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Daren Ray, *Ethnicity, Identity, and Conceptualizing Community in Indian Ocean East Africa*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2024, Pp. 312, ISBN: 0821426125.

Reviewed by: Nathaniel Mathews, SUNY-Binghamton.

Tackling the enduring scholarly question of East African coastal identity, historian Daren Ray explores two thousand years of community formation on the Kenyan coast through the framework of ethnicity and identity. While many treatments of the Swahili coast are focused on post-sixteenth-century history, Ray's work is notable for its integration of linguistic and archaeological evidence to analyze the social attitudes of the first Bantu speakers to migrate to the coast. This greater time depth allows him to "reimagine how littoral communities in the Indian Ocean formed and then adapted to ever-shifting political constraints..." (Ray, 3) In addition to the use of "littoral" to emphasize the territoriality of coastal identity beyond ethnicity, Ray uses several key terms to frame the coast consonant with recent scholarship that tries to integrate coastal history with its nearby hinterland as well as the Indian Ocean. Most importantly, the term "cis-oceanic" is used to signal the book's focus on the coastal region's links to larger networks. "Cis-oceanic" is particularly meant to "highlight the contributions of inland African communities to Kenya's littoral society."(13).

In an Introduction, eight chapters, and an epilogue, Ray explores the flexible and fluid boundaries of belonging on the Kenyan coast and how coastal residents defined relations between groups, integrated newcomers, and articulated responses to the challenges of Portuguese, Omani, and British rule. The great strength of the book throughout is its use of linguistic evidence to connect the practices and beliefs of a larger community of neighboring Bantu speakers to particular social dynamics in the Swahili coast towns. To do this in early chapters, which cover the under-historicized period from 3000 BCE to 1500 CE, Ray relies on the discipline of historical linguistics. The methods within this linguistic sub-discipline rely on fieldwork collecting utterances from elderly speakers within a target language. Scholars use this data to identify linguistic patterns within the language and to compare similar utterances from earlier studies of the same community and between different communities speaking related languages. This method has been elaborated in particular by scholars working on Bantu migrations across Africa, a world-historical event for which written records are largely absent. If enough comparative

data is available, scholars of Bantu linguistics can backdate the emergent usage of particular terms among particular local and regional Bantu speech communities, connecting these historical-theoretical utterances to the archaeological record to produce a partial but valuable picture of historical social life among speakers of Bantu languages in particular areas at particular times. Ray uses linguistic data to demonstrate that the kinship schemas first developed in the Great Lakes region are "as crucial to understanding the formation of a littoral society in coastal Kenya as the ideas that flowed from distant shores around the Indian Ocean." Ray thus begins his story of Bantu-speaking coastal communities in the Great Lakes region with a consideration of the distant ancestors of coastal Bantu speakers and their divergence into separate speech communities, some of whom moved into the more arid regions nearer the coast and became the forebears of Northeast Coastal Bantu and Sabaki speakers (Swahili being the most widely spoken language in the Sabaki subgroup). Ray explores the evolving meanings of the roots of two key words in the Swahili language, -lango, meaning door, and -nyumba, meaning house, to the incorporation of kith and kin into the clan structures Sabaki speakers brought with them to the coast. Conserving these utterances and innovating their meaning, Sabaki speakers defined maternal and paternal relations in new environments.

The book's integration of different evidence really shines in chapter two. Here, Ray uses the term "uganga," a Sabaki word commonly translated as "medicine/healing," but which Ray interprets more broadly as "esoteric knowledge." Uganga was among a cluster of older ideas from the Great Lakes that helped organize the settlement of Bantu-speaking clans at the Kenya coast by 150 BCE and organize their relations with already existing Cushitic speakers in the region. Local rivalries among Sabaki clans, rather than foreign mercantile dynamics, drove Swahili urbanization. The migrations of Sabaki speakers created the first towns in the region after 500 CE, drawing together the knowledge conserved through their clan structures and gained through relations with local people to address the ecological challenges of coastal living. Ray demonstrates uganga's usage to mark differences between proto-Sabaki-speaking clans and other Bantu speakers while showing the ancient linguistic interconnectedness of these groups along the coast.

