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Tradition, tribe and state in Kenya: the Mijikenda Union, 1945-1980¹

In 1963 Bethwell Ogot, a young Kenyan historian, called for politics to move beyond ethnicity and become truly national:

The African masses have to be persuaded to transfer their loyalties from an association they know and understand – the tribe – to something impersonal, abstract and as yet non-existent, called the nation. ²

More than forty years later, in the wake of the terrifying and overtly ethnic violence which followed the elections of 2007, Ogot, - who had in the intervening years become the country's most prominent public intellectual - lamented the continuing political power of tribalism in Kenyan public life.³ His sentiment captured a much wider sense of dismay at the persistence of the politics of ethnicity, in Kenya and across much of Africa. In the first decades after independence, when the explicit language of politics emphasised nation-building, the tribe posed an awkward challenge for academic analysis.⁴ Scholarship followed political rhetoric: the word 'tribe' fell from academic use, in favour of the allegedly more neutral 'ethnicity', and in 1971 Archie Mafeje, a South African sociologist, looked forward to a history which would overcome the legacy of a colonial experience which had 'helped create the things called "tribes"' in Africa'.⁵ Professional historians always enjoy denouncing historical invention, and multiple studies subsequently articulated a vision of flexible pre-colonial ethnicities which were hardened by the experience of colonial rule and instrumentalized by missionaries, officials and literate 'culture brokers' – a transition summed up most cogently in John Lonsdale's contrast between 'moral ethnicity' and 'political tribalism'.⁶

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² Bethwell Ogot, 'From chief to president', *Transition*, 10 (Sep. , 1963), 26-30.

³ 'Chancellor Ogot takes up fight against tribalism at varsities', *Daily Nation*, 19 Dec. 2008 (<http://www.nation.co.ke/News/-/1056/504640/-/u0n6ys/-/index.html>)

⁴ M. Crawford Young, 'Nationalism, ethnicity and class in Africa: a retrospective', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 26, 103, (1986), 421-95

⁵ Archie Mafeje, 'The ideology of tribalism', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 9, 2 (1971), 253-61; Aidan Southall, 'The illusion of tribe', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 5, 1-2, (1970), 28-50.

⁶ A definitive early statement was offered in John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 318; see also Patrick Harries, 'Exclusion, classification and internal

Critiques of this literature which argued that it discounted African agency were perhaps overstated: some of it placed African ‘culture brokers’ very much at the centre of the process.⁷ A more significant weakness was a failure to explain what Crawford Young called ‘the intense passions’ of ethnicity - or, as John Peel put it, the need for ethnic identity to have a cultural basis which gives it force in everyday life.⁸ As Peter Ekeh pointed out, while tribalism was shunned by scholars, it continued to thrive in popular discourse.⁹ The force of that criticism has been underscored by repeated and sometimes horrifying demonstrations of the continued vitality of ethnic politics, over the last two decades: ‘a brutal reminder’, in Carola Lentz’s words, ‘that ethnicity cannot simply be explained away’.¹⁰ Faced with a powerful politics of belonging and autochthony, academic work has turned steadily towards arguing the resilience of ‘African conceptions of political space’, seeking the roots of ethnicity in quotidian behaviours that generate the ‘habitual dispositions’ which underpin ethnic affinity, and even emphasising the role of what Jonathon Glassman has called ‘modes of thought . . . inherited from precolonial traditions’; Paul Nugent’s work has demonstrated that the construction of ethnicities in West Africa stretches back well before the colonial period.¹¹ Such reevaluations, like those of the 1970s, fit into wider scholarly trends – in this case, a tendency to emphasize long-term continuity in African political cultures, and to downplay the impact of what some would call ‘the colonial moment’ in Africa.¹²

This paper, however, reasserts the significance of that moment through revisiting the history of one particular ethnicity in Kenya. Acknowledging the profound importance of cultural affect, and placing African agency at the centre of these processes, it nonetheless follows Gabrielle Lynch’s work in insisting on the importance of the final years of colonialism - a critical juncture’ characterised by very public, and often fierce, politics, when the state was at its most intrusive and well-resourced even as its future was thrust dramatically into

colonialism: the emergence of ethnicity among Tsonga-speakers of South Africa’, in Leroy Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London: James Currey, 1989), 82-117. For moral ethnicity, see John M. Lonsdale, ‘Moral ethnicity, ethnic nationalism, and political tribalism: the case of the Kikuyu’ in Peter Meyns (ed.), *Staat und Gesellschaft in Afrika: Erosions- und Reformprozesse* (Lit Verlag, 1996), 93-106

⁷ Leroy Vail, ‘Introduction’, in Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism*, 1-20

⁸ Young, ‘Nationalism, ethnicity and class’, p. 447; John Peel, ‘The cultural work of Yoruba ethnogenesis’, in Elizabeth Tonkin, Maryon McDonald and Malcolm Chapman (eds.), *History and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 1989), 198-215

⁹ Peter Ekeh, ‘Social anthropology and two contrasting visions of tribalism in Africa’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32, 4 (1990), 660-700

¹⁰; Carola Lentz, ‘“Tribalism” and ethnicity in Africa: a review of four decades of Anglophone literature’, *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines*, 31, 2 (1995), 303-28; see also Carola Lentz and Paul Nugent, ‘Ethnicity in Ghana: a comparative perspective’ 6, in Carola Lentz and Paul Nugent (eds.), *Ethnicity in Ghana: the Limits of Invention* (New York: St Martins Press, 1999), 1-28

¹¹ G. Carter Bentley, ‘Ethnicity and practice’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29, 1 (1987), 24-55; Jonathon Glassman, ‘Slower than a massacre: the multiple sources of racial thought in colonial Africa’, p. 753, *American Historical Review*, 109, 3 (2004), 720-54; Paul Nugent, ‘Putting the history back into ethnicity: enslavement, religion and cultural brokerage in the construction of Mandinka/Jola and Ewe/Agotime identities in West Africa, c. 1650-1930’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50, 4 (2008), 920-48.

¹² Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: the Political Instrumentalization of Disorder* (Oxford: International African Institute with James Currey, 1999); Thomas Spear, ‘Neo-traditionalism and the limits of invention in British colonial Africa’, 20, *Journal of African History* 44, 1 (2003), 3-27; Richard Reid, ‘Past and presentism: the precolonial and the foreshortening of African history’, *Journal of African History*, 52, 2 (2011), 135-55.

question by rapid political change.¹³ Ethnicity was not a novel feature of the colonial world, but the processes through which ethnicities were made and remade gained new force because of colonialism. While the ‘roots of contemporary identities’ may, as Nugent says, lie in the pre-colonial past, at least some of the efflorescent vigour of such identities is a result of more recent circumstances.¹⁴ In particular, it will be argued here that the final years of colonial rule saw the embedding of a powerful, productive, discursive contrast in quotidian experience as well as in political argument.

Tom Spear, in a recent critical survey of the literature on colonial invention, has used the term ‘neo-traditionalism’- inspired by the political science notion of ‘neo-patrimonialism’ – to emphasise that processes of innovation were always limited by culture, possibilities always constrained by the need to evoke people’s lived experience.¹⁵ In doing so, he has deployed the word ‘tradition’ in two rather different ways. On the one hand, it signifies a particular performance or pattern of language which is established and familiar in a society – ‘a tradition’. It is the enduring influence of this kind of ‘tradition’ which Spear emphasises as a force limiting invention. On the other hand, he also refers to tradition as a discursive tool: that is, as a way of arguing about the character of practices.¹⁶ The story of the Mijikenda of Kenya’s coast, discussed below, suggests that while the first of Spear’s meanings was significant in setting the ‘limits of invention’, it is the second meaning which reveals quite how transformative the colonial experience was in creating new possibilities for cultural entrepreneurship, legitimized by an idea of tradition which rested on its contrast with modernity.

This dichotomy has proven powerfully productive, across Africa. As John Comaroff has suggested, colonial officials saw their role as ‘the practical management, often the production of, difference’ between the modern and the traditional; and the African officials who took over the levers of the state in the early 1960s at least partly shared this assumption, seeing themselves as representatives of a modern state, dealing with an often intractable population.¹⁷ The contrast between tradition and the multiple manifestations of modernity was not only the work of officials, or teachers: the evocation of an alternative sphere of distinctive social relations, ruled by tradition, could also be a technique for those who sought to evade or subvert the demands of officials, or to assert their own authority. In constant implicit contrast to the ‘modern’, this too was a discursive tool used to ‘make political claims and envision different futures’.¹⁸ James Ferguson’s work on the Zambian Copperbelt and

¹³ Gabrielle Lynch, *I Say to You. Ethnic Politics and the Kalenjin in Kenya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p51; see also M. Carotenuto, ‘*Riwruok e teko*: cultivating identity in colonial and post-colonial Kenya’, *Africa Today*, 52, 2 (2006), 53-73

¹⁴ Nugent, ‘Putting the history back into ethnicity’, 923.

