Recycling Interdisciplinary Evidence: Abandoned Hypotheses and African Historiologies in the Settlement History of Littoral East Africa

Daren E. Ray*

Brigham Young University Provo, Utah, USA
*Corresponding author. E-mail: darenray@gmail.com.

Abstract: Scholars can elevate African voices as they recycle evidence from abandoned lines of research. This article discusses how to apply the confirmation and recycling methods of interdisciplinary research to engage with African historiologies. After reviewing contentious debates about Shungwaya from ca. 1955–2000, it draws on Mijikenda elder Thomas Govi's descriptions of *uganga* and clanship (in a published collection of oral traditions) as a historiological theory for reimagining cross-linguistic collaborations, the formation of "stone towns," and Islamic conversion in the settlement history of littoral East Africa.

Resume: Les chercheur.e.s peuvent donner une plus grande importance aux voix africaines en recyclant des sources issues d'anciens axes de recherche. Cet article explique comment utiliser les méthodes de recherche interdisciplinaire pour valider et recycler les sources utilisées par les historiographies africaines. En étudiant les débats controversés sur Shungwaya (env. 1955-2000), il s'appuie sur les descriptions de l'uganga et des clans par un aîné des Mijikenda, Thomas Govi (dans un recueil de traditions orales publiées) pour formuler une théorie historiographique qui vise à réinventer les collaborations translinguistiques, la formation des «villes de pierre» et la conversion islamique dans l'histoire du peuplement du littoral de l'Afrique de l'Est.

doi:10.1017/hia.2022.7

> To hold history, the discipline, and other forms of memory together so that they can help in the interrogation of each other, … these are the tasks that subaltern histories are suited to accomplish.
>
> Dipesh Chakrabarty[1]

Introduction

Where is Shungwaya? This question spurred interdisciplinary debates among historians, anthropologists, archeologists, and historical linguists of coastal East Africa for much of the twentieth century. Dutch cartographers noted a place called Shungwaya on maps as early as 1596, but Charles Guillain was the first European to describe it in 1856 as the origin of the Kilindini (a Kiswahili-speaking community in Mombasa).[2] By the mid-twentieth century, scholars noted that other East Africans also claimed Shungwaya as their ancestral home, including Segeju, Taita, and Mijikenda communities. Thomas Spear's transcriptions of interviews with Mijikenda elders in 1971 comprise the most complete corpus of oral traditions about Shungwaya.[3] His insistence on their accuracy spurred decades-long disputes over how to correlate evidence from multiple disciplines, and his migration narrative has prevailed since the 1980s. Archeological research conducted since the 1990s indicates that scholars must finally abandon this hypothesis.[4]

Yet, as scholars reconstruct the settlement history of littoral East Africa with greater nuance, they should heed Spear's counsel to "accept oral traditions as history … and traditional oral historians as our colleagues … seeking to understand their theory and practice of history."[5] Oral traditions once occupied the "heart of the canon" of African history.[6] However, as the "foreshortening of African history" placed more emphasis on colonial and postcolonial eras, historians have focused more often on archival materials

---

[1] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 93–94.

[2] R. F. Morton, "The Shungwaya Myth of Mijikenda Origins: A Problem of Late Nineteenth-Century Kenya Coastal History," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 5–3 (1972), 406; Charles Guillain, *Documents Sur l'Historie, La Géographie, et Le Commerce de La Côte Orientale d'Afrique* (Paris: Arthus Bertrand, 1856), III: 240.

[3] Thomas T. Spear, *Traditions of Origin and Their Interpretation: The Mijikenda of Kenya* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1981).

[4] See for example Richard Helm, "Re-Evaluating Traditional Histories on the Coast of Kenya: An Archeological Perspective," in Reid, Andres M. and Lane, Paul J. (eds.), *African Historical Archeologies* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004).

[5] Thomas Spear, "Oral Traditions: Whose History?," *History in Africa* 8 (1981), 168.