In chapter 3, Ray further shows how the clan confederations that founded Swahili towns adapted to the expansion of overseas commerce on the coast between 1000 and 1700 CE, noting that the word for "town" is also the word for "clan confederation" in Swahili and that clan groupings were more than mere collections of blood-descended people but were vehicles for integrating those with new knowledge and other useful outsiders into the emerging littoral society. Title

societies and age-sets helped mediate and contain the increasingly commercial bent of coastal society by redistributing resources across clan networks. Ray's treatment of Islam is uneven. He shows how residents of one early Swahili town, Shanga, saw the new religion in terms of the old category of "uganga" and gradually came to prefer the "uganga" of Islam over more traditional forms between 1100 and 1250 CE. But at times, he struggles to distinguish the increasing archaeological evidence for adherence to Islam on the coast from an "orthodoxy" he claims was imposed from the top-down by outsiders. The locus for this interpretation rests on Ray's speculation, drawing in part on Mark Horton, that Arab outsiders brought a "new Sunni-Shafii orthodoxy" that was "less tolerant of maganga and their halls". At a key moment in the story of the evolution of coastal society, then, Ray puzzlingly withdraws local agency from Sabaki speakers, reifying a boundary he otherwise argues against—between Sabaki speakers who think in terms of uganga and clans and Arab migrants who think in terms of "Sunni-Shafii orthodoxy". Arabs are not analyzed in terms of their multi-generational adaptation to Swahili-speaking coastal society, nor is African conversion taken seriously as an independent preference indication. As we shall see, this ahistorical treatment of Islam is also extended to a similar process of ideological change and preference rearrangement in the nineteenth century. In both cases, Sabaki speakers are not granted agency to redefine Islam consonant with their awareness of Islamic scriptures and global practice; their moves away from traditional religion are instead ascribed to a vaguely nefarious Arab cultural imperialism.

Indeed, though the analysis of the cis-oceanic framework is well done and very welcome, Ray's discussion and understanding of the "ideas that flowed from distant shores" sometimes leave something to be desired. Take his discussion of Omanis at the coast. First, Ray uses the terms "Islamic orthodoxy" and "Arab orthodoxy" interchangeably to describe the ideology of the new arrivals and their impact. Ray indicts this orthodoxy for introducing communal exclusion among coastal residents by introducing a separation between pagan and Muslim that had previously been more vaguely defined. The choice by Ray to use "orthodoxy" is an odd one that might be negatively compared to western writers describing uganga as "witchcraft". Second, orthodoxy is portrayed as uniquely Islamic. Third, while Ray is careful to note that orthodoxy is in the eye of the beholder, he does not define the meaning of orthodoxy, much less in terms his own historical subjects would have recognized—sometimes it is described as "Arab orthodoxy", sometimes as "Islamic", and at other times, Ray discusses "...claims to orthodox Muslim identity." Fourth, Ray does not take into account Omani scholars and their investments in and writing about the esoteric and the occult. These contradictory usages tend to obscure

what was at stake in these encounters, not only between non-Muslims and Muslims at the coast, but between different sects of Muslims. Orthodoxy is a Christian term that was also debated and rejected by German-Jewish reformers in the nineteenth century. It is rather anachronistically used to describe the attitudes of the Omanis who arrived at the coast. First, because as Ibadis, Omanis were often considered theologically deviant by many Sunni ulama, and second, because the debates over Islam on the coast were and are more about right practice than about right belief. Orthopraxy has long been more important than orthodoxy in Islam for defining who is Muslim, but that obscures that his actors never used this terminology.