¹⁵ Spear, ‘Neo-traditionalism’.

¹⁶ Spear, ‘Neo-traditionalism’, 4, 6, 25.

¹⁷ John Comaroff, ‘Governmentality, materiality, legality, modernity: on the colonial state in Africa’, in Jan-Georg Deutsch, Peter Probst and Heike Schmidt (eds.), *African Modernities* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 107-34; see also Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2005), 143.

¹⁸ Lynn M. Thomas, ‘Modernity’s failings, political claims, and intermediate concepts’, *American Historical Review*, 116, 3 (2011), 727-40.

Lynn Thomas' study of Kenya in the 1960s have each shown how these contrasts featured in popular moral debate.¹⁹ The evocation of this distinct sphere, conceived in explicit contrast to the modern, may not always have allowed people to 'create[] a space that stood separate from the state', as completely as James Gibling has suggested of the Tanzanian villagers whose stories he has recorded: the rural homestead existed in the same money economy as the urban labourer who migrated from it.²⁰ But it did provide a way to negotiate over individual and community authority. The idea of ethnicity explored in this paper drew on the productive power of this division between tradition and the multiple, modern, antitheses which colonialism created for it. What Ogot has called 'the invention of greater ethnic communities' which now play such a prominent role in Kenyan politics must be understood partly in terms of cultural continuity - but this in itself is not enough to explain why political innovation has taken particular ethnic forms, and why ethnicity has become such a significant 'category of practice'.²¹ That question is one which, as the events of 2008 showed, has lost none of its urgency since the 1960s.

A brief history of failure?

In November 1944 the Provincial Commissioner (PC) of Kenya's Coast Province received a letter announcing the creation of the 'Miji Kenda Union.'

Please receive this letter informing you that we people of the nine tribes of the coast . . . have the intention of uniting our tribes and bringing back the KINSHIP which existed in the time of our forefathers, and creating a party of unity, in order to advance our nation through consultation, mutual affection and assistance in every way.²²

The authors were all men, waged employees living in the coastal town of Mombasa, or in the colonial capital, Nairobi. They evoked the newly vogueish colonial aim of development in support of their plans: 'You must be aware of the rottenness and weakness of the development of these people, always being behind; it is because of being divided into small groups, and not agreeing in consultations.'

The PC made no objection, and in a first flush of enthusiasm, the new Union organized a grand meeting in Rabai, a few miles inland from Mombasa, attended by men described as representatives of all the 'nine tribes': Digo, Duruma, and Giriama (the three groups which are largest in numerical terms) and the smaller groups of Rabai, Ribe, Kambe, Jibana,

¹⁹ James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity. Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press,, 1999), 84-85, 93-100; Lynn M. Thomas, *Politics of the Womb. Women, Reproduction and the State in Kenya* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2003), 169-70.

²⁰ J. Gibling, *A History of the Excluded: making Family a Refuge from State in Twentieth-century Tanzania* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005)

²¹ Bethwell Ogot, 'Mau Mau and nationhood: the untold story' in E. S. Atieno Odhiambo and John M. Lonsdale (eds.), *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003), 8-36. The term 'category of practice' comes from Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond "identity"', *Theory and Society*, 29, 1 (2000), 1-47.

²² Said Suleiman, c/o William Paul, Mombasa to PC Coast, 5 Nov. 1944 Kenya National Archive (KNA) OP 1/1331

Chonyi, and Kauma.²³ But by the end of the 1940s the Union had almost collapsed, undermined by a combination of poor management, official hostility and embezzlement; in subsequent decades it never achieved a sustained institutional existence, although the name ‘Mijikenda Union’ was frequently appropriated by a range of groups and individuals. In 1980 it was formally dissolved, as an incidental byproduct of the antipathy of Daniel arap Moi, independent Kenya’s second president, for another ‘ethnic’ union, the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru Association (GEMA): all such associations were required to dissolve themselves, on the grounds that all Kenyans should be committed solely to a broader vision of ‘nation’.²⁴

This seems a poor record, and the Mijikenda Union has been seen in previous scholarship as no more than a brief stage on the route to nationalist politics.²⁵ But despite its organizational failings, the Union had a lasting impact. In 1944, the term Mijikenda was an innovation. As the PC’s correspondents admitted, the ‘nine tribes’ whom they sought to represent had previously been more often regarded as several separate groups, or – when they were given any collective identity at all, were ‘better known by the term Wanyika’ - a mildly pejorative term which implied that their proper place was in the ‘wilderness’, inland from the coastal settlements.²⁶ Twenty years later the term Mijikenda had become entirely naturalized into the language of Kenya’s ethnic politics, was widely accepted as denoting a group whose members had a shared sense of identity and interests.

Tradition and authority in the late colonial state

The men who first used the term Mijikenda as an ethnonym did so in ways which reflected their profoundly colonial experience – conjuring the Union through letters, a constitution, and minutes of a meeting. But they also drew imaginatively on ‘tradition’: both in the sense of shared practice, and through the powerful contrast between the worlds of tradition and colonial government.

A myth of origin through a shared migration from a northern homeland called Singwaya had come to link all of the nine tribes. This story, told by other coastal groups in the nineteenth century, seems to have become widely (though not universally) known amongst the nine tribes from the early twentieth century.²⁷ Multiple circumstances contributed to the adoption of this story. There is a considerable linguistic continuum among this population; this can be

²³ Memo, Ag PC Coast, 27 Nov. 1944, KNA OP 1/1331

²⁴ Jennifer Widner, *The Rise of a Party-State in Kenya: From “Harambee!” to “Nyayo!”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 142

²⁵ Robert Mambo, ‘Nascent political activities among the Mijikenda of Kenya’s coast during the colonial era’, *Trans-African Journal of History*, 16 (1987), 92-120

²⁶ Said Suleiman, c/o William Paul, Mombasa to PC Coast, 5 Nov. 1944, KNA OP 1/1331

²⁷ R.F. Morton, ‘The Shungwaya myth of Mijikenda origins: a problem of late nineteenth-century Kenya coastal historiography’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies (IJAH)*, 5, 3 (1972), 397-423; ‘New evidence regarding the Shungwaya myth of Mijikenda origins’, *IJAH*, 10, 4 (1977), 628-43; T. Spear, *The Kaya Complex: a History of the Mijikenda Peoples of the Kenya Coast to c. 1900* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978); T. Spear, ‘Traditional myths and historians’ myths: variations on the Singwaya theme of Mijikenda origins’, *History in Africa*, 1 (1974), 67-84; T. Spear, *Traditions of Origin and their Interpretation: The Mijikenda of Kenya* (Athens: Ohio University Centre for International Studies, 1982); J. Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili and the Making of the Mijikenda* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

categorised into discrete languages, but the linguistic boundaries are hazy and there is substantial inter-comprehensibility. A long history of marriage and migration has spread words and names and practices, creating complex patterns of similarity and difference in terms of language and culture which are not always readily mapped onto any single ethnic schema. Movements by individuals or families have also expanded the area occupied by this population over time – especially to the north of Mombasa.²⁸ There, the mid-nineteenth century concentration of population had been along and west of the chain of hills which lie some 15 miles inland of the coast, stretching up to Kilifi; subsequent history has seen a steady and significant movement of population northwards, as well as eastwards towards the shoreline.²⁹ This migration became mixed up with the widespread absorption into these communities of former slaves and their descendants, who fled from coastal plantations in the nineteenth century, or left them in the wake of the abolition of slavery in 1907.³⁰ There was – and is – also considerable similarity in notions of moral authority across this population, notably in the former importance of age-grades and in the continued role of central ritual spaces known as *kayas*, though the details of the age-grade system seem to have varied, as did the nature of each group's relationship to the *kayas*.

This is, in short, a population in which individuals are aware of multiple distinctive group identities, but have also been constantly faced with reminders of their commonality. Disputes over bridewealth, inheritance and other obligations, the inevitable product of such closeness, have encouraged constant debate over morality and customary law, and the relationship of these to categories of identity, in which both similarity and difference have been rehearsed through arguments over – for example – the relative significance of maternal and paternal ties in relationships of claim and obligation. These were multiple, overlapping, moral ethnicities, whose members constantly debated the bounds of the shared assumptions which constituted their social bonds.

The founding document of the Union offered this similarity in language and customs as evidence that the Mijikenda were 'one nation from their origin.' And it placed this nation as the victims of dispossession:

...when the Asian and European strangers came, they found these indigenous people ... And these strangers, if they wanted anything or had any issue, they had to discuss this with the elders of the MIJI KENDA . . . this union had the authority to make or remove any law in their country . . . because of the avarice which was associated with these foreign tribes, which were not compatible with the people of MIJI KENDA, they caused them to fall out and fight, causing our elders to misunderstand one

²⁸ Interview, Ali Warrakah and others, 28, 12 Jan. 2011

²⁹ Spear, *The Kaya Complex*, 80-132; Cynthia Brantley, *The Giriama and Colonial Resistance in Kenya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 19-22.

