

PWANI C KENYA? MEMORY, DOCUMENTS AND SECESSIONIST POLITICS IN COASTAL KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Following the elections of 2007, there was a significant increase in public expressions of secessionist feeling on the Kenya coast. The language of secessionism is historical, and revisits the vivid political debates of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when politics in coastal Kenya revolved successively around two constitutional issues. The first was the possibility that the Ten-Mile Strip, nominally the sovereign territory of the Sultan of Zanzibar, might not become a part of independent Kenya; the second was the 'regionalist' constitution of 1963-64. This article explores the way that people now retell the history of earlier debates, and argues that these retellings suggest both the power and the plasticity of claims to historical knowledge, and that they reveal a profound fault line within 'secessionist' opinion, which separates those who claim political primacy on the basis of autochthony from those who locate their claim to independence in the language of colonial-era treaties.

DURING 2010 AND 2011, THE MOMBASA REPUBLICAN COUNCIL (MRC) became a prominent presence in the politics of coastal Kenya, articulating multiple, longstanding grievances and setting out a defiant agenda which poses an existential threat to the Kenyan state by demanding independence for the coast.¹ Continuing disputes over land ownership; the sense that wealth and jobs are largely held by 'up-country' people; the belief that the coast is deprived of educational facilities and that the revenues generated by tourism all end up elsewhere; conspiracy theories about drugs and politicians – all come together in the meetings and leaflets (and now, on the Facebook page) which bear the name of the MRC - though, as will be suggested below, the level of cohesion and

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¹ Willis Oketch and Joseph Masha, 'Leaders meet over outlawed Mombasa group', *Standard Digital*, 26 May 2011,

<<http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?id=2000035890&cid=¤tPage=1&articleID=2000035890>>, 29 August 2012; Anthony Kitimo, Bozo Jenje and Philip Muyanga, '18 members of banned gang seized', *Daily Nation*, 24 October 2011, <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201110250171.html>>, 29 August 2012; Maureen Mudi, 'Youth killed in Mombasa during MRC-GSU fracas', *The Star*, 25 October 2011 <<http://www.the-star.co.ke/local/coast/46078-youth-killed-in-mombasa-during-mrc-gsu-fracas>>, 29 August 2012.

organization which lies behind that name may be questioned.² . The t-shirts, flags and graffiti of MRC supporters repeat the slogan *Pwani si Kenya*, ‘the coast is not Kenya’ – rendered sometimes, in self-consciously voguish text-speak, as *Pwani C Kenya*. In late 2011 they began to call for a boycott of Kenya’s next national elections; when rowdy youths disrupted a trial poll exercise in Malindi in March 2012, the MRC was blamed.³ The threat to disrupt the elections is evidently viewed as particularly alarming, with potentially wider consequences. Government reactions have veered erratically between repression, accusations that the MRC are linked to Somali militants, and uncertain offers of negotiation; at the time of writing (July 2012), a court ruling which overturns the government’s decision to ban the MRC has created further confusion.⁴

Those claiming to speak for, or in support, of the MRC consistently evoke history in support of this claim to independence. They are particularly concerned with events in the period from the late 1950s to 1964, when two issues were, successively, the subject of a very public and bitter politics at the coast. The first (which has been the subject of recent work by James Brennan) was the status of the ‘Ten-Mile Strip’. Running along the length of the Kenya coastline, but never properly defined or mapped, this was nominally the territory of the Sultan of Zanzibar.⁵ When the rest of British East Africa became Kenya Colony, in 1920, the Strip remained a protectorate. As Kenyan independence moved rapidly from being a distant possibility to an imminent reality, the uncertain legal position of the coast suddenly assumed new significance. When this question was apparently resolved at the end

² Patrick Beja, ‘Why coastal “rebels” won’t give up fight for secession’, *Standard Digital*, 4 June 2011 <<http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?id=2000036563&cid=259&articleID=2000036563>>, 29 August 2012.

³ Mwakera Mwajefa and Bozo Jenje, ‘Coast rebel group scores major diplomatic coup’, *Daily Nation*, 29 October 2011, <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201110300049.html>>, 29 August 2012; ; Kerubo Lornah, ‘We will block next year’s general election, says MRC’, *The Star*, 12 January 2012 <<http://www.the-star.co.ke/local/coast/57646-we-will-block-next-years-general-election-says-mrc>>, 29 August 2012; Kipchumba Some, ‘Coast rebels seize on old grievances’, *Daily Nation*, 4 February 2012 <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201202060960.html>>, 29 August 2012; Daniel Nyassy and Kipchumba Some, ‘Outlawed gang disrupts mock Malindi polls’, *Daily Nation*, 24 March 2012 <<http://www.africanseer.com/countries/kenya/178609-outlawed-gang-disrupts-mock-malindi-polls.html?print>>, 29 August 2012

⁴ Vitalis Kimutai, ‘Aspirants defy NIS warning to court MRC ahead of polls’, *Standard Digital* 28 August 2012 <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?articleID=2000064913&story_title=Aspirants-defy-NIS-warning-to-court-MRC-ahead-of-polls> 31 August 2012; see also Kipchumba Some, ‘State appears clueless on how to handle MRC’, *Daily Nation*, 4 February 2012 <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201202060971.html>>, 29 August 2012

⁵ James Brennan, ‘Lowering the Sultan’s flag: sovereignty and decolonization in coastal Kenya’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50 (4) 2008, pp. 831-61.

of 1961, the second issue immediately arose. This related to the Coast Province as a whole – a much larger administrative unit, which included the ‘Ten-Mile Strip’ but stretched far inland.

From 1962 to 1964 the politics of Kenya’s independence were dominated by the argument over whether each of Kenya’s provinces should become ‘regions’ at independence, with substantial devolved power, or whether they should continue to be no more than administrative units of a centralized state. These debates ended with a clear victory for the proponents of a single, centralized state. The Ten-Mile Strip did not become independent; and after a brief experiment with regional government, Kenya moved to a centralized administrative structure at the end of 1964.

In recalling this history, those who claim to represent the MRC change or blur the details of these events, and draw them into arguments about legitimate authority and the primacy of different communities at the coast. In studying the way that people discuss these events, this article speaks to two wider academic debates. One is about the power of historical representation – power over such representation, and the power created by it. While some of these retellings of history evidence a familiar theme – the malleability of remembered historical knowledge and the flexibility of oral history - the centrality of written treaties suggests a rather different phenomenon. By citing such documents, the MRC offers a challenge to the esoteric knowledge which lies behind state authority, the distribution of which is profoundly inequitable, and it asserts a claim to an alternative authoritative knowledge of documents which can remake power – a subversive appropriation of what Sharon Hutchinson, in another context, has called the ‘hidden powers of “paper”’.⁶ Levels of literacy on the Kenya coast are much higher than those in Hutchinson’s study area in southern Sudan, but here too words on paper are attributed a special, sometimes magical, power which may be particularly compelling for those who cannot read them.⁷ Even for those who can read English, the texts of these treaties are not easily available, and they are couched in an obscure and exclusive style.

Reinterpreting their content, as the MRC does, turns esoteric power on its head in a way which offers

⁶ Sharon Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with war, money and the state* (University of California, Berkeley, CA, 1996), pp. 284-85.