[6] David Newbury, "Contradictions at the Heart of the Canon: Jan Vansina and the Debate over Oral Historiography in Africa, 1960–1985," *History in Africa* 34 (2007), 213–254.

and collections of oral histories.[7] Meanwhile, fewer linguists working in East Africa focus on historical linguistics, and archeologists have questioned their earlier emphasis on tracing population movements.[8] So, questions that scholars intended to answer with these methods – for example, the location of Shungwaya – no longer animate scholarly debate.

Nevertheless, scholars can elevate African voices as they recycle evidence that supported these abandoned lines of research for new priorities. One priority is unifying the ethnicized historiography of littoral East Africa, since narratives about the "Swahili" coast have consistently marginalized those of Mijikenda and other littoral communities.[9] Reviewing earlier collections of oral traditions can recenter these perspectives. When historians examined oral traditions using the methods pioneered by Jan Vansina, they isolated and extracted "core" historical facts from oral traditions that they could correlate with evidence generated through other methods.[10] However, this practice excised African narrators' commentaries as extraneous, presentist elements. Rather than abandon these commentaries, scholars can adapt the confirmation methods of multidisciplinary research and the recycling methods of interdisciplinary research to directly engage Africans' historiologies – i.e., their vernacular study and knowledge of the past. This approach recognizes "traditional oral historians" as interpreters and theorists of the past rather than mere conveyers of evidence.

This article thus explores how practices of interdisciplinary research in Euro-American historiography offer a model for treating African historiologists as theorists rather than data points. I first examine how scholars trained in Euro-American institutions have refined their thinking about the past by confirming and recycling evidence and methods from other historical disciplines. I then review debates about Shungwaya in East African history to illustrate how scholars sharpened their debates about interdisciplinary

---

[7] Richard Reid, "Past and Presentism: The 'Precolonial' and the Foreshortening of African History," *Journal of African History* 52–2 (2011), 135–155; Luise White, Stephan Miescher, and David William Cohen, eds., *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

[8] Historians continued to generate and analyze historical linguistic data in East Africa; e.g. Rhonda M. Gonzales, *Societies, Religion, and History: Central-East Tanzanians and the World They Created, c. 200 BCE to 1800 CE* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[9] For example, Chapurukha M. Kusimba and Jonathan R. Walz, "When Did the Swahili Become Maritime?: A Reply to Fleisher et al. (2015), and to the Resurgence of Maritime Myopia in the Archeology of the East African Coast," *American Anthropologist* 120–3 (2018), 429–443.

[10] Jan Vansina, *Oral Traditions as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Joseph C. Miller, "Introduction: Listening for the African Past," in Miller, Joseph C. (ed.), *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1980).

research in African history since 1955. The article concludes by presenting the concept of *uganga* – as explained by Mijikenda elder Thomas Govi – as a theoretical framework for examining linguistic, archeological, and documentary evidence. Thinking through Govi's theory of *uganga* helps interrogate conventional interpretations for three dynamics in the settlement history of littoral East Africa: cross-linguistic collaboration, the establishment of "stone towns," and Islamic conversion.

Recycling Evidence to Elevate African Voices

Scholars of the African past have often marginalized the historiological expertise of Africans by treating them as informants rather than interpreters of the past. Analyzing their subjective experiences through neo-Marxist, Foucauldian, or any other Euro-American model may provide insights and meanings but not necessarily theirs. Dipesh Chakrabarty and other scholars of South Asia argued that fitting the experiences of sub-altern and marginalized people into secular historical narratives distorts them because they are unassimilable to the perspectives of historians trained in Euro-American institutions. Instead, Chakrabarty invites historians to "hold history, the discipline, and other forms of memory together so that they can help in the interrogation of each other."[11] Indeed, Derek Peterson, Karin Barber, and other Africanists have shown how the historical writing of ethnic patriots, journalists, civil servants, and others in Africa drew from Euro-American conventions but also contested colonial visions of the past. Although these studies do not ignore oral genres, they have largely focused on written discourses.[12] The term "historiology" (the study or knowledge of history) can refer to diverse forms of historical expertise without privileging written historiography over oral discourses about the past. Instead of incorporating African knowledge about the past as data, scholars can elevate Africans' vernacular historiologies as comparable to similarly distinctive historiologies, which scholarly disciplines developed in Euro-American contexts.