³⁰ Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters. Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997 (first 1980)), 228-29; D. Parkin, 'Swahili Mijikenda: facing both ways in Kenya', *Africa* 59, 3 (1989), 161-75.

another, and so it happened that the power and authority of those Mijikenda elders was lost.³¹

The language and events at the meeting of the Mijikenda Union at Rabai in 1945 played repeatedly on this division between the culture of the indigenes and that of strangers. Opening the meeting, Edward Binns (then in his forties) explained that he and other ‘youths’ who worked in Nairobi had first conceived the Union as a response to their life as migrant workers: ‘there are not many Nyika youths in Nairobi, but they thought it better to create a party to unite our nine tribes’. For Binns, the cultural gap between indigenes and strangers: created opportunities for intermediacy: ‘it is up to [the elders] to lead us with all that they have which is of benefit and it is up to us youths to bring to them all the good things which we pick up in our education’, he said, adding later that ‘we must help [chiefs and elders] and show them the modern way with good manners and respect.’

The meeting, reportedly attended by a thousand people, including chiefs and ‘elders’, offered a theatrical demonstration of the different possibilities of such intermediacy. Nine elders were selected to represent the nine tribes; they gave their approval to the Union ‘if you, our children, will sit with your elders respectfully’, but took the opportunity to explicitly define themselves as the *kambi wa Mijikenda* – ‘the initiated elders of the Mijikenda’.³² It was a novel claim, cast as tradition, which drew both on existing notions of elderhood and on the powerful distinction between education and tradition.

‘The youth’ of the Mijikenda Union had cause to be anxious about their relationship with elders and with tradition; for their own experience had been very much shaped by colonialism. The shifting cast of officers of the Mijikenda Union in the later 1940s included a number of educated Christian men, the children or grandchildren of freed slaves from south-east Africa, who had been settled at missionary stations.³³ They were outsiders – marked as such by their lack of local kin and by their education, which gave them privileged access to clerical employment. Binns himself was one; so was William Paul, from whose postal address the first letter to the PC had been sent.³⁴ There were other kinds of marginality, too: Nimrod Taabu, who also spoke up to ask the elders to pursue unity, was a Digo convert to Christianity, a rare thing among a group who were (unlike other putative Mijikenda) overwhelmingly Muslim. He spent much of his life in Nairobi, working as a carpenter; as did John Juma Maneno, another Digo convert to Christianity who became a Mijikenda Union official.³⁵ If asked their identity, all these men could lay claim to membership of one or more of the nine tribes, a claim sometimes made on the basis of ties of marriage, sometimes simply through residence or friendship. Binns had grown up in Rabai, at the mission station,

³¹ Foreword to the Rules of the Mijikenda Union, with Said Suleiman to PC Coast, 5 Nov. 1944, KNA OP 1/1331. This is my translation of the original Swahili; there is a variant English translation of the letter, foreword and rules, prepared by Kibwana bin Mza, in KNA CC 1/49.

³² Minutes, Miji Kenda Union General Meeting, 28/29th Dec. 1945, KNA CC 1/49

³³ Thomas Herlehy and R.F. Morton, ‘A coastal ex-slave community in the regional and colonial economy of Kenya: the Wamisheni of Rabai, 1880-1963’, in Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts (eds), *The End of Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 254-81.

³⁴ Interviews, Lawrence Bennett, 4, 25 June 2010; Harry Ngonyo and Joshua Malingi, 11, 13 Jan. 2011.

³⁵ Interview, Samuel Maneno, 4 Jan. 2011.

and had made blood brotherhood with a prominent Giriama family; Nimrod Taabu married a woman from another Mijikenda group, among whom Christianity was more acceptable. But in small communities, where people routinely place one another through a detailed knowledge of kinship and marriage relationships, the ambiguous status of such people was widely known.

These men – and all were men – may seem rather like the sort of ‘lonely, bilingual intelligentsia’ who elsewhere were nationalists, inducted into a new sense of identity by the experience of government employment, and created as a community by their shared pilgrimages around the nation created by colonialism.³⁶ But in this case they were exploring a much more closely circumscribed idea of the nation. Some of their fellow members were also employees, but more local in their experience, and there were Muslims as well as Christians: Said Suleiman, who wrote to the PC, was a Muslim dock-worker; Ali bin Salim, another of the ‘youth’ who spoke up at Rabai, and head of the ‘Mombasa Branch’ of the Union, was a headman for Mombasa municipality; Lewis Simeon worked for the Public Works Department. For many of these men, their hold on the world of money and employment was insecure, and the community they imagined was one which affirmed a place in local society, the possibility of retirement to a rural home secured through their ties of kinship and marriage which spanned the sub-groups of what they now called the Mijikenda.

Binns and his fellows referred with confidence to elders and tradition, and the audience echoed these terms with enthusiasm. But the chiefs and elders who crowded the Rabai meeting faced their own uncertainties. Popular memory among these communities has recalled a pre-colonial past in which authority was ‘gerontocratic’, diffused among the older men of each community through a system of age-sets, the rituals of which revolved around each community’s ritual spaces, the forest clearings known as the *kayas*.³⁷ This is at least in part idealized, rather than historical; there are counter-memories of multiple, competing, *kayas* and of individuals who claimed a wider power; and there is a persistent practice of esoteric power associated with secret societies to which men have gained access through purchase of knowledge, rather than through generational advance.³⁸ Since the 1880s no complete cohort of men has gone through the full rituals of age-set advancement. By 1914, these were already only uncertainly remembered from an ever-more remote past.³⁹ In these circumstances, the colonial state struggled to find local agents: in the three districts of Kilifi, Kwale and Mombasa, into which the southern coast was divided for administrative purposes,

³⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991 (first 1983), p. 140.

³⁷ Cynthia Brantley, ‘Gerontocratic government: age-sets in pre-colonial Giriama’, *Africa*, 48, 3 (1978), 248-64.

³⁸ Arthur Champion, *The Agiryama of Kenya* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute, 1967), 5, 12, 22-24; Justin Willis, ‘The king of the Mijikenda and other stories about the Kaya: heritage, politics and histories in multi-party Kenya’, in Derek R. Peterson and Giacomo Macola, *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 233-50

³⁹ Brantley, *The Giriama and Colonial Resistance*, 42-43; Champion, *The Agiryama*, 16-17.

those selected by officials as headmen (after 1938, restyled as chiefs) were seen by officials as chronically lacking in authority.⁴⁰

If district commissioners were unsure who the ‘elders’ were, so were many of their subjects. Tensions between young men and old had been generated by the expansion of settlement in previous decades, which gave young men opportunities to challenge or defy their elders. From the end of the nineteenth century, these tensions gained new vigour, as opportunities grew for waged work, or for marketing produce, in the town of Mombasa and elsewhere on the coast. Older men complained of the indiscipline of a younger generation, but they were themselves divided, with individuals frequently in dispute over land, or livestock, or bridewealth: officially-recognized ‘native tribunals’ were supposed to settle disputes, but found their decisions undermined or disputed by groups of ‘elders’ who ran alternative courts, sometimes in collusion with chiefs.⁴¹ Sporadic attempts by the colonial state to clarify control over ‘customary law’ through a revival of age-set rituals for one or more ‘Wanyika’ groups – in 1917-19; in 1924; in 1928-9; in 1939 – attracted some enthusiasm, but repeatedly collapsed beneath the weight of the mutual suspicion and personal ambitions of older men themselves.⁴² Many individuals might claim to be elders, but in 1944 it was reported that ‘the old kambi system has decayed and now hardly exists’. The uncertainty and rivalry over the status of elders which has been identified in recent scholarship on the Giriama has a long history.⁴³

For at least some of these older men the idea of the Mijikenda offered a new way to address these problems, deploying the discursive contrast between tradition and modernity to affirm a vision of a wider legitimacy which placed older men at the centre of traditional authority, as a new kind of *kambi*. The term Mijikenda had first been used in the 1920s, precisely in this context of elder men’s authority: the ‘Midzichenda Native Tribunal’ was created in 1924 to handle cases under customary law in nine locations in Kwale district – Midzichenda means, literally, ‘nine settlements’.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ DC Kilifi to PC Coast, 22 Dec. 1930, KNA CA 20/22; Kilifi District Annual Report, 1934, Section B.3, KNA DC KFI 1/3; see also Kilifi District Annual Reports, 1935, section B3 and 1937, section B1: KNA DC KFI 1/3; Kilifi District Handing-over Report, Dec. 1933 and May 1944, KNA CA 16/40; for the change in terminology, compare DC Kilifi to PC, 15 Nov. 1937 and DC Kilifi to PC, 9 Sep. 1930, KNA CA 20/22. The Monthly Intelligence Reports for Kilifi record a rapid turnover of chiefs: see entries for Jan. 1942, May 1942, Sep. 1942, June 1943, all in KNA CA 16/71

⁴¹ DC Kilifi to PC Coast, 19 Mar. 1935, KNA CA 20/22.