⁷ Janet McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam: Power, personhood and ethno-religious boundaries on the Kenya coast* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2009), pp. 1-2.

an alternative ‘world on paper’, and has a powerful allure for those who feel that documents embody what Hutchinson called a ‘simultaneous dependence on and estrangement from the powers of the government’.⁸

The other debate is about contending visions of legitimacy, and sets a legal sovereignty rooted in the alleged details of treaties against rights claimed on the basis of autochthony. The uneasy relationship between these two kinds of claim is evident elsewhere in Kenya, and across the continent more widely, where what Gabrielle Lynch has called the ‘common search for prosperity and security of tenure amidst underdevelopment and state failure’ has encouraged a language of indigeneity – which is not entirely novel, but has gained new strength in recent years.⁹ Lotte Hughes has shown how recent Maasai claims to land, and to political autonomy, combine references to colonial treaties with the assertion of indigenous status¹⁰. But legal sovereignty and the claims of autochthony may instead be in tension. They invoke different notions of legitimacy – the Casamance separatists of Senegal justify their agenda through reference to colonial treaties to ‘mask the primordial object of the claim’, as Mamadou Diouf has put it, and avoid accusations of tribalism.¹¹ But on Kenya’s coast, sovereignty and autochthony also define different, potentially rivalrous, constituencies: the MRC has many voices, which speak in different ways through different media, and their differences reveal disharmony, as well as a shared sense of oppression. For some of these voices, the MRC is a movement founded based on treaties and the sovereignty which these construct, and it is ethnically and racially inclusive. For others, it is a movement based on autochthony, and on the exclusive claims of particular ethnic groups.

Land and race

⁸ Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, p. 283; the idea of the ‘world on paper’ as a source of power is explored in Sean Hawkins, *Writing and Colonialism in Northern Ghana: The encounter between the LoDagaa and the ‘world on paper’* (University of Toronto, Toronto, 2002).

⁹ Gabrielle Lynch, ‘Kenya’s new indigenes: negotiating local identities in a global context’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 17, 1 (2011), pp. 148-67, p. 150; Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, citizenship and exclusion in Africa and Europe* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009), pp. 2-5, 16-21.

¹⁰ Lotte Hughes, ‘Malice in Maasailand: the historical roots of current political struggles’, *African Affairs*, 104, 415 (2005), pp. 207-24.

¹¹ Mamadou Diouf, ‘Between ethnic memories and colonial history in Senegal: the MDFC and the struggle for independence in Casamance’, p. 222, in Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh and Will Kymlicka (eds), *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa* (James Currey, Oxford, 2004), pp. 218-39; Michael C. Lambert, ‘Violence and the war of words: ethnicity vs. nationalism in the Casamance’ *Africa*, 68, 4 (1998), pp. 585-602.

The treaty of 1895, which conjured legal sovereignty out of the uncertain stuff of Zanzibari influence, was the culmination of a series of treaties which each involved a degree of legal prestidigitation. An Anglo-German treaty in 1886 had defined the Sultan's territories on the coast as a strip ten miles in width; in 1887 British government pressure (and fear of German ambitions) led the Sultan of Zanzibar to grant the Imperial British East Africa Company rights to administer, and collect tax in the strip over which his powers had been recognized. An 1890 treaty placed Zanzibar itself and this strip of coast under British protection. When the Company proved unequal to the task of administering the coast, and tottered into bankruptcy, the Sultan was bullied and bribed to buy out the 'rights' it had been granted through the 1895 treaty, under which the British government took over the Company's powers to administer and tax in return for an annual payment to the Sultan of £17,000: £11,000 in rent, and £6,000 as interest on the £200,000 which (according to a rather complicated logic) the Sultan had paid to the Company to surrender the lease, and was therefore deemed to have lent to the British government.¹²

The agreements of 1890 and 1895 thus embodied two claims to legal sovereignty. They were the formal basis of British control over the Kenya coast – a crucial legitimating device in a time of competitive European expansion. But even more fundamentally they both asserted and limited the sovereignty of the Omani sultans of Zanzibar, on the basis of a political authority that was exiguous outside the few major urban settlements which fringed the Indian Ocean. Rooted in many hundreds of years of settlement from and commerce with the Gulf, the Omani presence more immediate origins in the nineteenth-century, when the Oman's ruling family became both beneficiary and victim of British patronage.¹³ British protection allowed one branch of the family, in Zanzibar, to split away from Oman after the death of the long-ruling Seyyid Said in 1856; and British capital, as well as diplomatic and military support, allowed the newly-styled sultans of Zanzibar to maintain and extend

¹² Ahmed Salim, *The Swahili-speaking Peoples of Kenya's Coast, 1895-1965* (East African Publishing House, Nairobi, 1973), pp. 59-61; 72-73.

¹³ Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African commercial empire into the world economy, 1770-1873* (James Currey, London), pp. 18-38; 201-25.

their influence along the East African coast.¹⁴ The treaties turned this uncertain authority into an internationally-recognized sovereignty – but also limited it to a strip ten miles wide.

Writing of Zanzibar itself, Jonathan Glassman has shown how a long and complex history of settlement and unequal commercial and political relations shaped local understandings of tensions over land, status and wealth which mapped these onto racial categories: British rule did not create this, but it created a context in which antagonism between Arab and African became increasingly bitter and violent in the late colonial period.¹⁵ On the Kenya coast, too, British rule did not create racial thought, nor the sense of hierarchy; but the British colonial enthusiasm for racial categories did exacerbate difference. Legal status, taxation, the possibilities of land ownership – for most of the period of British rule, all were defined by race. In this context the term ‘Swahili’ - which had been widely used to signify and claim membership of a distinctively coastal, largely Muslim and urban community that hinted at the subversion of this racial categorization – fell out of favour as a term for self-definition, and indeed, became almost a term of opprobrium.¹⁶ At the same time, increasing literacy and print media offered new possibilities to debate the boundaries and prerogatives of race.

From the early years of British rule, land had been a particular focus for these debates. Together with the distinct legal status of the coast, the formal abolition of slavery produced an anomalous situation, ripe for friction. In contrast to other parts of Kenya, it was possible for individuals to own freehold land in the Ten-Mile Strip, since the British were committed to respecting the pre-existing property rights of the Sultan’s subjects. But only those classed as Arabs (and some Asians, who had bought land from Arabs) were recognized as possessing these rights; Africans could not own land.¹⁷ Land over which no claim was recognized was judged to be Crown Land. Some of this was set aside for African use, either as reserves or – from the 1920 – as settlement schemes; some was granted as leasehold to European or Asian entrepreneurs. While Asians, Arabs and Europeans were allowed to own land, freehold or leasehold, hardly any had the capital required to work it. Instead, land lay

¹⁴ Norman Bennett, *A History of the Arab State of Zanzibar* (London, Methuen, 1978), pp. 60-164.

¹⁵ Jonathon Glassman, “’Sorting out the tribes’: the creation of racial identities in colonial Zanzibar’s newspaper wars”, *Journal of African History* 41, 3 (2000), pp. 395-428.

¹⁶ Justin Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993), pp. 95-11, 184-200.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-34.

unused, or landlords encouraged African squatters (some of them ex-slaves) to live on the land, in return for labour or for a share of their crop.¹⁸ Those who owned the land could not use it; those who used it could not own it – and the distinction between them was based on racial and ethnic categorizations.¹⁹

The situation became steadily more complex over time. British officials claimed that increasing numbers of people who had lived just inland from the Ten-Mile Strip were moving on to vacant land along the coast, either to escape from food shortages or to take advantage of cash markets for produce – or both. Those described by the British as migrants largely belonged to the groups who were called Nyika at the time, and are now more often called Mijikenda: Giriama, Digo and others, who were considered both coastal and African.²⁰ These squatters themselves insisted that they were simply occupying lands which had always been theirs. By the later 1940s and 1950s, an explicitly racial language of antagonism between landowner and squatter was commonplace along the coast.²¹ The squatters were persistently on the losing side in legal terms and there were frequent evictions; but many landowners could not survive without squatter labour, and the state lacked the resources to prevent the widespread petty challenges to landowners' property rights, which ranged from cutting firewood or harvesting fruit, to grazing livestock on their land or growing and harvesting annual crops.²²

Until the 1950s, the language of these challenges was little recorded; in such written accounts as exist, there is no mention of the 1895 agreement, though evidently Arabs were very conscious of the significance of the treaty, and the symbolic power of the sultan's flag.²³ But in the early 1950s, some Arabs and Asians on the coast, inspired by political developments in Zanzibar and uneasy over the prospect of political change in Kenya, had begun to argue that that the distinct legal position of the

¹⁸ Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters. Plantation labor and agriculture in Zanzibar and colonial Kenya* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1980), pp. 173-272

¹⁹ Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili*, p. 124

²⁰ Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters*, 219.