Interdisciplinary research offers at least two models through which experts trained in and acculturated to different historiologies can inform one another's thinking. First, the confirmation model is a multidisciplinary approach that correlates evidence from historical documents, linguistic

---

[11] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* 93–94.

[12] Derek R. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004); Karin Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Derek R. Peterson, Emma Hunter, and Stephanie Newall (eds.), *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

evidence, ethnographic descriptions, material remains, oral traditions, and other kinds of evidence.[13] This approach is often hampered by misinterpretation of data from other disciplines and confirmation bias. As Kathryn de Luna, Jeffrey B. Fleisher, and Susan Keech McIntosh observed, scholars often try to avoid misinterpreting data by confining "the interpretive step of historical reconstruction to the evidence from their own discipline."[14] However, this hesitancy offers little protection against error, as the debates over the Shungwaya migration hypothesis will demonstrate below.

Scholars also follow the confirmation model because they recognize that archeologists, historical linguists, and historians hold sometimes incompatible historiologies. To offer one oversimplification, historians' emphasis on contingency is sometimes at odds with linguists' search for universal principles of grammar or the global comparative frameworks in which archeologists situate their often hyperlocal research.[15] In one memorable exchange in this journal, Vansina lamented the commitment of archeologists to neo-evolutionary stages of development.[16] Peter Robertshaw responded (several years later) by playfully griping that historians had used archeology as little more than a "dating service" to confirm events in oral traditions.[17] Historians had treated archeologists in the same way that they treated the narrators of oral traditions: conveyors of evidence rather than interpreters of the past.

The recycling model is a second approach that scholars use to cross disciplinary boundaries. While the confirmation paradigm treats other disciplines as repositories of data, researchers who follow the recycling approach apply methods and perspectives from other disciplines as well as data. De Luna, Fleisher, and Keech McIntosh outlined this interdisciplinary approach in a special journal issue that compared how linguistic historians and archeologists think about the African past. The introductory essay outlined the breakdown in multidisciplinary collaborations to trace Bantu Expansions, and it identified persistent challenges in adapting analytical methods from one discipline to another. Besides raising familiar issues about differing sources of evidence, they noted that disciplines "'see' from different scalar points of view" and vary in their judgments about which ethnographic

[13] Kathryn M. De Luna, Jeffrey B. Fleisher, and Susan Keech McIntosh, "Thinking Across the African Past: Interdisciplinarity and Early History," *African Archeological Review* 29: 2–3 (2012), 75–94.

[14] De Luna, Fleisher, and Keech McIntosh, "Thinking Across the African Past," 75.

[15] Jan Vansina, "Historians, Are Archeologists Your Siblings?," *History in Africa* 22 (1995), 369–408; Peter R. Schmidt and Jonathan R. Walz, "Re-Representing African Pasts through Historical Archeology," *American Antiquity* 72–1 (2007), 53–70.

[16] Vansina, "Historians, Are Archeologists Your Siblings?"

[17] Peter Robertshaw, "Sibling Rivalry? The Intersection of Archeology and History," *History in Africa* 27 (2000), 263.

analogies can be relevant to their research questions.[18] Hence, recycling evidence across disciplinary boundaries requires a nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which scholars generate, compile, and analyze their evidence.[19] Recycling evidence is distinct from the confirmation approach because scholars do not simply corroborate when and where a particular event (such as a migration) may have happened. Rather, they reprocess data generated in another discipline to answer questions generated by their own disciplines.

