa, or all of “Black Africa,” away from the “ancestral world of collective wisdom and personal intuition,” toward “the new world of quantified data and scientific analysis” (p. 220). In this way, and facilitated by the international potential of the expanding language of Kiswahili, Mazrui and Mazrui hope that this region of the world might literally “advance” into greater “communion with the modern world” (p. 220). While certain of their intentions are indeed laudable, specifically the advocacy of Kiswahili as a technical and global language, the authors’ framework is riddled at its base with outdated and problematic Western epistemological assumptions that impoverish their efforts.

Space does not allow a proper review of the parallel works of Alamin Mazrui, Ali Mazrui’s cousin, or the excellent book by Alamin Mazrui and I. Shariff (1994), but they generally reach similar conclusions about the centrality and importance of Arab and Islamic influences in Swahili history and culture. Their writings are corrective in some instances of colonial era biases against Arabs and the Islamic faith generally, but on the other hand they leave unchallenged many of the colonial dismissals of Mijikenda and non-Swahili presences and participations in coastal history and societies. Further, this is accorded and extended in the widely lauded postmodern work on the region of British scholar Justin Willis (1993), who accepts Swahili power and narratives, while dismissing all Mijikenda perspectives as suspect and unreliable, notwithstanding the life work of historian of Mijikenda traditions Thomas Spear (1978, 1981, 1982). Thus can be seen a nexus between colonial discourse and its aftereffects in both Swahili and Western academic scholarship to this day. The corrective to this, amply supplied by Mijikenda popular discourses readily available to anyone interested in listening, has been deftly avoided in the academy to date, by process of simple omission.

The conclusion of this essay is that Mijikenda discourses have rarely reached the level of the academy due to processes of intellectual and
cultural underdevelopment. Because of the economic and infrastructural underdevelopment of the Mijikenda heartlands a few miles inside from the coastal strip, few parents there could afford to pay for their children to attend elementary and upper level educational institutions, and very few PhDs were therefore achieved. Two of the only directly Mijikenda-affiliated scholars to join the academic debates on these issues, Katama Mkangi and Robert Mambo, spent their careers in African institutions of higher learning, where their writings on these subjects have gone almost unnoticed in the Western-centric academy and its publishing combines. It is not so much that Swahili narratives are overrepresented, as that Mijikenda and other coastal perspectives are vastly underrepresented, which accounts for the significant asymmetry in coastal historiographic and sociological debates. To illustrate, I briefly sample the representative work of Katama Mkangi, whose untimely passing in an auto accident outside Nairobi a few years ago still reverberates in its silence.

Perhaps Mkangi’s most important intervention for our study, his discussion of the relationship of Mijikenda people to Islam, begins by locating the Mijikenda as a people contiguously enmeshed within coastal society’s other peoples, the “Waswahili, Wasegeju, Wasanye, Wapokomo, Wasagala and Wataita in that order” (1995, p. 110). Gone are the discrete ethnic notions of anthropologists, and instead we have a nuanced, overlapping set of identities that determine one another in their similarities and differences. Mkangi also directly identifies the “two historical factors which have contributed to Mijikenda’s perspective on Islam . . . the Eastern Africa Slave Trade and European Christian colonial domination” (p. 110.). This seemingly commonsense orientation to Mijikenda history is actually refreshingly new in its inclusion of 19th century Arab domination in the loci of power relations to be understood and examined today. Both colonial and predominant Swahili perspectives like those reviewed above have tended to ignore or downplay this important factor, thus allowing colonial exceptionalism to overshadow the Arab era and erase the vast social reorganizations that first took place at this juncture. Contrary to Ali Mazrui or Justin Willis, Mkangi takes Mijikenda oral histories and memories seriously, for example, when he relates that:

Raids by the Arab—assisted by the Waswahili—into the Mijikenda hinterland in search of slaves, [are] well remembered among the Waribe through an incident when the slave-raidars fired a cannon into their kaya which destroyed a tamarind tree. Stories also abound narrating the tricks which were used by the slave-raidars into luring the unsuspecting Mijikenda victims into slavery. (1995, pp. 110-111)
I found similar stories, referred to above, in my own research at the coast in the early nineties. While Willis dismissed these narratives, Mkangi and I would maintain that they are indeed central to the history of the coast and serve as critical diagnostic tools for interpreting current social relations there. As Mkangi follows the issue up, “Families have stories of how some of their relatives disappeared only later to be discovered having been “Swahilized” in one of the Waswahili towns and settlements along the Coast” (p. 111). Further, these 19th century practices of forced enslavement and subsequent social ascription into Swahili society may be seen to be continuing into the 20th century as these social groups retain their relative standings in terms of relational power and social/racial hierarchies.