²¹ H. de W. Waller, 'A report on the problem of squatters on private lands in the coastal strip', nd, in National Archives, UK (NA) CO 822/2142; Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Report, Apr. 1945, Kenya National Archives (KNA) CA 16/71

²² Digo Monthly Intelligence Reports, Feb. 1940, Aug. 1941; KNA CA 16/66.

²³ Brennan, 'Lowering the Sultan's flag'.

Ten-Mile Strip could be used to fend off ‘African’ rule in favour of some form of autonomy.²⁴ Over the next few years they used the term *mwambao* – a name for the coast itself - as an abbreviated statement of their ambitions. The adoption of this slogan conveniently glossed over a persistent uncertainty as to whether the aim was complete independence or some more limited autonomy. Enthusiasm for *mwambao* was characterized, as Brennan has said, by ‘opportunism ... and socio-economic incoherence’ and multiple political parties emerged to campaign for slightly varying visions of this goal; the most visible of these was the Coast People’s Party (CPP).²⁵ Divided though they were, all these parties shared the sense that the 1895 treaty was the basis of their campaign.²⁶

This inspired a reactive opposition to the treaty from those who considered themselves ‘African’ leaders, and who insisted on preminent claims of autochthony. Following the decision by the colonial government to allow district-level political organizations in 1955, several parties were created at the coast which – as was characteristic of the period– were explicitly racial in the way they defined their constituencies: : the Mombasa African District Union (MADU); the Kilifi African Peoples Union (KAPU) and, briefly, the Kwale African Democratic Union.²⁷ All were directly concerned with the land issue:

There was no foreign nation which came to Africa with cargoes of soil from their homes, so there is no foreign soil here on the East African coast. This is black land, and the indigenous people are black, from the outset, and it must remain in black hands until the end of the world.²⁸

²⁴ *The Times* ‘“Self-rule plan” for Kenya Coast. An Arab suggestion’, , 4 June 1956, p. 9; Brennan, ‘Lowering the Sultan’s flag’, p. 847.

²⁵ Brennan, ‘Lowering the Sultan’s flag’, p. 846.

²⁶ Coast People’s Party to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 4 Dec. 1961, NA CO 822/2151; see also Memorandum by Coastal league, No. 1961, NA CO 822/2151; Brennan, ‘Lowering the Sultan’s flag’.

²⁷ Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Report, November 1955 and April 1956, KNA CA 16/72.

²⁸ ‘Sauti ya MADU’, newsletter, 20 July 1958

These organizations were led by educated men who were enthusiastic letter-writers and producers of pamphlets, as well as public-speakers: race, autochthony, political primacy and claims to land were all bound up in their language, and they mocked the illogicality of treaty-based claims:²⁹

It is amazing to claim that one land can be ruled by two monarchs . . . we know we are ruled by just one monarch, and she is British, and it is she who will lead us Africans on the road to self-government³⁰

The leaders of KAPU and MADU saw *mwambao* as a device to perpetuate Arab dominance; in 1960, hearing that the Sultan was visiting London, they wrote urgently to the Secretary of State insisting that he should not make any new agreement concerning the coast without consulting the African populace, who were its rightful owners.³¹ There were multiple ethnic tensions – notably relating to competition for urban employment – within the African population of the coast, notably between the Mijikenda (a term which was just coming into widespread use) and more recent arrivals from ‘up-country’.³² But all shared a suspicion of *mwambao*.

The Robertson Commission

When, in 1961, the British government decided that the issue of the Ten-Mile Strip could best be formally settled by appointing a ‘Commissioner’ to inquire into the matter, the outcome of that inquiry was already decided. The expectation was that the Commissioner, James Robertson, would recommend that the coast should be part of an independent Kenya.³³ But the opponents of *mwambao* did not know this, and what followed was a remarkable moment of political mobilization and popular activism.

By this time, Ronald Ngala had emerged as the main African political leader at the coast, and as a key figure in the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU). KADU was one of two national parties

²⁹ See for example Julius Mwatsama, President of KAPU to DC Kilifi, 3 December and 16 December 1958, in KNA CB 1/14; Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Report, April 1959, KNA CA 16/73.

³⁰ ‘Sauti ya MADU’, newsletter, 27 July 1958.

³¹ Ngala and Khamisi to Secretary of State, 12 June 1960, NA CO 822/2142.

³² Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront: Urban disorder and the transformation of work in colonial Mombasa* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1987), pp. 147-50.

³³ ‘Draft for a preliminary discussion with Governor: the Coastal Strip’ 15 June 1961, NA CO 822/2151; Brennan, ‘Lowering the Sultan’s flag’.

which were created in mid-1960, which were partly ethnic and regional in character – KADU was led by politicians from the Rift Valley, western Kenya and the coast, while the leaders of rival Kenya African National Union (KANU) were largely from central Kenya and Nyanza.³⁴ Ngala's dominance at the coast – and consequently, his role in KADU – were a consequence of his effective deployment of a claim to autochthony. Francis Khamisi, the other prominent African leader on the coast was the descendant of freed slaves, and while he was an articulate exponent of African rights against Arabs, he could be seen as an outsider.³⁵ Ngala, on the other hand, was a Giriama - a member of one of the two largest constituent groups of the Mijikenda. Since 1957 he had systematically evoked the idea of a unified Mijikenda identity by reviving a defunct organization called the Mijikenda Union, which played a major role in the campaign against *mwambao*.³⁶ As formal leader of the Union, Ngala enlisted Robert Matano, newly elected to Kenya's parliament and, like Ngala, a Christian with a professional background in teaching and then in educational administration. Unlike KADU and other political parties, the Mijikenda Union remained formally a cultural organization – and its public pronouncements emphasized tradition and autochthony, not education or national politics. Other groups also opposed coastal autonomy. KANU, KADU's national rival, had a local presence at the coast, and was virulently anti-*mwambao*; and there was also the Coast African Political Union (CAPU), a largely Mijikenda party which continued the rhetorical denunciation of Arabs which had characterized KAPU and MADU, and was to be increasingly ambivalent in its attitude towards Africans who were not from the coast.³⁷

When Robertson came to the coast to gather evidence, he encountered a coordinated series of demonstrations and deputations, and multiple memoranda. As one delegation explained, 'All the KADU, KANU and Miji Kenda people were opposed to Coastal Autonomy, and desired Kenya to

³⁴ Keith Kyle, *The Politics of the Independence of Kenya* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 11-35

³⁵ Francis Khamisi's background, and his reliance on non-Mijikenda support, are suggested by his 'statutory declaration' for the 1958 election, which is at f. 127, KNA OP 1/320

³⁶ Justin Willis and George Gona, 'Tradition, tribe and state in Kenya: the Mijikenda Union, 1945-1980', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, (forthcoming); Eric Aseka, *Ronald Ngala* (East African Educational Publishers, Nairobi, 1993)

³⁷ Msanifu Kombo, KANU Mombasa Branch to 'Right Honourable Members of Parliament', London, 27 July 1961, NA CO 822/2151; Richard Stren, 'Factional politics and central control in Mombasa, 1960-1969', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 4, 1 (1970), pp. 33-56

develop as a unitary state'.³⁸ In both demonstrations and deputations, the Mijikenda Union became prominent in the campaign against *mwambao*, and associated with an argument about autochthony, which subtly turned the issue from one which set Arabs against Africans into a more specific claim by 'the Mijikenda' as a group to be the 'indigenous' or 'native' population – and therefore the proper owners – of the coast.³⁹