Since institutional and disciplinary barriers normally preclude individual scholars from gaining expertise in multiple disciplines, the recycling approach can be improved through extended conversations among scholars from different disciplines. De Luna and Fleisher's *Speaking with Substance* offers a promising procedure for an effective recycling approach.[20] They paired their respective attempts at interdisciplinary research (in linguistic history and archeology) with critical responses that focused more on educating each other about how their respective disciplines compile and interpret evidence than correcting mistakes. Scholars can elevate Africans' voices by treating their historiologies similarly. Since the recycling approach requires scholars to incorporate theoretical perspectives as well as evidence, it is more likely to generate extended collaborations that assert the intrinsic value of African historiologies.

As we develop and institutionalize new practices of collaboration with African historiologists, we can also recycle the research of earlier scholars who pursued the same goal through now deprecated methods. Africanist historians initially turned to oral traditions as the primary vehicle for accessing African perspectives on the precolonial past. However, the dominant method for generating evidence from oral traditions dismissed some aspects of Africans' historical expertise. Spear's corpus of Shungwaya traditions followed the method refined by Vansina and his students prior to the 1990s, after which a new generation of Africanist historians shifted their focus to oral histories.[21] Vansina's method required historians to collect narratives about the past from a wide variety of experts in communities, which were ideally isolated from one another.[22] Similarities between narratives could thus be regarded as retentions from an original oral tradition, while differences were treated as presentist interpolations. By focusing on stable elements among many variants, scholars treated their interviewees as

---

[18] De Luna, Fleisher, and Keech McIntosh, "Thinking Across the African Past," 80.

[19] Joseph C. Miller, "Life Begins at Fifty: African Studies Enters Its Age of Awareness," *African Studies Review* 50–2 (2007), 1–35.

[20] Kathryn M. De Luna and Jeffrey B. Fleisher, *Speaking with Substance* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2019).

[21] White, Miescher, and Cohen, *African Words, African Voices*, 19.

[22] Vansina, *Oral Traditions as History*; Newbury, "Contradictions at the Heart of the Canon."

informants who served as chains of transmission for information from the past, rather than consultants with distinctive methods of interpreting that information. Indeed, much of the techniques they developed to establish oral traditions as legitimate historical evidence involved removing the extraneous information that African historiologists contributed to make sense of the past.[23] Since they cast such a wide net to build a suitable corpus, they rarely engaged in detail with the historiological theories of individual experts.

Compiling large corpuses of oral traditions was nevertheless a significant achievement. Collecting oral evidence involved the painstaking work of elicitation, transcription, and translation, and it required tracing variants among many communities. In the mid-twentieth century, historians could still hope to find individuals who lived prior to colonialism and could be expected to be familiar with vernacular forms of knowledge about the past. That generational window has closed in most of Africa. Scholars are also more attuned to complexities in the performance of social memories and less likely to assume that past communities were ever isolated.[24] So, some of the basic assumptions about how Vansina's method was supposed to work now seem unachievable.

In addition, the process of collecting and publishing oral traditions has often changed how communities pass along historical knowledge.[25] For example, R.F. Morton noted as early as 1977 that scholarly attention to Shungwaya had created an echo chamber.[26] Unless scholars want to hear passages of Spear's monographs rehearsed back to them, it makes little sense to ask Mijikenda consultants for narratives of Shungwaya.[27] Instead of assembling new compilations of oral traditions that might confirm or contradict the research of earlier historians, scholars can recycle the ethnographic and linguistic data from archived and published collections to answer new research questions. They can also recycle the vernacular historiologies recorded in these collections as theories for investigating the African past.[28]

---

[23] Miller, "Introduction;" David Henige, "Impossible to Disprove Yet Impossible to Believe: The Unforgiving Epistemology of Deep-Time Oral Tradition," *History in Africa* 36 (2009), 127–234.

[24] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Miller, "Introduction."

[25] Jan Bender Shetler, "The Politics of Publishing Oral Sources from the Mara Region, Tanzania," *History in Africa* 29 (2002), 413–426.