⁴² Brantley, *The Giriama and Colonial Resistance*, 138-39; Kilifi District Annual Report, 1929 KNA PC Coast 2/1/25; Kilifi Station Diary, Jan. and June 1924, KNA DC KFI 4/1; ‘Description of kaya initiation ceremonies, 21 Nov. 1925’; E R St J. Davies to Tisdall, 21 Aug. 1937, Kilifi Political Record Book, Vol. 3, KNA DC KFI 3/3; Provincial Handing-over report, 16 Mar. 1939, KNA CA 16/36.

⁴³ Kilifi Handing Over Report, nd, 1944, Section x, KNA DC KFI 2/2; J. McIntosh, ‘Elders and “frauds”’: commodified expertise and politicized authenticity among the Mijikenda’, *Africa*, 79, 1 (2009), 35-52.

⁴⁴ The nine locations – administrative divisions – had formerly been part of Mombasa District: Digo District Station Diary, Apr 5 and 29/30 1924, KNA DC KWL 1/5/1; Kwale Monthly Intelligence Report, Feb 1940, KNA CA 16/66; Kwale Handing-over Report, 30 Aug. 1950, KNA CA 16/38. ‘Mijikenda’ is a variant form of the word Midzichenda, with minor sound changes associated with Swahili – the language of government, and of urban employment.

The availability of the term Mijikenda set off a vigorous round of political entrepreneurship and claims-making. In the aftermath of the meeting at Rabai, people claiming to represent the Mijikenda Union set to work collecting funds throughout the southern coast, with ‘clerks’ of the Union travelling widely: it was reported that 16,481/- had been collected in one-shilling subscriptions.⁴⁵ The collection coincided both with another attempt to revive the initiation of elders and with reports that ‘elders’ were again subverting official tribunals by trying to settle cases.⁴⁶ By mid-1947 the initiations had, like previous attempts, come to nothing as different groups of older men argued over the control and cost of the ceremonies.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, British officials suspected that chiefs were collecting the Mijikenda Union subscription as though it were a tax, and that members of the Union were misrepresenting themselves as a body which could negotiate with the government (sixty years later, one man still believed that the Mijikenda Union ‘had agreed with government, each taxpayer should pay 1/-’).⁴⁸ Colonial officials elsewhere in Kenya seem to have smiled on ethnic unions at this time.⁴⁹ But on the coast their attitude soon turned to outright hostility. In the Rabai area, and a little further inland near Mariakani, ‘development’ schemes which involved cutting *kaya* forests were disrupted by young men claiming to work for the Mijikenda Union; their success was limited, but enough to outrage officials.⁵⁰

This outrage grew when the Union became involved in land issues. When the rest of the ‘East Africa Protectorate’ had become Kenya Colony in 1921, the ‘Ten-Mile Strip’ which ran along the coast had remained a protectorate, nominally the sovereign territory of the Omani sultan of Zanzibar.⁵¹ In Kenya Colony, there was no freehold title to land; in the Ten-Mile strip, the British recognized what they believed to be pre-existing freehold land rights. In practice, only those who were classified as Arabs and Asians were able to secure this recognition, and Africans could own neither leasehold nor freehold.⁵² South of Mombasa, the collective claims to land of the Digo were acknowledged through the provision of tribal reserves in the coastal strip. North of Mombasa, the coastal strip was composed entirely of freeholds in Arab or Asian ownership; leaseholds given more recently to European or Asian farmers; and unallocated ‘Crown Land’. Large numbers of people lived on these lands, sometimes as formal tenants, paying rent, more often as squatters, giving a share of their

⁴⁵ ‘Miji Kenda Union: position as at 7 Jan. 1949’, KNA CC 1/49

⁴⁶ Local Native Council minutes, 6 Dec 1946 and 15-16 Apr. 1947, KNA CG 2/29; DC Kilifi to PC 15 Sep. 1947, KNA CA 20/22.

⁴⁷ Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Report, May 1946, Nov. 1946, Apr. 1947, KNA CA 16/71; Kilifi District Annual Report, 1947, Section x, KNA PC Coast 2/1/77; there is a rueful recollection of this in Kilifi Handing-over Report, 8 June 1952, KNA CA 16/41

⁴⁸ Wild, DO Malindi, Safari Report, 21 Mar. 1947: KNA DC MAL 2/1/3; Kwale Monthly Intelligence Report, Aug. 1948, KNA CA 16/66; Interview, Katana Juba, p. 8, 5 Jan. 2011.

⁴⁹ Carotenuto, ‘*Riwruok na teko*’, 58-59 records official enthusiasm for the Luo Union.

⁵⁰ Kwale Monthly Intelligence Report, Sep. 1947, KNA CA 16/66; Kilifi District Annual Report, 1947, Section B, KNA PC Coast 2/1/77

⁵¹ James Brennan, ‘Lowering the Sultan’s flag: sovereignty and decolonization in coastal Kenya’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50, 4 (2008), 831-61

⁵² Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili*, 118-34

crops or their labour to landowners but without any clear legal rights or obligations.⁵³ Some were former slaves, or their descendants; others were more recent migrants from a little further inland. Whatever their parents and grandparents may have called themselves, by the 1940s, many of these people claimed to belong to one of the groups which came to be called Mijikenda.

While some landowners, short of capital, were happy to have such squatters on their land, the squatters had no security of tenure. Disputes over crops, and especially over the ownership of planted trees, were always possible. In the 1930s, the wider colonial obsession with erosion and soil degradation encouraged British officials to view squatting as a problem – since squatters were alleged to use the land in a destructive, short-term way.⁵⁴ The result was a prolonged but fitful campaign to evict or at least regulate squatters on private land, and to drive them off Crown Land onto ‘settlement schemes’, where tenure and farming practices were controlled.⁵⁵ This did not reduce the number of squatters, but it did produce an insecure and vulnerable group ready to appropriate the name of the Mijikenda Union in pursuit of their claims to land. Officials reacted with predictable irritation: ‘The action of the temporary committee of the proposed Mij Kenda Union in writing a letter inciting the Wagiriamas to turn Arabs off their land makes one regard the Union with suspicion’.⁵⁶

The committee of the Mijikenda Union were chastised by officials, but activists continued to evoke the name of the Union: ‘A Giriama, stating that he was acting on behalf of the Mijikenda Union on the 29th July had a *baraza* [public meeting] . . . at which he asserted that all the land in the coastal strip belonged to the African’; men identified as ‘*kaya* elders’ were alleged to have sent him, though they denied this to the district commissioner.⁵⁷ Infuriated by these challenges, the district commissioner organized public meetings ‘at which the Agents of the Miji Kenda Union were invited to state to the people to what purpose they had put the money which they have been collecting’.⁵⁸ The next few years saw a prolonged wrangle over control of the funds involving British officials and various individuals who claimed to be office-holders (denounced by one DC as ‘a bunch of semi-educated stiff’). Several thousand shillings were reportedly embezzled and two men imprisoned; and by 1953 it was reported that the Mijikenda Union ‘has practically died.’⁵⁹ While a version of the Union survived in Nairobi for a few years among a small – and apparently entirely Christian

⁵³ Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters*, 173-232; Kilifi District Handing-over Report, Section B1, 19 Mar 1946, KNA DC KFI 2/2

⁵⁴ ‘A report on the problem of squatters on private lands in the coastal strip’, National Archives, London (NA) CO 822/2142

⁵⁵ Jan Hoorweg, ‘The experience with land settlement’, in Jan Hoorweg, Dick Foeken and R.A. Obudho (eds.), *Kenya Coast Handbook: Culture, Resources and Development in the East African Littoral*, (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2000), 309-25; Evictions are mentioned in Digo Monthly Intelligence Report, Feb 1940 and Aug. 1941, KNA CA 16/66

⁵⁶ Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Report, Apr. 1945, KNA CA 16/71

⁵⁷ Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Reports, July and Aug, 1947, KNA CA 16/71

⁵⁸ Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Report, Aug. 1947, KNA CA 16/71.