Ngala told Robertson that the Mijikenda 'want you to help them by doing away with the Coastal Strip agreement of 1895, which was made without their consent'.⁴⁰ A 'Mijikenda' delegation declared that 'they were all Africans, united together. They did not recognize the coastal strip'; and on similar lines, a CAPU delegation insisted that 'the Africans had not been consulted when the Treaty was made, and they demanded that it should be abolished at once'.⁴¹ As one CAPU memorandum neatly summed it up, the debate set the rights established by the 1895 treaty against those claimed on the grounds of autochthony: "The immigrant races" argument is based chiefly on the treaty while ours is based on the principle of our very long occupation of the Coast'.⁴²

As part of this vigorous campaign, Robert Matano stage-managed a delegation of 'Mijikenda elders' to the Sultan of Zanzibar.⁴³ That in itself was an interesting nod to history – though the press coverage at the time did not mention it, it was surely inspired by local memory of a delegation to Zanzibar by elders in 1888.⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, the newspaper record suggests that the delegation resulted in an exchange of banalities:

³⁸ Record of meeting with KADU delegation, Msambweni, 19 October 1961, NA CO 894/8.

³⁹ *Daily Natio*, 'Offer of truce to Arabs at coast', 12 October 1961; *Mombasa Times*, 'Commissioner condemns intimidation', 11 October 1961 (clippings in NA CO 894/2); interview with Ali Chizondo, Diani, 1 July 2010'; telegram, Ngala to Secretary of State, 22 September 1961, NA CO 822/2151.

⁴⁰ Memorandum by Ngala to Robertson, 26 Oct. 1961, NA CO 894/10

⁴¹ 'Notes of a meeting . . . with CAPU', 16 October 1961, NA CO 894/4; 'Notes of a meeting between Mr Robertson and a delegation of Miji Kenda', 24 October 1961, NA 894/10; 'Kumbukumbu . . . ya KANU na KADU Malindi', 13 October 1961, NA CO 894/12'; October 1961, NA CO 894/13; Ngala, KADU to Secretary of State, 20 November 1961, NA CO 822/2151; Korokoro to Secretary of State, nd December 1961, NA CO 822/2151; 'A memorandum from the people of Mijikenda', 18 September 1962, NA CO 897/1

⁴² CAPU memorandum, nd, NA CO 894/12.

⁴³ *Mombasa Times*, 'Weekend activity over Coast autonomy', 9 October 1961; *Mombasa Times*, 'Sultan to hear tribes' views', 11 October 1961 (clippings in NA CO 894/2)

⁴⁴ Salim, *Swahili –Speaking Peoples*, p. 61.

The Sultan of Zanzibar has assured a delegation of the Miji Kenda tribes from the Kenya Coastal Strip that he is determined to find a peaceful solution to the problem of the Protectorate . . . The delegation's main purpose was to ask the Sultan to use his good offices to restrain the Arabs in the Protectorate and to implore them to stop their provocative campaign.⁴⁵

When members of the delegation visited the Kenya Governor on return from Zanzibar, they reportedly told him that they were 'totally opposed to the idea of an autonomous state'.⁴⁶ There is no evidence that the delegation's visit had any effect on the attitude of the Sultan – who had by this time made it clear that he had no intention of supporting the secessionists.⁴⁷ Nor, presumably, was it of much concern to Robertson, who had already been told privately by the Governor that 'most thinking people in Nairobi and in the Government felt that autonomy for the Coast was a non-starter'.⁴⁸ But it did assert a specifically Mijikenda claim to political primacy.

In December 1961 Robertson duly recommended that the Ten-Mile Strip should become part of Kenya at independence.⁴⁹ The formal conclusion of the process was delayed for almost two years, however. In October 1963, shortly before independence, the Sultan renounced his claims to sovereignty over the coast in a treaty between Britain and the Sultan, and an immediately consequent exchange of letters between the prime ministers of Kenya and Zanzibar set out guarantees over Muslim education, worship and the jurisdiction of Muslim family law courts, as well as existing property rights, on the coast.⁵⁰ The delay between Robertson's report and the treaty was not a result of difficult negotiations with the Sultan – who had made clear his acceptance of Robertson's recommendations in March 1962.⁵¹ It was rather that the issue of the Sultan's sovereignty had become entirely overshadowed by another debate, which had swiftly changed patterns of racial and ethnic

⁴⁵ *Mombasa Times*, 'Sultan gives assurances on coastal strip', 20 October 1961 (clippings in CO 894/2).

⁴⁶ *Daily Nation*, 'Nine tribes seek strong provinces', 23 October 1961 (clippings in CO 894/2).

⁴⁷ Brennan, 'Lowering the Sultan's flag', p. 831.

⁴⁸ Notes of a meeting held at Government House, 4 October 1961, NA CO 894/3

⁴⁹ Brennan, 'Lowering the Sultan's flag'; Salim, *Swahili-Speaking Peoples*, pp. 240-41.

⁵⁰ *Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom, His Highness the Sultan of Zanzibar, the Government of Kenya, and the Government of Zanzibar*, Cmnd 2161, 1963

⁵¹ Salim, *Swahili-speaking Peoples*, p. 242.

alliance in ways which were to have long-term significance. This was the debate over regionalism, or *majimbo*.

Mwambao to Majimbo

In October 1961 – even as Robertson was collecting evidence – KADU had been developing a new and distinctive policy, calling for Kenya to become independent with a constitution which would turn its former, centralized system of provinces into ‘regions’ with significant devolved powers. There is continued debate over the extent to which this policy may have been encouraged by white settlers, who saw it as a possible way to entrench their privileged position; whatever the origin of the policy, regionalism was seized upon by Ngala and other KADU leaders as a policy which answered their anxieties over domination by Kikuyu and Luo – the two ethnic groups which mainly supported KANU.⁵² In some of the submissions to Robertson, the idea of regionalism was making its first, uncertain appearance, and some struggled to distinguish this idea from that of secession: pressed in one meeting over apparent inconsistency, one advocate of regionalism had to admit that ‘they had not worked out details as yet’.⁵³ By the end of 1961, the brief alliance which had allowed KANU and KADU supporters on the coast to cooperate in rejecting *mwambao* had been forgotten; for the next three years, regionalism was the key issue, and in this case the debate concerned the Coast Province as a whole, rather than the Ten-Mile Strip. Regionalism set coastal people as a whole against those from up-country; in this time of multiple, ephemeral parties, a Coast People’s United Front came into brief existence, claiming to unite a constituency of Arabs, Asians and Mijikenda.⁵⁴ The most extreme supporters of regionalism made sweeping demands:

⁵² David Anderson ‘Yours in struggle for *Majimbo*: nationalism and the party politics of decolonization in Kenya’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, **40**, 3 (2005), pp. 547-84

⁵³ ‘Notes of a meeting’, 16 October 1961, NA CO 894/4; see also record of meeting with ‘Delegation from the Miji Kenda’, 19 October 1961, NA CO 894/8 with record of meeting with KADU delegation, 20 October 1961, NA CO 894/4

⁵⁴ ‘Coast Region – autonomous/secessionist trends’, Deputy Director of Intelligence, 25 June 1963, KNA GO/GO7/6A

We do not want any Wakamba, Luos and Kikuyus to take any responsible [sic] in our District, they should be under our responsible in this Region, or to be removed away from our reserves and back to their own regions.⁵⁵

CAPU, which in 1961 had opposed *mwambao*, was by 1962 demanding ‘complete autonomy’ and ‘independence’ for the coast within a year, and the ‘repatriation’ of ‘up-country’ civil servants.⁵⁶

Regionalism had a brief triumph in 1962, when in the negotiations over Kenyan independence, KANU reluctantly agreed to KADU’s demand that Kenya would move to self-government under a regionalist constitution. This was a popular policy on the coast, and in the elections of 1963 KADU won 9 of the 12 coastal seats in the national parliament (with almost two-thirds of the votes cast), and 21 of the 30 seats in the Coast Regional Assembly.⁵⁷ But this was a hollow victory, for overall the national parliament was dominated by KANU, whose leaders had made clear both their preference for a centralized independent state, and their intention to abolish regionalism as soon as possible.⁵⁸ Even before formal independence in December 1963 KANU had begun to systematically undermine the regional governments, and during 1964 there was a steady stream of defections from KADU to KANU.⁵⁹ Ngala, who had been elected as leader of the Coast Assembly and as a national MP, was the last to admit defeat; in November 1964, having been abandoned by all the other KADU leaders, he crossed the floor to join the ruling party.⁶⁰ Within two months a new constitution had been passed, abolishing the regions and reintroducing the centralized administrative state that had been established by colonialism.