[26] R. F. Morton, "New Evidence Regarding the Shungwaya Myth of Miji Kenda Origins," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 10–4 (1977), 641.

[27] However, see Jeong Kyung Park, "'Singwaya Was a Mere Small Station': Islamization and Ethnic Primacy in Digo Oral Traditions of Origin and Migration," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 24–2 (December 2012), 157–170.

[28] Cf. Henrietta L. Moore, "The Changing Nature of Anthropological Knowledge," in Moore, Henrietta L. (ed.), *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge* (London: Psychology Press, 1996); Kai Kresse, *Philosophizing in Mombasa: Knowledge,*

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Shungwaya

Reviewing debates about the role of Shungwaya in the settlement history of East Africa illustrates the challenges that scholars faced over the past seventy years as they triangulated evidence about the African past from multiple disciplines. After a short summary of the Shungwaya myth that is central to these debates in East Africa, I outline how scholars complicated their understanding of migration narratives in the region through interdisciplinary research. In addition to showing how scholars of Africa applied confirmation and recycling approaches to their interpretations, these debates emphasize their efforts to elevate African perspectives, though their methods sometimes sidelined the individual voices of African historiologists.

Shungwaya Myths as History

The earliest text to claim Shungwaya as the Mijikenda homeland was the *Kitab al-Zunuj* "Book of the Zanj." Though likely written in the late nineteenth century, it was first made available to European scholars in a few Arabic manuscripts between 1912 and 1923.[29] The anonymous author located Shungwaya at Bur Gao near the Juba River in southern Somalia and described it as the realm of the kings of the Kashur people. He also identified the Kashur as the ancestors of the Wanyika ("bush people," an epithet later deprecated in favor of Mijikenda). The author emphasized that Kashur refugees became the clients of Arab communities after settling near Kenya's coast.

This written version contradicted stories that Wanyika communities had told missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century. Some claimed to come south from Mount Mwangea, east from the Taita Hills, or even north from Rombo, near Mount Kilimanjaro. They agreed that they shared ancestry with the Pokomo and sometimes mentioned Shungwaya; but they described it as the ancestral homeland of Kiswahili speakers rather than their own.[30]

During the twentieth century, Mijikenda speakers began circulating oral traditions about migration from Shungwaya that aligned better with the *Kitab al-Zunuj*. Mijikenda elders told Spear in 1971 that their history began with a frantic flight southward from Shungwaya. They claimed a man with two wives and nine sons as their common ancestors, who lived alongside Oromo-speaking pastoralists whom they called "Galla." Most narrators blamed their precipitous departure on an ancestor who ritually sacrificed the son of their Oromo-speaking neighbor. The sons separated as they fled retaliatory raids,

---

Islam, and Intellectual Practice on the Swahili Coast (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 4–5, 26–27.

[29] Enrico Cerulli, trans., "Kitab al Zunuj," in *Somalia: Scritti Vari Editi Ed Inediti* (Rome: A Cura dell'Administrazione Fudiciaria Italiana dell Somalia, 1957).

[30] Morton, "New Evidence," 633.

and their families expanded into lineages and clans that formed nine confederations. They finally escaped their adversaries when foragers showed them forest clearings along Kenya's coastal escarpment where they would be safe. Each confederation founded a *kaya* ("fortified town," pl. *makaya*) on separate hilltops. The Digo settled furthest south, the Giriama settled in the north, and the other seven (Duruma, Rabai, Jibana, Chonyi, Ribe, Kauma, and Kambe) fell between.

These traditions served as a constitution for the emerging Mijikenda ethnicity. Claiming a distant location as an earlier origin extended the boundaries of ethnic belonging around all communities derided as Wanyika. The Shungwaya myth provided a schema for ordering people, places, rituals, and customs in historical memory. It explained how all the Mijikenda peoples related to one another as well as their neighbors. As Mijikenda historiologists recycled the Shungwaya myth to craft a shared ethnic ideology, they arranged and adapted knowledge of the past to suit contemporary political arguments; but they also assembled stories that their audiences could accept as true. Their efforts to balance the relevance of their narratives to modern audiences with accurate representations of the past were not so different from the work of scholars trained in Euro-American historiologies.