⁵⁹ ‘Miji Kenda Union: position as at 7 Jan. 1949, KNA CC 1/49; Kwale District Handing-Over Report, July 1953, KNA CA 16/38; DC Kilifi to Municipal African Affairs Officer, 10 May and 20 May 1952, KNA CC 1/49 ;DC Kilifi to Municipal African Affairs Officer (MAAO), 19 Jan 1953, MAAO to DC Kilifi 23 Jan 1953; PC Coast to Treasurer Mijikenda Union, nd May 1959, KNA CC 1/49

– group of government employees, running a small general goods shop and holding regular music and dance events, this vanished in the mid-1950s when several key members retired and moved back to the coast.⁶⁰

The term Mijikenda itself maintained a precarious discursive existence in these years; but one innovative practice drew Mijikenda identity directly into everyday expressions of the imagined contrast between the worlds of urban and rural, of money and of kinship. A correspondent to the *Mombasa Times* in 1955 opined that the term ‘Mijikenda’ was ‘too long, too artificial, and has already failed’; the only published reaction to this was another letter suggesting that the term ‘Wanyika’ was perfectly good.⁶¹ An educated Christian Ribe, writing an account of ‘his tribe’ for publication, preferred to argue that the nine tribes were ‘Swahili’, although he somewhat dismissively noted that ‘these days they call themselves “Miji Kenda”’.⁶² But wider memory does record a persistent use of this new ethnonym. For an urban worker who imagined themselves as a migrant from the rural area, to die in town was a constant risk; to be buried in town was inconceivable. An urban death was always the cue for a collection of money to transport the corpse back to a rural home for burial; such collections were made through meetings which brought together any available immediate family members with a shifting cast of more distant kin, in-laws and prominent community figures, whose attendance, and whose contributions were recorded in a book. Marriage, migration and urban solidarity based on linguistic and cultural similarity would ensure that any such collection meeting brought together individuals from a number of the nine tribes, and the collection itself came to be known in the 1950s simply as ‘the Mijikenda’ or ‘the Midzichenda’; and ‘even today Mijikenda is still collected, it buries, it is not for weddings or education, no, that Mijikenda is given to bury’.⁶³

The politics of the Ten-Mile Strip

In the later 1950s the term Mijikenda - and the Mijikenda Union - suddenly reappeared in the written record with extraordinary rapidity, driven by the complex and very public politics of the final years of colonial rule. As the end of British rule moved swiftly from distant prospect to imminent reality, debates over identity acquired urgency and venom: in this context, like the term Kalenjin elsewhere in Kenya at the same time, the idea of Mijikenda identity offered a resource which many sought to exploit for it conjured a political constituency, African but distinctively coastal, from a bundle of multiple, overlapping moral ethnicities.⁶⁴ This was an alluring prospect for aspiring politicians - but the term was equally potent in the hands of ordinary men and women who might use it to make claims on leaders, and to legitimate their demands for land or jobs. And the term found its way deeper into daily life. It was deployed in moral arguments over rights and relationships with kin, or with neighbours; and it added a new layer to the ritual repertoire of a

⁶⁰ The Mijikenda Union in Nairobi was registered as a society on 26 Mar. 1953: Eggins, MAAO to DC Mombasa, 28 July 1953, KNA CC 1/49. Interviews Ali Warrakah and others, 45-46, 12 Jan. 2011; interview, Samuel Maneno, 4. Jan 2011.

⁶¹ Letter from S. Kalachu, *Mombasa Times*, 16 Mar. 1955; and reply from H.G Banks, 11 Apr. 1955.

⁶² William Frank, *Habari na Desturi za Waribe* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1953), vii, 9.

⁶³ David Parkin, *Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 32; Interview, Harry Ngonyo and Joshua Malingi, 5-6, 13 Jan. 2011.

⁶⁴ Lynch, *I Say to You*, 50.

population which was chronically concerned with the challenges of disease and drought, and about the malign possibilities of witchcraft.

The decision to allow African political organizations at a district level from 1955, followed by the creation of directly-elected African representation on Kenya's Legislative Council from 1957, marked the beginning of this period, and the anomaly of the Ten-Mile Strip shaped the way the way these politics developed over the years leading up to independence in 1963, by raising a stark question: when British rule ended, would the Ten-Mile Strip be part of an independent Kenya, or would it be ruled by the Sultan of Zanzibar?⁶⁵ And a second, subsidiary, question came to be equally insistent. If the Ten-Mile Strip were to be part of Kenya, would the coast be allowed a degree of autonomy, to guard against the danger of domination by 'up-country' Africans?

The first of these questions turned coastal residents against one another, as they rehearsed and developed ideas of identity which had long been extant, but had been hardened by the experience of the sultans' rule in the late nineteenth century and by British administration. Those who defined themselves as Arabs, as descendants of migrants who had come from Oman or elsewhere since the seventeenth century, had enjoyed political and economic privilege.⁶⁶ Uneasily alongside Arab identity lay the idea of 'the Swahili', a usefully ambivalent term which could be used both to assert a relationship to a much more ancient immigration from the Middle East and to claim a status as the descendants of coastal indigenes, who had intermarried with or assimilated to this immigrant community. Swahili identity had given generations of local migrants, forced and unforced, the possibility of incorporation into a largely urban, Muslim culture. But it was a possibility rooted in inequality, and in an explicitly racial and ethnic (the distinction between the terms is impossible to unpick here) hierarchy of domination, the assumptions of which were hardened by nineteenth- and twentieth-century experience.⁶⁷ Arabs looked down on Swahili; Swahili looked down on those whom they called Wanyika. The use of the term Swahili itself had declined under the force of Arab disdain and colonial skepticism; by the 1940s, many Swahili preferred to describe themselves in Arabic, as members of the *Tissia Taifa* ('nine tribes') and *Thalatha Taifa* ('three tribes').⁶⁸ For coastal Africans excluded from these Arab, or Arabized, identities, the possibility that the coast might actually be ruled by Zanzibar was profoundly alarming.⁶⁹

The second question potentially pitted the people of the coast as a whole against the rest of Kenya. In the towns – notably in Mombasa, by far the largest urban centre on the coast – men

⁶⁵ A.I. Salim, *The Swahili-speaking Peoples of Kenya's Coast* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973), 203-46; Brennan, 'Lowering the Sultan's flag'.

⁶⁶ Salim, *Swahili-speaking Peoples*, 100-38; 184-202.

⁶⁷ This section is, of course, indebted to the work of Jonathon Glassman: *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995); *idem.*, 'Slower than a massacre'.

⁶⁸ Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili*, 188-90; Randall Pouwels has identified a long-term trajectory of Arabization in coastal culture: *Horn and Crescent. Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁶⁹ Interview, Daniel Korokoro, 4, 6 Jan. 2011

from all over Kenya competed for waged work for the municipality, for the railway and, most of all, on the docks, where the long campaign by state and employers to stabilize labour was fought in the context of bitter rivalry over jobs which had persistent ethnic overtones.⁷⁰ Coastal people feared that ‘up-country’ people with superior school education, and with a vigorous involvement in politics in Nairobi, would seize political power - and the best jobs - when British rule ended.⁷¹ This was a local variant of the fear of domination by people from central Kenya which was felt in other parts of Kenya, and was stirred so effectively by politicians.⁷² But it was a distinctive variant, for at the coast, all people from ‘up-country’ could be resented – not just those from central Kenya - so that coastal politicians who became involved in Kenyan national politics always faced local suspicion.

From 1956, aspirant political leaders sought to mobilize coastal Africans against aliens. In Mombasa, the Mombasa African District Union (MADU) urged African unity against the Arabs; in Kilifi District, north of Mombasa, the Kilifi African People’s Union (KAPU) encouraged squatters to appropriate the crops of trees on landowners’ estates, emboldened by a sudden boom in cashew nut prices which added a new economic incentive to an old grievance.⁷³ The documentary record of the period does not show whether the term *Mijikenda* was used in the public meetings which were the central elements of this politics, and ‘African’ seems to have been the more common term: KAPU’s constitution pledged it to ‘promote with energy all the rights of the Africans of Kilifi District’.⁷⁴

British district commissioners did little to hide their dislike of the leaders of KAPU and MADU, who were described as ‘clerks’ working in Mombasa. They were initially more enthusiastic when in 1957, on the basis of a very restricted franchise, Ronald Ngala became the African Elected Member of Legislative Council representing the coast.⁷⁵ Ngala was a Giriama Christian, who had in 1949 written a little book on Giriama custom which asserted the distinctive history and culture of that group (though it briefly acknowledge that the nine tribes ‘have joined together with the name “*Mijikenda*”).⁷⁶ There is no evidence that Ngala was involved in the *Mijikenda* Union in the 1940s, and he did not become active in public life in Mombasa until the early 1950s, when he was headmaster of a school and a nominated

⁷⁰ Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 147-50.

⁷¹ Interview, Katana Juba, p. 2, 5 Jan. 2011; also interview, Harry Ngonyo and Joshua Malingi, 7, 13 Jan. 2011; Richard Stren, ‘Factional politics and central control in Mombasa, 1960-69’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 4, 1 (1970), 33-56.

⁷² Cherry Gertzel, *The Politics of Independent Kenya* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 10; David Anderson, ‘Yours in the struggle for Majimbo: nationalism and the party politics of decolonisation in Kenya, 1955 to 1964’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40, 3 (2005), 547-64; Lynch, *I Say to You*, 36, 51-80.

⁷³ Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Reports, Nov. 1955, Jan/Feb. 1956, May 1956, Aug. 1957, KNA CA 16/72; ‘The Malindi cashew dispute’, NA CO 822/2142.

⁷⁴ Julius Mwatsama to Registrar of Societies, 17 July 1957, KNA CB 1/14

⁷⁵ Malindi sub-district handing-over notes, Edgar. June 1959, KNA CA 16/44. See also Edgar, District Officer Malindi to Mwatsama, 26 Nov. 1958; Mwatsama to DC Kilifi, 3 Dec 1958; Mwatsama to PC Coast, 16 Dec 1958 KNA CB 1/14. There were 1,785 registered voters in the whole of Kilifi District: Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Report, Nov. and Dec. 1956, KNA CA 16/72.