For many at the coast, emboldened by Ngala’s vivid promises to defend regionalism to the end, the dissolution of KADU and of the regional government was a bitter moment.⁶¹ Regionalism had

⁵⁵ Bakari Kitauro, Digo Political Union, DC Kwale, 18 September 1962, NA CO 897/1.

⁵⁶ Alex Karisa, President, CAPU to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 30 September 1962, NA CO 822/2151.

⁵⁷ See election results in *East African Standard*, 28 and 29 May 1963: of 215,085 votes cast in Coast Province KADU took 137,963 and KANU 56,662. The KANU vote was concentrated in Mombasa, and in the two Taita constituencies, well inland from the Ten-Mile Strip.

⁵⁸ Kyle, *The Politics of the Independence*, pp. 176-77.

⁵⁹ Anderson, ‘Yours in struggle’, pp. 562-63; Salim, *Swahili-Speaking Peoples*, pp. 243-44.

⁶⁰ Kyle, *The Politics of the Independence*, p. 199.

⁶¹ Interview, Safari wa Yeri, former youth organizer, Mombasa, 24 June 2010; George Gona, ‘Portrait of a Nationalist: the Life of Ronald Ngala’, *Hekima* 4,1 (2009), pp. 145-162

commanded support from disappointed supporters of *mwambao*, as well as their former opponents; from those who defined themselves as Arabs and from those whose collective sense of themselves as Mijikenda had been developed by the vivid politics of late 1961. The demise of KADU left no space for a formal politics of coastal identity; somewhat ironically, some coastal militants joined the Kenya People's Union (KPU) in 1966 as a means to articulate their opposition, although the KPU was far from regionalist in its policies.⁶² Writing a history of the coast in the early 1970s, Salim carefully distanced himself (and the population generally) from any idea of separatism, avowing instead 'optimism and enthusiasm for participation in nation-building'.⁶³ But a sense of grievance persisted, exacerbated by the continuing tensions over land. These could still be framed as a conflict between Arabs and Africans, but the steady transfer into up-country African hands of a significant proportion of coastal land, and the predominance of 'up-country' people in civil service and parastatal jobs, meant that ethnicity was a steadily more important fault-line. A factional local electoral politics – in Mombasa, especially – revolved around these two cross-cutting tensions, with rival leaders mobilizing constantly shifting alliances which sometimes linked Arabs and coastal Africans against 'up-country' Africans, and sometimes pitted Arabs against Africans.⁶⁴

From the 1990s, the return of multi-party politics created new space for the public articulation of these grievances, in the context of the institutional weakness, diffusion of violence and the rise of a party-politics driven by ethnic clientilism which Susanne Mueller has identified as the key elements in the development of an increasingly febrile political climate across Kenya.⁶⁵ Local figures in KANU at the coast instrumentalized coastal grievances in the 1992 and 1997 elections, seeking to drive out Kikuyu and Luo residents who might vote for the opposition – for the ethnic alignments of party politics had been ironically reversed, and now KANU was in the hands of Moi, Ngala's erstwhile ally and Kenya's most accomplished political survivor. Brief but locally savage spasms of violence were

⁶² Interview, Daniel Korokoro, former party activist, Chasimba, 6 January 2011.

⁶³ Salim, *Swahili-Speaking Peoples*, p. 246.

⁶⁴ Stren, 'Factional politics', pp. 43-51.

⁶⁵ Susanne Mueller, 'The political economy of Kenya's crisis', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 2, 2 (2008), pp. 185-210

preceded by campaigns of whispering and threatening leaflets aimed at ‘up-country’ people.⁶⁶ The generalized sense of coastal grievance overlapped uncertainly with a sense of exclusion which was specific to Muslims – the ‘Islamic Party of Kenya’, which flourished briefly in the 1990s, while cast as a movement of ‘Islamic extremism’, was a largely coastal movement which picked up on the wider themes of economic and educational marginalization, and the alleged extraction of wealth by up-country people.⁶⁷ A succession of minor, legal, parties drew on this feeling, though none were bold enough to publicly advocate secession.⁶⁸ But the political context was changed again by the very active and vigorous debate on a new constitution which followed the 2002 election, which gained in intensity as a result of the 2005 referendum. This effectively created a ‘critical juncture’ in Kenyan politics more widely; new political possibilities suddenly opened out, authorizing public debate over the fundamentals of Kenya’s future in a way which had not been possible since the early 1960s.⁶⁹

The many voices of the MRC

At the beginning of 2005 a new organization announced its appearance at the Kenya coast. The ‘Republican Council’ addressed a letter to the Queen Elizabeth II which set out, at considerable length, the multiple grievances of coastal people. The list was familiar enough: poor education provision, the domination of up-country people in public sector jobs, the ‘grabbing of huge chunks of Coastal land’ by Kenyatta and others. The letter revived the treaty-based claims making of mwambaoism: it denounced the agreements of 1963 and of 1895; invoking instead the Zanzibar protectorate agreement of 1890 which it claimed (inaccurately, on numerous grounds):

provides a road map and a whole sale politico-administrative package under which the Kenya Colony colonized by the British Governors and the Coastal Protectorate (also known as

⁶⁶ Lisa Misol, Joost Hiltermann and Ernst Hogendoorn, *Playing With Fire: Weapons Proliferation, Political Violence and Human Rights in Kenya* (New York, Human Rights Watch, 2005), pp. 33-105; A. M. Akiwumi, *Report of the Judicial Commission Appointed to Inquire into Tribal Clashes in Kenya* (Nairobi, Republic of Kenya, 1999), pp. 233-78.

⁶⁷ Pace the analysis in Arye Oded, ‘Islamic extremism in Kenya: the rise and fall of Sheikh Khalid Balala’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* **26**, 4 (1996), pp. 406-18.

⁶⁸ George Gona, ‘Changing political faces on Kenya’s coast, 1992-2007’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* **2**, 2 (2008), pp. 242-53.

⁶⁹ Gabrielle Lynch, *I Say to You. Ethnic politics and the Kalenjin in Kenya* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2011), pp. 51, 182-83.

Kenya Protectorate) colonized by the Arabs under Arab sultans were to be two independent territorial entities with definite territorial boundaries, full and equal constitutional rights.⁷⁰

The letter asserted that since the 2004 ‘Bomas draft’ of a new Kenyan constitution - which would have addressed coastal grievances – had been sabotaged by the ‘land grabbers’ then ‘we the Coast Protectorate Natives denounce the citizenship of Kenya’ and that ‘the Coastal Protectorate, known as Mombasa, is declared a Republic of Mombasa from now – and is under the authority of the Republican Council’. The letter was signed by Omar Mwamwazi and twelve others, including H. R. Nzai.