The Shungwaya Debates

Debates over Shungwaya narratives between 1955 and 2000 offer insights into some of the first interdisciplinary research conducted in Africa. In theory, scholars were supposed to seek confirmation only after reaching conclusions through their own disciplines. In practice, ambiguities of interpretation in each discipline often led scholars "to spurious agreement" as they fit evidence into prevailing hypotheses.[31] So, scholars often advanced debate by correcting misrepresentations of data from their respective disciplines. Though these corrections are common in interdisciplinary research, the Shungwaya debates generated exceptionally acerbic recriminations whenever scholars questioned one another's commitment to the value of African perspectives as presented in oral traditions.

The first phase of research on Shungwaya narratives was fragmented and opportunistic. Missionaries and travelers recorded the origins of communities they proselytized and visited in the nineteenth century, but only the Kilindini and Segeju communities claimed to come from Shungwaya.[32] By the time anthropologists and colonial officials began recording oral traditions in the early twentieth century, Mijikenda, Taita, and other communities

---

[31] The phrase is from Jan Vansina, "Is a Journal of Method Still Necessary?," *History in Africa* 36 (2009), 430.

[32] For an exhaustive catalog of European observers, see Morton, "New Evidence," 631.

had begun claiming origins in Shungwaya as well.[33] Scholars decided that the Kashur of the *Kitab al-Zunuj* were likely the Mozungullos encountered by Portuguese travelers in the sixteenth century, who became the Wanyika in the eighteenth century, and eventually adopted the Mijikenda ethnonym in the mid-twentieth century. By 1955, A. H. J. Prins was describing Shungwaya as a linguistic homeland (*urheimat*) for Bantu speakers in the region, and V. L. Grottanelli evocatively called it a "lost African metropolis."[34] These anthropologists buttressed the migration narratives with catalogs of cultural similarities among Bantu-speaking communities in littoral East Africa.[35]

However, scholars sometimes conflated oral traditions with only slight similarities. For example, linguist H. E. Lambert extrapolated a slender claim about crossing a river near "the great water" in Meru traditions to suggest that they and linguistically related communities in central Kenya also migrated from Shungwaya.[36] By the time J. Forbes Munro and Iris Berger (separately) pointed out the improbability of this logic in 1967, historians had already integrated Lambert's claims about migration into survey texts on East African history.[37] Their critiques invited a closer look at what scholars began to call the "Shungwaya problem."

In the second phase of debate, scholars identified problems with the migration narrative. Archeologist Neville Chittick expressed some of the first doubts in 1969, but he limited his critique to the issue of Shungwaya's location.[38] His survey of three sites near Bur Gao did not meet his expectations for an abandoned capital city. Historian Fred Morton went much further in his 1972 critique of the *Kitab al-Zunuj* by questioning whether the Mijikenda had ever migrated.

---

[33] Alice Werner, *The Bantu Coast Tribes of the East Africa Protectorate* (London: Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1915); J. A. G. Elliot, "A Visit to the Bajun Islands. Part I: Brief Historical Sketch – Source of Origin of the Present and Past Population – Traditions Thereanent," *Journal of the Royal African Society* 25–97 (1925), 10–22; Arthur Mortimer Champion, *The Agiryama of Kenya* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain & Ireland, 1967).

[34] A. H. J. Prins, "Shungwaya, Die Urheimat Der Nordost Bantu," *Anthropos* 50 (1955), 273–281; Vinigi L. Grottanelli, "A Lost African Metropolis," *Afrikanistiche Studien* 26 (1955), 231–242.

[35] For example, A. H. J. Prins, "The Shungwaya Problem: Traditional History and Cultural Likeness in Bantu North-East Africa," *Anthropos* 67–1–2 (1972), 9–35.