⁷⁶ Ronald Ngala, *Nchi na Desturi za Wagiriama* (Nairobi: Eagle Press, 1949), pp. 1-2.

councillor.⁷⁷ But by 1959 Ngala was using the term Mijikenda to assert the right of squatters to take ownership of land in the coastal strip.⁷⁸

In the process, Ngala ‘revived’ the Mijikenda Union, as he tried to assert primacy among a fractious group of would-be leaders of African coastal politics, who had preceded him in involvement in KAPU and MADU.⁷⁹ His initial status as an apparent favourite of the government was not necessarily an electoral advantage, and by late 1958 he was holding public meetings jointly with KAPU, tacitly vying for prominence with the established leaders of that party.⁸⁰ In this contest, Ngala turned to an explicitly ethnic political base and to the assertion of tradition, encouraging the creation in 1957 of the Midzichenda Cooperative Society – which, by 1960, had assumed the identity of the Mijikenda Union.⁸¹

There was an immediate practical advantage to this. While political parties were still only permitted to operate at a district level, as a ‘welfare’ organization the Mijikenda Union allowed Ngala to organize across three districts.⁸² But this was not merely a matter of evading colonial law: the Mijikenda Union was a different kind of organization to KAPU or MADU. While KAPU and similar parties vied for seats in the institutions of government, using the term ‘African’ to define their claimed constituency and emphasising development in their rhetoric, the Mijikenda Union did not put up candidates for seats – though it was vigorously engaged in politics – and its language was that of tradition. It drew its strength from men who self-consciously presented themselves as ‘elders’, and who insisted that their status rested not on government or education but on their knowledge of the *kayas* and of tradition – though the biographies of these men might seem to confound the distinction between tradition and government.

Among them were a former government chief, Mwachiti Nyawa, who had been present in that role at the meeting in Rabai in 1945. Another, Mwanyanje Vali, had been jailed for embezzling Mijikenda Union funds in 1948; a third, Biryama Masha, was a member of the African District Council, with first-hand experience of local government.⁸³ But they presented themselves as elders, and the style and language of this revived Mijikenda Union evoked a very local idea of cultural continuity and primacy which rested on tradition: from the late 1950s, Biryama Masha routinely cast himself as one of the ‘elders of Kaya Giriama’, (although, symptomatically, some still deny that he ever was a ‘real’ *kaya* elder) and publicly derided those who had abandoned their culture in favour of education: ‘those who prided

⁷⁷ Eric Aseka, *Ronald Ngala* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1993); see also the biographical sketch in NA FCO 31/1192.

⁷⁸ There is a reference to Ngala’s use of the term in a 1959 petition in Magor, Office of the Chief Secretary, Nairobi to Buist, Colonial Office, 14 June 1960, NA CO 822/2142. The petition itself is not extant.

⁷⁹ Aseka, *Ronald Ngala*, 6-7; also Interview, Harry Ngonyo and Joshua Malingi, 7, 13 Jan. 2011. It is presumably memory of Ngala’s role in this revival which has misled some scholars into suggesting that Ngala created the Mijikenda Union in 1945: see for example McIntosh, ‘Elders and “frauds”’, 42.

⁸⁰ Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Report, Sep. 1958, KNA CA 16/73

⁸¹ Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Report, Jan. 1958, Apr. 1958, KNA CA 16/73

⁸² Interview, Safari Yeri, 3, 24 June 2010

⁸³ Biryama Masha was elected to the Council in 1956, and was still on it in 1961: African District Council Minutes, 1960-61, KNA JA 1/336A

themselves on being educated had a hard time with Birya . . . he said, you see, these educated people, they are all thieves!’⁸⁴ This vivid discursive evocation of tradition through contrast to modernity led the district commissioner to comment on ‘the revival of tradition’ in this period; Ngala took to wearing a beaded cap, given to him by *kaya* elders, which was widely believed to contain a powerful magic charm.⁸⁵

In late 1961, circumstances provided an opportunity for a very public display of the traditional politics of the Mijikenda Union, with the visit to the coast of the commissioner appointed to enquire into the future of the ‘Coastal Strip’. By this time Ngala had led a new party, the Coast African People’s Union (CAPU) - which was created from KAPU as the restrictions on party organizations were lifted - into a wider national party, the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU). This brought together a group of politicians who sought national independence but feared – or claimed that ‘their people’ feared – Kikuyu dominance.⁸⁶ KADU organized delegations and memoranda opposing separate independence for the coast. But it was people claiming association with the Mijikenda Union who put on the most dramatic display, organizing a boycott of Arab shops, and bringing hundreds of men, ‘dressed in Mijikenda style’ and armed with bows and spears, onto the streets of Mombasa to stage a mock ‘funeral’ for the idea of an independent coast.⁸⁷ When the commissioner travelled south of Mombasa he was mobbed by cheering crowds chanting ‘Freedom with Mijikenda.’⁸⁸ Petitions and memoranda used the term Mijikenda to express a claim to autochthony. Ngala himself set the tone: ‘KADU does not recognize the coastal strip agreement of 1895 we demand immediate abrogation and sovereignty of the whole Coast province reverting to indigenous be [sic] native ie Wamidzichenda’; and ‘the strip is African soil . . . the Arabs know very how they first came into contact with Mijikenda as the indigenous owners of the strip’.⁸⁹ Appearing at a rally in Mombasa, in ‘Miji Kenda robes presented to him . . . as a sign of “eldership”’, Ngala wove together autochthony, tradition and Mijikenda primacy: ‘“The whole of the Coast Province . . . was occupied by the Miji Kenda. It was their country – even before the Arab immigration”’.⁹⁰

Others similarly intertwined the claim to autochthony with an emphasis on traditional authority. ‘The WAMIJIKENDA are the indigenous owners [of the coast] . . . The kayas have always been the traditional bodies charged with the task of maintaining law and order.’ The number and style of memoranda sent to the commissioner - allegedly from groups of rural elders who were almost certainly illiterate, but typed up in English or Swahili and sent in the

⁸⁴ Interview, Katana Juba, 12, 5 Jan. 2011; see also interview, David Chigube Tsuma, 8, 30 June 2010.

⁸⁵ Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Report, Aug. and Oct 1958, Nov. 1958, KNA CA 16/73; and Aug. 1962, KNA CB 18/21; Interviews, Mary Jumwa and Jumwa Kazungu, 3, 12 Jan. 2011; Harry Ngonyo and Joshua Malingi, 15, 13 Jan. 2011.

⁸⁶ Keith Kyle, *The Politics of the Independence of Kenya* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 136-59.

⁸⁷ ‘Intimidation closes Coast Arab shops’, *Daily Nation*, 11 Oct. 1961; ‘Commission condemns intimidation’, *Mombasa Times*, 11 Oct. 1961; ‘Sir James dodges the demonstrators’, *Daily Nation*, 9 Oct. 1961; Interview, Ali Chizondo and others, 7, 1 July 2010.

⁸⁸ ‘Sultan gives assurances on coastal strip’, *Mombasa Times*, 20 Oct. 1961.

⁸⁹ Telegram from Ngala to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 22 Sep. 1961, NA CO 822/2151; Memorandum by the President of KADU, 26 Oct 1961, NA CO 894/10; ‘Memorandum to the Coastal Strip Commissioner by Kaya Councillors of Wamijikenda, 6 Oct. 1961, NA CO 894/14

⁹⁰ Speech reported in ‘KADU drops ban on inquiry commissioner’, *Daily Nation*, 9 Oct. 1961.

space of a few days in October - suggest a coordinated attempt to link being indigenous with being Mijikenda. So too did the language of the many delegations who made verbal submissions: 'the indigenes who are original in this country, who are the Mijikenda;' 'we the people of Mijikenda . . . do not want foreign rule'.⁹¹ Some of them expressed also the view that they 'did not want to be ruled by an up-country government'.⁹² To emphasise the point, Ngala's close ally, Robert Matano - described as the 'leader of the Mijikenda Union' - took a delegation of 'Mijikenda elders' to Zanzibar to challenge the sultan.⁹³

At the end of 1961, the commissioner recommended that the coastal strip should become part of Kenya. Political debate rapidly shifted to the terms of that inclusion. Even as the commissioner had gathered evidence, KADU had been developing the idea of a 'regional' constitution under which an independent Kenya would see significant powers devolved from the centre; KANU was reluctantly forced to agree to this plan, and in 1962 two further commissions visited the coast to delimit electoral constituencies and to set the boundaries of the proposed regions.⁹⁴ In May 1963, elections gave KADU local victory at the coast - where they dominated the regional assembly - but national defeat at the hands of KANU. Over the next seventeen months, as Kenya moved towards complete independence, KANU steadily chipped away at the regional constitution and at the fragile unity of KADU.⁹⁵ Finally, in October 1964, KADU dissolved; Ngala joined KANU, and formally abandoned the aim of a distinct status for the coast, ending an extraordinarily intense period of very public politics.