The text of the letter was circulated at the coast (and was still circulating in 2011). Its verbose and jumbled evocation of history, and the very idea of writing to the Queen, were an ambitious attempt to appropriate the authority of documentary knowledge and present a distinctive challenge to state legitimacy. The letter’s evocation of coastal identity was interestingly ambivalent. In one passage it offered a deep history of Arab settlement on the coast:

The Coastal Strip initially had been a colony of the Ammu Zaid Arabs who made Benadir Coast their capital in 740 AD and ruled important towns of the East Coast of Africa for two hundred years (200 years), then a colony of the Arab Zanj Empire from Persia under Hassan Bin Ali in 975 AD and ruled the whole of the East Coast of Africa for five hundred years (500 years) then a colony of the Portuguese who came in the early fifteenth century and ruled the East Coast of Africa for nearly four hundred years (400 years).

The letter’s use of the term ‘coastals’, and the denunciation of ‘the black colonialism of Kenya against the entire Coastal Protectorate (the Republic of Mombasa)’ suggested a racially inclusive vision of coast identity which embraced Arabs and Asians as well as Africans and which used the sultan’s

⁷⁰ Republican Council to ‘Your Majesty, Queen of the United Kingdom’, 1 January 2005 (document supplied by Randu Nzai, November 2011)

former sovereignty over the coast as the basis for a claim to independence, just as *mwambao* supporters had done in the early 1960s. But elsewhere the letter implied that the Mijikenda were the rightful population of the coast: ‘That’s why until today the government of Kenya works hard to ensure that the Mijikenda remain economically poor so that they cannot one day rise against the ills of the Central Kenya government.’

Soon after this letter was written, the police raided what they said was a camp where young men were swearing oaths to commit violence and undergoing military training; several people were killed and a number arrested, including Mwamnwadzi.⁷¹ H. R. Nzai, or Randu Nzai Ruwa as he came to be more usually styled, became the most prominent, if occasional spokesman for the group. In 2010, in the run-up to the referendum on a new draft constitution, new documents - now using the name Republican Council of Mombasa – began to circulate. One letter, signed by Randu Nzai, was addressed to all coastal members of parliament:

The Republican Council of Mombasa (RECOMO) is kindly calling for your support to save the Coastal natives from the Government of Kenya . . . either through peace or bloodshed
Coast will one day be a country of its own.⁷²

A further letter was sent to the Queen, and another to the East African Parliament.⁷³ The Republican Council also produced a manifesto in 2010, which identified the people of the coast as including Mijikenda, Arabs and Asians, and evoked the treaties of 1895 and 1963 and the Robertson commission report in a claim to independence whose breathless style and aberrant punctuation blurred detail while asserting knowledge:

⁷¹ ‘Police kill 3 youths in forest ambush’, *Daily Nation*, 18 March 2005 www.nationmedia.com/dailynation, 11 January 2006; ‘Kenya’s coastal rebels’, BBC News, 8 April 2005 (at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4425083.stm>).

⁷² Randu Nzai Ruwa, Secretary- General, Republican Council of Mombasa to Coast MPs, 6 February 2010 (copy supplied by Randu Nzai, Nov. 2011).

⁷³ Randu Nzai Ruwa, Secretary general and Omar Khamisi Mwamnwadzi, Chairman, Republican Council of Mombasa to members of East African Assembly, 6 February 2010 (document supplied by Randu Nzai, November 2011).

. . .the British government and the government of Zanzibar placed the Coast region under the protection of the government of Kenya. Agreement No cmnd 2161 which on its paragraph four (4) third and fourth lines stated that the government of Kenya, entered into certain undertaking concerning the protection after Kenya has attained independence.

Some of the reasons that made this Coast Region be placed under Kenya's protection was well illustrated in the colony and protectorate of Kenya sessional paper No 9 of 1961 in chapter '*V examination of proposed solutions* Section (a) clause 50 line 15 stating. A number of people said that they wanted the British to maintain their connexion with the coastal strip and indeed looked to her Majesty's government to defend them against possible invasion from upcountry Kenya tribes people. If the strip was set up as an autonomous state. The letters written by M. Shamte and J. Kenyatta concluded in London 5th October 1963 and exchanged to each other. Now under the Mombasa Republican council we can administer ourselves. Therefore the Republic of Kenya is being urged by the Mombasa republican Council to nullify the 8/10/1963 Agreement.⁷⁴

Randu Nzai took up other issues on which local feeling ran deep. Early in 2011, he and two others brought a civil case to the High Court to try and stop the privatization of some functions of the Port of Mombasa, widely suspected of benefitting well-connected individuals from 'up-country'; the case lapsed when the privatization process was suspended for other reasons, but it provided another opportunity to produce and circulate documents.⁷⁵ By early 2011, more letters were circulating, like that of 2005, evoking history in support of claims to independence in the name of what was now called the Mombasa Republican Council; in late 2011, the eviction of squatters provided an opportunity for the MRC to publicly restate the urgency of addressing the multiple historical

⁷⁴ 'The Mombasa Republican Council Manifesto', 2010 (document supplied by Randu Nzai, November 2011; also posted on 6 September 2011 at

<http://jukwaa.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=general&action=display&thread=5762>.

⁷⁵ High Court of Kenya, Order by Consent, dated 27 May 2011 (copy supplied by Randu Nzai, November 2011)

injustices meted against the coast people, particularly over land.⁷⁶ A letter sent to the International Court of Justice by a Ugandan solicitor working for the MRC – copies of which were, again, circulated at the coast - declared that:

Before Britain granted independence to the Kenya Colony and Protectorate the British government did place Coastal strip under Kenya Government for security reasons and protection for a period up to when the Coastal strip was ready to take up its mantle as an autonomous state. There was no agreement whatsoever that the Coastal Strip was to form part of Kenya.⁷⁷

While hostile critics persistently allege that the MRC was a radical Muslim organization linked to al-Shabaab, support has by no means been confined to Muslims.⁷⁸ In mid-2011 a meeting of '[t]he Pwani Church, which is a confederation of Christian churches of indigenous coastal peoples' asserted its support for the Mombasa Republican Council as a 'spontaneous coastal people response to the long-standing grievances of the coastal people against the government of Kenya and . . . up-country immigrants communities'.⁷⁹

Alongside these circulating documents, and taking up and amplifying their themes, people continued to elaborate through speech – sometimes to crowds, sometimes in everyday conversation - their claims to an alternative knowledge of the treaties of the 1890s and 1960s. Confusion over the content of these documents has multiplied: the only extended study of the MRC, while in many ways a reflective and thoughtful piece of work, reproduces multiple factual inaccuracies.⁸⁰ One common assertion is that the agreements enshrined coastal autonomy, since the treaty uniting the coast with

⁷⁶ Bozo Jenje, George Kikami and Jonathan Manyindo, 'Banned group urges squatters to resist eviction from ancestral land', *Daily Nation*, 13 December 2011 <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201112140075.html>> 29 August 2012.

⁷⁷ Ambrose Tebyasa to Chief Registrar, International Court of Justice, 2 November 2010 (copy circulating in Kaloleni, January 2011)

⁷⁸ For the al-Shabaab allegation see for example James Macharia, 'Separatist storm brewing on Kenya's coast', Reuters, 23 July 2012: at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/07/23/uk-kenya-coast-mrc-idUKBRE86M0H820120723>

⁷⁹ 'Statement on the Mombasa Republican Council', Bishop James Mungumi and Bishop Stephen Mkomu and 31 signatories, nd 2010 (document supplied by Randu Nzai, November 2011).

⁸⁰ Paul Goldsmith, 'The Mombasa Republican Council. Conflict Assessment: Threats and Opportunities for Engagement', November 2011.