[36] H. E. Lambert, *The Systems of Land Tenure in the Kikuyu Land Unit: Part I, History of the Tribal Occupation of the Land* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1950).

[37] J. Forbes Munro, "Migrations of the Bantu-Speaking Peoples of the Eastern Kenya Highlands: A Reappraisal," *Journal of African History* 8–1 (1967), 25–28; Iris Berger, "Migrations of the Central Kenya Bantu: A Reconsideration of the Shungwaya Hypothesis" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1967).

[38] Neville Chittick, "An Archeological Reconnaissance of the Southern Somali Coast," *Azania* 4 (1969), 129.

Morton argued that members of the colonial Arab Administration of British East Africa inserted passages about the "famous laws" of the Kashur (i.e., Mijikenda forebears) into the *Kitab al-Zunuj* before sharing the manuscript with administrators. These passages validated practices that British officials were then litigating as violations of anti-slavery laws in their colonial courts.[39] Morton also suspected that Arab administrators inserted passages that characterized the Kashur as dependents of their "Arab tribes." The Mijikenda, he argued, borrowed these migration narratives from court hearings to unify their nine communities as a single tribe. Turning to the wider set of Shungwaya myths, Morton questioned why scholars presumed that Portuguese descriptions of Mozungullos in the late sixteenth century were evidence for recent immigration rather than a belated acknowledgement of their presence.

In addition to challenging the migration hypothesis, Morton recycled some archeological evidence. Archeologist James Kirkman had previously interpreted a style of fingernail ornamentation on pottery that he recovered at Gedi, Kenya, to suggest that the Kiswahili-speaking Kilindini had lived there for two centuries before fleeing Oromo raids in the mid-sixteenth century. Since the ChiMijikenda-speaking Giriama were the only group in the region that used fingernail ornamentation in the 1960s, Kirkman reasoned that they must have learned the technique from the Kilindini after joining them along the coast. Morton suggested instead that Kirkman was misled by a desire to confirm the Shungwaya myth. He offered the less convoluted possibility that this style of ornamentation indicated the earlier and continuing presence of the Giriama (rather than the Kilindini) around Gedi. He also criticized archeologists' common practice (at the time) of associating material culture with discrete ethnic groups as too "risky" to rely on over long periods of time.[40]

Morton's hypothesis prompted a series of rebukes.[41] First, Spear pointedly reminded him that arguments from negative evidence are fallacious; hence, missionaries' failure to note a connection between Shungwaya and the Mijikenda was unconvincing. He suggested that missionaries' informants were unreliable because many of them were formerly enslaved refugees who lacked knowledge of their adoptive communities' histories. Spear also disputed Morton's specific argument that the tradition spread among Mijikenda communities through colonial courts. He considered it unlikely that the Shungwaya narrative could have acquired several variants among the Mijikenda within a few decades of the circulation of *Kitab al-Zunuj*, especially since the movement to unify all nine Mijikenda communities seemed to

[39] Morton, "Shungwaya Myth," 408.
[40] Morton, "Shungwaya Myth," 406.
[41] Thomas T. Spear, "Traditional Myths and Historian's Myths: Variations on the Singwaya Theme of Mijikenda Origins," *History in Africa* 1 (1974), 67–84.

begin after World War II. This kind of criticism about sources and sequences was standard fare for arguments among historians.

However, Spear then disparaged Morton's hypothesis as a "historian's myth" because it dismissed Africans' traditional histories as fictitious. The article was the first time Spear published his interpretation of Mijikenda oral traditions, collected in 1971. After presenting a detailed version of the migration narrative, he suggested that interdisciplinary research confirmed the history as presented by Mijikenda narrators, with some modifications. Moreover, oral traditions performed a necessary role in reconstructing African pasts, which lacked documentary evidence. He accepted the socio-logical role of the Shungwaya myth as a charter for key institutions like age-sets, clans, and *makaya*, which he would later name the "*kaya* complex." However, he claimed these institutions had not been functioning since the nineteenth century, so they would be most helpful in reconstructing Miji-kenda life prior to their disintegration rather than contemporary Mijikenda culture.