Throughout these dramatic events, the Mijikenda Union continued to hold public meetings - sometimes more frequently than KADU did - though it is KADU and KANU who dominate the written record.⁹⁶ And the language of the Union continued to foreground tradition: the press announcement of its annual meeting announced that 'The meeting will be attended by Miji-Kenda elders resident in Mombasa and the Kwale and Kilifi Districts'.⁹⁷ Local activists now used Mijikenda identity to assert their rights against up-country Africans: 'We Miji Kenda . . . do not want any other tribe to mix with us except the ones which we know to be original'; Biryama Masha publicly endorsed KADU candidates on behalf of the 'elders', and candidates were also brought to Kaya Fungo to be blessed.⁹⁸ The politics of independence had firmly established Mijikenda in the imagination of government - following the flurry of

⁹¹ Kumbukumbu juu ya Mkataba wa 1895 na Maili Kumi, Wajumbe wa KADU na KANU, 13 Oct 1961, NA CO 894/12; 'Miji Kenda memorandum on the future of the Coastal Strip', 15 Oct. 1961 NA CO 894/13. See also 'Memorandum on coastal strip', Johnson Mwero, 11 Oct 1961, NA CO 894/13; Record of meeting with 'Miji Kenda elders', Malindi, 13 Oct. 1961, NA CO 894/5; 'Delegation from the Miji Kenda' Msambweni, 19 Oct 1961, NA CO 894/8

⁹² Statement by Masha Kalamu, 19 Oct. 1961, NA CO 894/8.

⁹³ 'Sultan gives assurances on coastal strip', *Mombasa Times*, 20 Oct. 1961. Popular memory of these events remained vivid in 2010/11: Interviews, David Chigube Tsuma, 2, 30 June 2010; Ali Chizondo and others, 7, 1 July 2010

⁹⁴ Kyle, *The Politics of the Independence*, 143-49.

⁹⁵ Gertzel, *The Politics of Independent Kenya*, 33-34.

⁹⁶ In the period November 1963 to February 1964, KADU held 14 public meetings in Kilifi District; the Mijikenda Union held 19: Kilifi Monthly Intelligence report, Nov. 1963 to Feb. 1964, KNA CB 18/21.

⁹⁷ 'Miji-Kenda Union meeting', *Mombasa Times*, 22 Dec. 1962

⁹⁸ Seoni Ezekiel *et al*, 16 Aug. 1962, NA CO 897/1; Interview, Harry Ngonyo and Joshua Malingi, 9, 12, 13 Jan. 2011.

activity around the Coastal Strip, Mijikenda was added to the ‘list of tribal names’ used in the 1962 census.⁹⁹ But more importantly, this vivid and very public politics had embedded the term – and the idea of a collective Mijikenda identity – in wider popular discussions and quotidian practice. In 1962 and 1963, men claiming to represent the Mijikenda Union were involved in issues of pressing popular concern which were quite unrelated to national politics – the control of witchcraft, and the performance of rituals intended to ensure that rain fell – as well as in continuing disputes over squatting and cashew trees.¹⁰⁰

The people’s government?

Independent Kenya was on one level a developmentalist state, whose formal institutions, language and practice were all alien forms, inherited from its late colonial forebear, and in which rhetoric linked state legitimacy to a familiar bundle of ‘progress’ – education, healthcare, roads, waged work. But delivery of that bundle was at best erratic, and the state could never reward all of its citizens equally with the fruits of independence; and so politicians were required to manage a local politics of patronage, ‘to deliver the support of their ethnically mobilised constituents and clients’.¹⁰¹ While the formal structures of the state were alien, this local politics turned much more readily to a distinctive language of tradition, and to the sometimes novel ethnic constituencies which this defined.¹⁰²

The foci of political activity shifted abruptly after 1964. In the words of one official: ‘[t]he role of politicians changed to that of Nation-Building. Instead of holding political meetings many Development barazas [public meetings] were held.’¹⁰³ Through such meetings, addressed by district commissioners, and sometimes by local members of parliament ‘appeals [were] made to the public to provide better sanitation and adopt better methods of living’ and ‘emphasis . . . put on education, farming and self-help projects’.¹⁰⁴ These meetings were held at district headquarters on national holidays, and elsewhere as part of tours or official visits by ministers: as when Ngala and Matano, now KANU stalwarts and government ministers, addressed a KANU rally in 1971 and urged their listeners ‘to mount joint efforts in the field of development endeavour’, or when Kenyatta gave a speech in Malindi ‘laying emphasis on hard work and change of attitude by the coastal people’.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ ‘Report on the Kenya Population Census’, D G Christie Miller, 31 Aug. 1962, p.3 and Appendix 1, NA CO 822/3177.

¹⁰⁰ Kilifi Monthly Intelligence Reports, May and Sep. 1962, Nov. 1963, KNA CB 18/21

¹⁰¹ Daniel Branch and Nic Cheeseman, ‘The politics of control in Kenya: understanding the bureaucratic-executive state, 1952-78’, 17, *Review of African Political Economy*, 33, 107 (2006), 11-31; Githu Muigai, ‘Jomo Kenyatta and the rise of the ethno-nationalist state of Kenya’, in Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh and Will Kymlicka (eds), *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2004), 200-17; Widner, *The Rise of the Party-State*, 43.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰³ Kilifi Monthly Report, Mar. 1965, KNA CB 18/21.

¹⁰⁴ Kilifi Monthly Report, Jan. 1965, KNA CB 18/21; Ganze Division Handing-over report, Feb. 1967, KNA CA 16/65; Kilifi Monthly Report, Apr. 1976 KNA CA 16/150.

¹⁰⁵ Kilifi Monthly reports, Mar-Apr. 1971, May 1975, KNA CA 16/150

The written record of these events may suggest a sullen populace being harangued to ‘work harder on your farms’ by an authoritarian state.¹⁰⁶ But as Angelique Haugerud has argued, while only one party was allowed to organize, and the state could be heavy-handed, politicians and administrators feared the humiliation which a scanty, silent, or even restive crowd could visit on a speaker; the state needed politicians who could show their popularity, and meetings could be unpredictable.¹⁰⁷ And so a partly hidden local politics ran alongside, and sometimes through, these meetings: politics given a particular edge at the coast since most senior administrators were from up-country, but all politicians were locals, who were expected to secure the support of ‘their’ people – these were encounters between government and local community, in which ideas of ethnicity and tradition were evoked to distance the government and to argue over who had the support of the community. Speeches were not always confined to bland exhortations to development; they could include pointed comments about rivals, or appeals to visiting dignitaries: ‘indirect messages float between orators and hearers’, as Haugerud observed. And alongside the public events there were private meetings with individuals or delegations, who sought the patronage of politicians to secure anything from school fees for a child to government finance for a clinic. Politicians in their turn sought out individuals or groups who they thought would help them secure victory for themselves or their allies in local government elections, and in parliamentary by-elections or national elections (held in 1969 and 1974); and who they believed would help turn out an appreciative crowd for meetings.

In this politics, both Ngala and Matano – who remained nominal ‘president’ of the Mijikenda Union until its dissolution- used the idea of the Mijikenda as a collective group, rooted in tradition, whose loyalty they undertook to secure in return for the guarantee of resources. They evoked this idea to negotiate upwards, as they vied with other ministers for jobs and projects; and downwards, as they argued to ‘their people’ that they were serving their interests. Both men were nervous of rivals – and of each other - colluding to prevent the emergence of other possible leaders.¹⁰⁸ And crucially, both talked and behaved in ways which affirmed a distinction between the ‘government’, and a sphere of local legitimacy and authority which rested on tradition and was embodied in Mijikenda identity. For Ngala, now uneasily in government, the relationship with ‘elders’ was central to his claim to intermediacy with the world of tradition: ‘when Ronald Ngala went to look for votes . . . Biryama Masha had to be there’.¹⁰⁹

For Matano too, the Mijikenda Union offered a formal way to position himself as the interlocutor between government and tradition. But he struggled to do so. Matano was usually described as Duruma; but local knowledge was and is always ready to recategorise him, as his paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother are both said to have been former slaves, brought by missionaries to their home on Methodist church land near Mazeras.¹¹⁰ In

¹⁰⁶ Kilifi Monthly Report, Apr. 1976, KNA CA 16/150

¹⁰⁷ Angelique Haugerud, *The Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2-3; 8-11; 58-59, 67-68.

¹⁰⁸ Stren, ‘Factional politics’, 44-45; Interview, Katana Juba, 5, 5 Jan. 2011.