Kenya was to be valid only for fifty years. At a public meeting in October 2011 a speaker announced that ‘documents in the organisation’s possession indicated that by 2013 the government of Kenya should return the region to its indigenous people after the expiry of a 50-year “lease” agreement signed on October 5 1963’; and in January 2012 a man who claimed to be the chairman of the MRC ‘branch’ in Likoni demanded rhetorically in a press conference “Why does Kenya fail to honor its contract with Pwani which was signed in 1963?”⁸¹ In 2010, an interviewee insisted ‘that treaty ended after 50 years, it ended, now I want my part, as a Digo, a Mijikenda. The Sultan, and the English, and Kenyatta, all agreed and signed.’⁸² A prominent Mijikenda Muslim leader made a similar claim in 2009 – though he presented the treaty as one which specifically concerned Muslims.⁸³

Written documents and the MRC’s Facebook site echo these circulating arguments, though often elliptically, spreading and affirming slightly variant forms of this alternative knowledge; multiple individuals who claim to speak for the organization give press statements articulating slightly differing versions. A leaflet circulated in the name of the MRC in 2011 explained that: ‘We are mobilizing the community who do not know the truth about the treaty which produced the union and the conditions which covered the completion of the agreement for the union’.⁸⁴ Facebook posts similarly assert that the Kenya government has in some way failed to meet the terms of the 1963 agreements, and so these are now void. ‘[T]he rule of Kenya here on our coast is not how we agreed it should be in our treaty’, declared one post; while another stated:

⁸¹ Mwakera Mwajefa and Bozo Jenje, ‘Coast rebel group scores major diplomatic coup’, *Daily Nation*, 29 October 2011 <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201110300049.html>>, 29 August 2012; Kerubo Lornah, ‘We will block next year’s election, says MRC’, *The Star*, 12 January 2012 <<http://www.the-star.co.ke/local/coast/57646-we-will-block-next-years-general-election-says-mrc>>, 29 August 2012..

⁸² Interview, Ali Chizondo, activist, and colleagues, Ukunda, 1 July 2010.

⁸³ Interview, Juma Ngao, activist, Mombasa, 20 July 2009.

⁸⁴ ‘What you need to know about the Mombasa Republican Council’; leaflet circulating around Kaloleni in January 2011.

... we have a treaty with Kenya, if all that we agreed is not fulfilled then there is justice for a broken treaty, we agreed with Kenya that the administration from the highest rank to the bottom should be our fellow coast people.⁸⁵

Yet another post offered a rather disingenuously-presented extract from Robertson's recommendations: 'The coastal strip should be integrated administratively with Kenya before self-government and independence takes place'. Robertson had meant this to refer to Kenyan independence, but quoted thus the extract might be taken to mean *coastal* independence: 'so, folks, this is clear, what can those who are opposed to us say now?', asked the post, rhetorically.⁸⁶ More plaintively, another post on the site asked: 'when the treaty with Kenya ends will there be a new treaty or will the coast be a country by itself?'⁸⁷

Coastal politicians, who have established themselves in Kenya's patrimonial national politics as intermediaries between the region and the centre, have struggled to manage the challenge of the MRC. They are mostly reluctant to denounce a movement which has apparently captured much public sympathy; but secession would remove the need for intermediacy on which their positions rely. By early 2012, a number of them were hesitantly moving to express their sympathy for the MRC, while avoiding any direct endorsement of its secessionist agenda.⁸⁸ Meanwhile the self-proclaimed leaders of the MRC themselves continue to generate uncertainty over the precise nature of their agenda, distancing themselves from leaflets threatening violence against 'up-country' people, and announcing

⁸⁵ MRC Facebook posts, 25 October 2011 and 18 November 2011, <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Mombasa-Republican-Council-MRC/148508195220835>>., 20 November 2011

⁸⁶ MRC Facebook post, 7 February 2012, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Mombasa-Republican-Council-MRC/148508195220835>, 8 February 2012..

⁸⁷ MRC Facebook post, Abbas Kama, 18 November 2011 <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Mombasa-Republican-Council-MRC/148508195220835>> 20 November 2012.

⁸⁸ Wesonga Ochieng, 'Politicians are reaching out to us, claims MRC', *The Star*, 7 December 2011 <<http://www.the-star.co.ke/local/coast/52815-politicians-are-reaching-out-to-us-claims-mrc>>, 29 August 2012; Maureen Mudi, 'Mwakwere now backs outlawed youth group', *The Star*, 24 October 2011 <<http://www.the-star.co.ke/local/coast/45871-mrc>>, 29 August 2012; Amina Kibirige, 'Muslim leaders ask State to lift ban on outlawed group', *Daily Nation*, 6 February 2012 <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201202070775.html>> 29 August 2012.

that the movement is peaceful and a ‘social’ one – but also insisting on independence, and in some cases threatening to enforce an electoral boycott by violence.⁸⁹

Behind these uncertainties looms a larger one, for the old division within ‘coastal’ opinion is still apparent – though some argue that the MRC has united coastal people.⁹⁰ Those who say they speak for the MRC have started to use the Swahili term *wapwani*, ‘coast people’, to define their constituency; English translations of this have included ‘coastarians’. But who are the *wapwani*? The distinction between ‘Arab’ and ‘African’ is still readily evoked in coastal politics: Mijikenda (including many Muslim Mijikenda) denounce the alleged social and economic privileges of those they call Arabs; and while those who call themselves Arabs or Swahili are more reluctant to use racial language publicly, some will talk privately of Africans with a condescension which borders on contempt.⁹¹ Those who claim to speak on behalf of, or in support of, the MRC deploy different representations of history in arguing the case for coastal secession, which offer very different ideas of where rightful authority over the coast lies, and what it is to be ‘coastal’. The written style and uploaded images on the MRC Facebook page suggest that it is the work of young urbanites; when Chirau Mwakwere, currently the most prominent coastal politician, chided the MRC for being too focused on Mombasa, he was asserting the importance of what he called the ‘indigenous’ Mijikenda constituency, implying a claim to the coast based on autochthony, not on ingenious re-readings of historic treaties; the decision to use the word Mombasa in the MRC’s title (the logic of which is not

⁸⁹ Philip Mbaji, ‘Panic grips Likoni residents over leaflets’, *The Star*, 8 December 2011 <<http://www.the-star.co.ke/local/coast/53027-panic-grips-likoni-residents-over-leaflets>> 29 August 2012;; Wesonga Ochieng and Philip Mbaji, ‘Mudavadi wants talks with MRC speeded up’, *The Star*, 18 January 2012 <<http://www.the-star.co.ke/local/coast/58558-mudavadi-wants-talks-with-mrc-speeded-up>>, 29 August 2012; . Similar leaflets were distributed in several places: Martin Mwita, ‘Kaloleni DC warns over hate leaflets’, *The Star*, 16 January 2012 <<http://www.the-star.co.ke/local/coast/58193-kaloleni-dc-warns-over-leaflets>>, 29 August 2012; Patrick Mathangani, ‘Proscribed group plans to secede’, *Standard Digital*, 24 August 2011 <<http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?id=2000041427&articleID=2000041427>> 29 August 2012. For the more or less explicit threat of violence, see the remarks attributed to Omar Mwamnwadzi in Macharia, ‘Separatist storm brewing on Kenya’s coast’.

⁹⁰ Goldsmith, ‘The Mombasa Republican Council’, p. 28.