Mkangi’s discussion of “Mudzomba,” the Mijikenda term for (the Kiswahili) Mjomba, shows that the “cut-point between these two communities sometimes has been difficult to identify” (p. 111). (It is significant that one of the only other discussions of this central point about Mjomba/Mudzomba appears in the work of Robert Mambo (1984, 1987a, 1987b), himself one of [if not] the only other coastal social science scholars to contribute to the academy in recent decades.) Most importantly, again, we see that Mkangi identifies the 19th century, under the “Zanzibar Arab Sultanate” and its Mwambao Protectorate as the origins of the modern coast’s “racial social hierarchy.” He acknowledges that this was further complicated by British racism during formal colonial rule, but identifies these two streams of inequality as primary factors in understanding the present. This allows him to state what should be the obvious legacy of this, and yet is overlooked in almost all other studies of coastal societies: “... it is still the “Mgiriana” who works as a domestic servant in Swahili houses” (p. 112).

Thus, his acknowledgement of nineteenth century slavery as the origins of modern racism and social hierarchy at the coast allows Mkangi, unlike Willis or Mazrui and Shariff, to see racial hierarchy in the present. My own research at the coast revealed such hierarchy to be very prevalent, making its avoidance in the academy a real problem. This leads us to what is perhaps Mkangi’s most important articulation of these issues:

During the rule of the Zanzibar sultanate, the Waswahili/Muslims were a notch above the Mijikenda in status and privileges. It was then an “in-thing” in becoming an “Arab” once one was a Muslim. This transformation even forced the Bantu-speaking Waswahili to substitute “uungwana” (for: to being “civil” or “gentle”) with “ustaarabu.” (p. 112)

Clearly, this terminology is central to any understanding of coastal social
hierarchies. Much more can and elsewhere should be said about Mkangi’s contributions to coastal scholarship, but space here is limited to illustrating his very different epistemological orientation from that of colonial, Western academic, and Swahili scholars.

Conclusions: The Effects of Kenya’s Diaspora on Coastal Discourses and Disputes

Mkangi’s perspective, as I saw in years of collecting interviews from Mijikenda informants in the early 1990s, was reflective of a widespread popular consciousness among Mijikenda societies that generally ran contrary to hegemonic colonial, national, Western, and Swahili narratives, all of which share in the suppression, intentional or not, of Mijikenda voices and perspectives. The central argument here is that the historical legacies of underdevelopment, or more pointedly what Samir Amin called “uneven development,” have shaped the inequalities manifest in contemporary coastal society in Kenya. While there are of course cleavages within Mijikenda and Swahili communities themselves, the most obvious pattern of social difference remains that between these two major coastal communities. Often, the very same social, linguistic, and racial categories used during the slave-era and colonial periods are still in use today, as is often seen in other parts of the world.

As Kenya moves deeper into the postcolonial era and now embarks into its first period of parliamentary democracy and fair elections, its diaspora is also growing at an exponential rate. Early indications suggest that domestic patterns of social division will, if anything, be magnified by diasporic migration. Whereas the majority of Swahili scholars on the world stage operate from within the U.S. and UK academies, as exemplified in the careers of Ali Mazrui (Binghamton University) and Alamin Mazrui (Ohio University), an almost total absence of Mijikenda or other non-Swahili perspectives continues to be seen in Western institutions of higher education. Until these issues of representation and the underlying infrastructural issues of underdevelopment that generated them are redressed, Mijikenda voices and epistemological contributions are likely to remain marginal if not subaltern. It remains to be seen whether the Kenyan diaspora can operate as an ameliorative agent in this regard. Perhaps in the future it will.

Note

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