In this writer's view, chapter five's focus on orthodoxy misses the key role of literacy. The nineteenth century brought new opportunities for wider swaths of people to acquire literacy in texts of the Islamic tradition, thus increasing a process of self-conscious reflection on how their local practices and beliefs aligned with global trends and leading to more opportunities for differentiation. Though mentioned, the acquisition of literacy is not discussed thoroughly enough, especially its connection to participants in coastal clan dynamics who used Arabic literacy to domesticate exogenous ideas and critique their own local contexts. This was the second step in a multi-part process of the coast domesticating Islam, the first step of which was the integration of Islamic knowledge and spiritual techniques into the uanga, which Ray addressed in chapter two (70-73). The waungwana version of Islam, which, as Ray explained in earlier chapters, was conceived by the elite as the esoteric epistemic property of certain clans, was in the nineteenth century supplanted by a new, more literate, missionary-oriented version that democratized the knowledge of Islamic faith. If orthodoxy was produced, it was out of these dynamics of literate engagement with the Islamic tradition, not by top-down impositions from Arab rulers. Ray argues that the intolerance of Islamic orthodoxy made earlier alliances with "pagan" communities untenable.

This argument might have been nuanced by an acknowledgement that the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in both coastal and hinterland communities were shifting, which Ray presents evidence for. In practice, what Islam did was to internally differentiate Mijikenda communities by offering an alternative lifestyle choice, with consequences for all manner of social associations: communal eating, residence, marriage, and inheritance. Conversion to Islam opened new avenues for assimilation into an urban lifestyle, while undermining the role of traditional authorities as mediators of the group. "Intolerance" and Arab "privilege" are ultimately limited frameworks for understanding this process. Put otherwise, Islam's appeal to the peoples of the nineteenth-century Swahili coast was based on their desire to liberate themselves from the often-oppressive strictures of traditional clan

organization in both town and hinterland, especially the hierarchical control of knowledge by elders. In short, though Ray discards the colonial idea that Swahili civilization was the product of Arab immigrants, he recapitulates that idea in a negative form in his discussions of Islam on the nineteenth-century coast by portraying "orthodoxy" as a unitary ideal imposed by Arab immigrants, rather than a process flowing as much from African initiative in domesticating scriptural Islam into an already Muslim coastal culture.

The wider context of East Africa is important to this discussion. In addition to Ray's ideological explanation, one should note the material changes sweeping the coast at this time, particularly the transition from subsistence agriculture and the growing importance of long-distance trade. Across East Africa, "new men" were supplanting the more traditional routes to prestige with imported wealth derived from trade that was gradually linking parts of Kenya and Tanzania into an interconnected zone; hinterland communities adjacent to the coast also wanted to be part of this dynamic new economy, and their residence at the coast increased their exposure to the teachings of Islam. At the same time, European missionaries had arrived to propagate Christianity at the coast. In the Kenyan coastal hinterland, these dynamics created tensions between converts to Islam and Christianity and the older customs of the clans. Sometimes, as Ray notes, these could be integrated by distinguishing the religious sphere from the judicial and the political. But at other points, they could not be fully reconciled, as with the Bantu custom of matrilineal inheritance in relation to Islamic law. Whatever their provenance, in Chapter Six, Ray acknowledges that the political tribalism associated with these identities did not become politically salient until the colonial era because of British attempts to demarcate communal identities by territorial boundary drawing of the coast and its hinterland. The remaining two chapters of the book explore the colonial period and the transition to an independent Kenya, in which Ray shows the struggle to re-imagine old ethnic and religious identities to forge a unified territorial coastal identity. These chapters analyze the works of coastal intellectuals like Hyder al-Kindy, Sheikh Al-Amin Mazrui, and Ronald Ngala and their opinions on colonial rule and national independence, revealing the contrasting dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in their respective ideological projects.

The book is a *longue durée* exploration of the salience of ethnicity and kinship in the development of Kenyan coastal identities, considering their deep cis-oceanic entanglements. Ray's book succeeds in bringing linguistic and archaeological analysis together with historical documentation to illuminate the deep historical

roots of contemporary coastal scenes of marriage, homestead creation, and holidays like Maulid and Swahili New Year, within the linguistic utterances of generations of Sabaki speakers. The book's treatment of the spread of Islam in Chapter Five is problematic, but this ought not to detract from its considerable strengths: using historical linguistics to add considerable time depth to the history of the Kenya coast and moving scholarly and popular understandings beyond the colonial view of the Swahili as an outpost of foreign civilization.

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