¹⁰⁹ Interview, Daniel Korokoro, 16-17, 6 Jan. 2011

¹¹⁰ Interview, Lawrence Bennett, 1, 25 June 2010.

the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of KADU – which came as a severe shock to many people at the coast – Matano’s claims to intermediacy were under attack.¹¹¹ Within a month the elders of the Mijikenda Union, including some of the men who had been on the delegation to Zanzibar, were sending a pointed message to Matano: ‘You, our representative, Mr Matano, we see that you are now very busy, now that you are in the Government and have become a minister’, they declared, announcing that a meeting had elected Biryā Masha to be ‘President’ in his place.¹¹² Matano ignored this, but Biryā Masha and his fellow elders kept up a steady campaign in which they consistently referred to their status as *kaya* elders as justification for their claim to authority over the Mijikenda, and announced that Matano had been toppled as

it appears that the many concerns of government have meant that he does not have the time or ability to lead the Mijikenda Union, which is a party that makes every child of Kenya remember their traditions . . . so that the beliefs of our grandfathers and fathers should not be lost .¹¹³

These typewritten letters, and the titles they used, drew deeply on bureaucratic practice while insisting on the authorizing power of tradition. Biryā Masha, they declared, had been ‘elected’ as president of the Mijikenda Union, and so ‘we have given him complete authority over the traditions of the Mijikenda’; the authors described themselves as ‘chairmen’, and sometimes as ‘presidents’ of the *kayas*; in one letter they personified themselves as *kayas*.¹¹⁴ David Parkin, conducting anthropological research in these years, encountered what local discourse cast as the ‘people’s government’, a practice of dispute resolution based on elder men’s authority.¹¹⁵ Such local ‘courts’ were by no means novel, but the idea that they dealt in ‘Mijikenda’ custom was; Biryā and his fellows were inserting themselves and the Mijikenda Union into popular notions of customary justice, drawing on their own role at intermediaries:

[Biryā’s] work was to go to Kizurini [the office of the district officer] and when he came back from there he went to the *kaya* . . . all the time he talked of the DO, DC, PC and he had letters in his pockets; he could not read but he knew that this [pocket] was for the DC; this one for the DO’.¹¹⁶

Parkin may have overstated the institutional strength of the Union at this time, but Biryā was successful enough to alarm local administrators, one of whom reported that Biryā was

¹¹¹ Kilifi Monthly Report, Nov. 1964, KNA CB 18/21; Interview, Safari Yeri, 13-6, 24 June 2010.

¹¹² Figo Dzugofya to Matano, 29 Nov. 1964, KNA CC 1/28

¹¹³ Biryā Masha, Chairman, Mijikenda Union to PC Coast. 20 Feb. 1968, KNA CB 11/47

¹¹⁴ Kenga Choga to PC Coast, 5 Apr. 1968, KNA CB 11/47; ‘Minutes za mkutano wa *kaya*’, 12 Sep. 1965; Buru Kunguni to Secretary, Mijikenda Union, 27 Sep. 1966, KNA CC 1/28

¹¹⁵ David Parkin, *Palms, Wine and Witnesses: Public Spirit and Private Gain in an African Farming Community* (London: Intertext Books, 1971), 24-25, 39, 63, 84.

¹¹⁶ Interview, Mary Jumwa and Jumwa Kazungu, 12 Jan. 2011; see also interview, Harry Ngonyo and Joshua Malingi, 13, 13 Jan. 2011.

‘engaging in political agitation, holding of unlawful courts and illegal secret collection of money’.¹¹⁷

Administrators’ suspicions of Birya were exacerbated by concerns over witchcraft. The point at which esoteric individual knowledge and power over well-being turned baleful was uncertain, and so witchcraft was a perennial concern in local communities. The services of ‘witchfinders’ – individuals who claimed to be able to identify witches, but were themselves often suspected of witchcraft - were prized, despite the disapproving attitude of colonial and post-colonial officials, who saw them as charlatans who endangered public order. Sometimes these officials simply banned witch-finding – in Kwale in 1965, for example.¹¹⁸ But Parkin’s work has shown how government and Mijikenda Union became entangled in a dispute over how to manage witchcraft in 1966, when a new witch finder called Tsuma Washe – better known as Kajiwe – emerged. One local administrator disdainfully noted that ‘[s]urprisingly, this Witch Finder has a large crowd of followers’; others sought to enlist the traditional authority of the Mijikenda Union to manage him. The failure of this led to Kajiwe’s imprisonment, and a deepening of administrative hostility to the Mijikenda Union, as Birya Masha and his fellows made increasingly strident claims to an authority based on tradition, and beyond the control of the state.¹¹⁹ ‘The ritual of the traditional oath of the Mijikenda’, they insisted, could end witchcraft; the Mijikenda Union had authorised ‘indigenous ritual experts’ who would eradicate witchcraft if only the government would allow them to do so.¹²⁰ Birya and his allies offered the idea of a Mijikenda collective ritual identity as the answer to other problems, too: as when urban workers in Mombasa raised funds for Birya to use in a collective ‘Mijikenda’ ritual to bring rain.¹²¹

Birya and his allies used the Mijikenda Union to raise another chronic concern of a populace who suspected that their political leaders had abandoned them to join ‘the government’. Independence had brought no resolution of the land conflicts at the coast: ‘until now you will find that the coast is full of squatters, you were born here, your grandfather, the grandfather of your grandfather . . . but you’re told that you are a squatter’.¹²² From 1964, these squatters increasingly faced African landowners – some from up-country, a few of them coastal members of the new political elite - who were buying up government land, or estates which had belonged to Europeans or Arabs. Ngala and Matano were too cautious to speak out publicly against this, but Birya Masha roundly denounced the eviction of squatters in the name of the Mijikenda Union.¹²³

¹¹⁷ Okech, DC Kilifi to PC, 14 May 1968, KNA CB 11/47

¹¹⁸ Kwale Monthly Report, Feb. 1965, Mar. 1965, KNA CC 23/9

¹¹⁹ Kilifi Monthly Report, June/July 1966, KNA CB 18/21; Parkin, *Sacred Void*, 26-28; See also Diane Ciekawy, ‘Witchcraft and statecraft: five technologies of power in colonial and postcolonial coastal Kenya’, *African Studies Review* 41, 3 (1998), 119-41.

¹²⁰ Birya Masha, Chairman, Mijikenda Union to Ngala, 15 Oct. 1967, KNA CB 11/47; Birya Masha to DC Kilifi, 1 Feb 1968 and 25 Mar. 1968; also ‘Minutes ya Makaya Tisa Mijikenda Union’, 3 Apr. 1968, KNA CB 11/47.

¹²¹ Interview, Safari wa Yeri, 10 Jan. 2011.

¹²² Interview, Katana Juba, 5, 5 Jan. 2011

¹²³ Birya Masha to R G Ngala, 6 Sep. 1967 and 18 Mar. 1968, KNA CB 11/47

Matano fought back, insisting that he controlled the Mijikenda Union and ordering local administrators to prevent Birya and his allies from holding meetings.¹²⁴ After Ngala's death in a car crash in 1972, Matano rushed to convene a meeting which confirmed his presidency of the Mijikenda Union – seeking thus to ensure his own status as a political leader.¹²⁵ But through the rest of the 1970s, the Union's significance remained imaginary, rather than institutional – torn between multiple claimants to the role of intermediary, its name constantly evoked, it had no sustained organizational existence.

Conclusion

The dissolution of the Mijikenda Union in 1980 had little meaning; there was no institution to abolish. But the idea of a Mijikenda identity had become embedded in multiple areas of discourse and practice. It was evoked by politicians to define a constituency; by elders who sought to create a moral community over which they had influence; but also by urban workers who saw the Union either as a tool for political mobilization in their complex battles over civic office in Mombasa, or as a means to assert their continued commitment to a rural moral community through a collective offering for rain; and again by squatters who offered it as legitimation of their claims to land. For all these different actors, the idea of a Mijikenda identity offered a way to claim intermediacy between tradition and modernity, asserting the central importance of a categorical distinction which was both imaginary and powerful. This super-tribe was not the creation of colonial officials, or missionaries, and it drew much of its creative and dynamic force from continuity: it did not entirely remake culture, or people's sense of themselves. In this, it reveals the 'limits of invention'. But it was also a 'modern product of the African encounter with capitalism and the nation state'.¹²⁶ The processes involved could be dramatic, as they were in the debates over the Ten-Mile Strip in October 1961; more often they were incremental. But the idea of the Mijikenda grew out of colonial and post-colonial experience. Consistently, and innovatively, those who experimented with it built on the powerfully productive set of contrasts which set modernity against tradition.

¹²⁴ Matano to PC Coast. 8 June 1966, KNA CC 1/28

¹²⁵ For the popular assumption that Ngala was murdered see Interviews, Kazungu Ngala, 12 Jan. 2011; Mary Jumwa and Jumwa Kazungu, 4, 12 Jan. 2011; for Matano's re-election, see Hall, British High Commission, Nairobi to Wood, Foreign and Commonwealth office, 17 Jan. 1973, NA FCO 31/1498.

¹²⁶ Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh and Will Kymlicka, 'Ethnicity and the politics of democratic nation-building in Africa', 5, in *idem.*, *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, 1-21.