⁹¹ Mcintosh, *The Edge of Islam*; *Daily Nation*, ‘Minister summoned afresh for hate speech charge’, 27 August 2012 <<http://www.nation.co.ke/News/politics/-/1064/1487942/-/9glc0e/-/index.html>> 29 August 2012.

clear) has attracted wider unfavourable comment.⁹² One of the documents circulating in the name of the MRC asserts that the organization represents ‘the original people of the coastal mwambao which was under British protection’, and ‘a collection of Mijikenda, Taita-Taveta, Pokomo Bajuni’: a list which pointedly excludes Arabs and Swahili.⁹³ This contrasts with the more expansive definition offered by the MRC manifesto:

The country, Mombasa which extends right from the Indian Ocean to Sultan Hamud, from Lungalunga to Kismayu [is] owned by natives, namely; the Mijikendas, Taitas, Pokomos, Bajunis, Arabs, Hindus and other Coastal tribes.⁹⁴

Postings on the MRC Facebook page similarly insist that the movement is inclusive: ‘here on the coast there are people of different classes, tribes and religions, and we coast people know one another; there are black coast people and white coast people.’⁹⁵ The iconography of the movement has also sought inclusivity, incorporating the symbols once used by both the pro-*mwambao* CPP and by anti-*mwambao* CAPU; the Facebook site carries multiple images of Mombasa’s Old Town, evoking an urban, multi-racial ideal of a coastal identity which is cosmopolitan and at ease with technology.

But clearly not all agree. And some oral histories circulating on the coast outside Mombasa, in particular, rework the events of the early 1960s to offer a different argument. Descriptions of the intention and the outcome of the delegation to the Sultan in 1961 turn this from an ephemeral moment of political theatre into a definitional episode. The elders, in these accounts, went not to denounce the Sultan’s claim to sovereignty, but to ask that the coast be given to them, as representatives of the Mijikenda. Sometimes this is explicitly framed as a riposte to ‘Arab’ claims – as it was in the 1960s –

⁹² Brian Otieno, ‘MRC says it’s not working for tycoons in Mombasa’, *The Star*, 4 January 2012 <<http://www.the-star.co.ke/local/coast/56373-mrc-says-its-not-working-for-tycoons-in-mombasa>> 29 August 2012; Goldsmith, ‘The Mombasa Republican Council’, p. 29.

⁹³ ‘What you need to know about the Mombasa Republican Council’;

⁹⁴ ‘The Mombasa Republican Council Manifesto’, 2010 (document supplied by Randu Nzai, November 2011; also posted on 6 September 2011 at <http://jukwaa.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=general&action=display&thread=5762>.)

⁹⁵ MRC posting, 27 Oct. 2011 and 11 November 2011 <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Mombasa-Republican-Council-MRC/148508195220835>> 20 November 2011; For other posts on the MRC Facebook site warning against division among coast people, see Ali Juma, 11 November. 2011; Abdulmajid Abdullah, 2 November 2011 <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Mombasa-Republican-Council-MRC/148508195220835>> 20 November 2011.

but now it is also presented as a rejection of the claims of the Kenyan state: as one man put it, the delegation went because ‘we are not Kenyans’.⁹⁶ The delegation is presented as a mission which asserted indigenous rights against the claims of the Sultan and those of Kenya: ‘[Matano] went to Zanzibar with his committee to fight for the Coast province, you see – they had gone to demand Mwambao for the coast, we wanted to fight for it so we may rule ourselves’.⁹⁷ ‘These people went to Zanzibar with Ronald Ngala . . . to look for our independence, a coastal region . . . they were looking for the coast, for the indigenous coastal people’.⁹⁸

Layers of detail are added, suggesting that the delegation were presented with a letter attesting to ‘Mijikenda’ ownership of the coast, and thus locating the delegation as part of the complex chain of negotiations over independence and the trail of documents which these spawned:

. . . they went to Zanzibar with Ngala . . . he went with the elders and sat with the Sultan, they talked many times, coming and going, you know, when you go to negotiations it doesn’t take only one time, they came and went, they came and went, until in the end, it was necessary, I think the Queen intervened, the British government intervened, when it intervened then the Sultan and the Mijikenda elders had to make a plan for the independence of the coast, the Sultan would leave and the coast would be independent.⁹⁹

The suggestion that the delegation to the coast had produced a document of Mijikenda ‘ownership’ may not be entirely a novelty. One interviewee explained that Matano himself had claimed to be in possession of this document in the 1970s, in an early attempt to appropriate the mysterious power of paper:

[Matano said] “Ngala sent me and the elders . . . I took the elders to Zanzibar, we went and saw the Sultan and said we have come as the Mijikenda Union, these elders of the nine tribes to ask you, the Sultan of Zanzibar, does the coast belong to the Arabs or to the Mijikenda”, he said the Sultan said that the coast belongs to the Mijikenda . . . he said, “we told him he

⁹⁶ Interview, Abethoya Baya, activist, Miritini, 3 January 2011.

⁹⁷ Interview, Daniel Korokoro, activist, Chasimba, 6 January 2011.

⁹⁸ Interview, David Randu, public servant, Malindi, 26 June 2010

⁹⁹ Interview, Chigube Tsuma, activist, Mombasa, 30 June 2010.

should write a certificate to show that the coast does not belong to the Arabs but to the Mijikenda”, and Matano said, “Even now I have a copy of that document, because when we were given it I sent one copy to the Governor and kept one”¹⁰⁰

These variant versions of the story of the delegation are very much a story of Mijikenda claims; and its circulation as an oral history, rather than a Facebook post, suggests the divided nature of the MRC’s support, and the profoundly different ideas of legitimacy which underlie ideas about secession.

Conclusion

There are multiple misrepresentations and ironies in these retellings of coastal history: treaties are said to contain provisions which do not exist, a delegation which sought assurances against secession is recast as a mission to secure it. As Lotte Hughes has shown of Maasai claims, attempts to redress perceived historical injustice can involve considerable historical inventions.¹⁰¹ And the use of documents by the MRC, like the Maasai evocation of colonial treaties or the appeal to the French government made by Casamance separatists, might seem a dangerous strategy: anyone with an internet connection can find the text of the 1963 agreement, and see that there is no reference in it to coastal independence or a 50-year limit – indeed, the document is now available on the MRC’s own Facebook site.¹⁰² But it is important to remember that there are multiple levels of misrepresentation in this story: the MRC’s fictions are the long-term consequence of the Sultan’s claims to sovereignty over people of whom he knew little, whose acknowledgement of his authority was cursory at best; of the semi-coerced treaties which he signed in the 1890s; and of the pantomime inquiry undertaken by Robertson. The evident power of current inventions is the consequence of a profound sense of injustice consequent on those earlier misrepresentations. These retellings of the past are evidence of the plasticity of memory, but even more they are the consequence of people’s exclusion from powerful knowledge. While the constitutional debate of the last few years has given some people a

¹⁰⁰ Interview, Safari wa Yeri, former youth leader, Mombasa, 24 June 2010.

¹⁰¹ Hughes, ‘Malice in Maasailand’, pp. 213-14, 220.

¹⁰² Lambert, ‘Violence and the war of words’, p. 595.

first experience of the possibility that official documents can be understood, and even mastered, most people's experience, for most of their lives, has been disempowering. The story of the MRC's success is in part a story of the peculiar vulnerability of arcane knowledge to subversive reinterpretation; it shows how the layered paper legitimacy of the colonial and post-colonial state can be challenged by interpretations whose popular appeal does not require them to obey the logic of that legitimacy. For people who do not expect documents to make sense, they can be made to mean anything.

Yet the support for secession is profoundly fractured, for its logic hangs between an avowedly multi-ethnic vision – which uses historical treaties to avoid any discussion of the idea of autochthony – and an alternative idea of the coast as the ethnic domain of the Mijikenda. Evocations of a multi-racial independent nation based on the Sultan's sovereignty may appeal to some; but for many Mijikenda, the claim to independence is a claim to ancestral land. While the supporters of the MRC may find it easy enough to agree that 'Pwani C Kenya', deciding who the real Wapwani are is likely to be more challenging.