Spear's argument is a clear example of how Africanists used the confir-mation approach to validate oral traditions as valid historical sources. He offered four corroborating forms of evidence to support the migration. First, the broad correspondence of details in the myth among seven of nine Mijikenda groups supported their veracity. This logic required the (improb-able) situation that these nine communities were isolated from one another in their separate *makaya* for nearly four centuries. Allowing the possibility that they did not develop distinct traditions, he suggested that Morton's hypoth-esis would still unjustifiably disregard the consonance of migration myths among Mijikenda, Pokomo, Segeju, Taita, and Galla (i.e., Oromo). Second, he noted that the distribution of cultural features among these communities (descent patterns, age-set names, etc.) aligned well with the traditions. Third, he drew on Malcolm Guthrie's classification of Bantu languages to claim that Taita, Mijikenda, and Pokomo shared a common linguistic origin. Finally, he turned to Portuguese documents between 1569 and 1624 that positively identified Segeju, Mijikenda (as Mozungullos), and Oromo in coastal Kenya. Spear concluded that the latter three bodies of evidence confirmed the validity of the Shungwaya traditions. Morton would need more than negative evidence to dismiss them.

Before Morton could respond, Neville Chittick published a "note" focused solely on debunking his argument. Curiously, the archeologist made no comments on Morton's treatment of pottery evidence. Instead, he tried his own hand at recycling evidence by interpreting the text of *Kitab al-Zunuj*. He outlined each section to demonstrate that the Kashur were integrated throughout much of the manuscript. He then claimed that if these portions were late additions, "they would surely have been distinguishable as separate

sections" – disregarding the possibility of more subtle manipulations.[42] While he accepted Morton's suggestion that lines related to enslavement may have been added, he denied that it had any bearing on the migration hypothesis. Unfortunately, both Morton and Chittick relied on English translations of an Italian translation of the single published version of one Arabic manuscript. Without detailed comparisons across multiple manuscripts, Chittick's critiques were unconvincing.

Linguist Thomas Hinnebusch joined the debate in 1976 to offer a sobering view of the pitfalls that historians encounter when they use linguistic data without specific training in linguistic methods.[43] In particular, he noted that Spear could not confirm Shungwaya as a linguistic homeland for Taita, Pokomo, and Mijikenda because he misunderstood the data: Guthrie's *Comparative Bantu* cataloged typological resemblances and geographic proximity but not reconstructions of shared innovations that indicate "genetic" relationships to linguists. Hinnebusch's own research supported a classification of Pokomo, Mijikenda, and Kiswahili as a Sabaki subgroup of Northeast Coast Bantu but excluded Segeju and Taita languages. Thus, communities with oral traditions of Shungwaya did not correspond with those that shared language origins. Hinnebusch also noted that the two successive migrations proposed by Spear – a northward movement through Kenya to Southern Somalia, followed by staggered migrations back south – violated the "least-moves" rule of parsimony by which historical linguists account for the sequential flowering of languages.[44]

These interdisciplinary interventions inspired both Morton and Spear to revisit their hypotheses in 1977. Morton refuted Spear's aspersions on his sources by presenting a slew of documents that showed that missionaries, travelers, and their informants were both knowledgeable and interested in the question of "origins."[45] He also reviewed Pokomo oral traditions instead of focusing solely on the text of *Kitab al-Zunuj*. He found no specific evidence to support Alice Werner's oft-cited assumption that Pokomo claimed origins in Shungwaya. As a new hypothesis, he asserted that Mijikenda origins "will be discovered, not at any distant location, but on the Kenya Coast."[46]

In Spear's response to Hinnebusch that same year, he accepted the linguistic corrections and offered a reconsideration of his earlier article as

[42] H. Neville Chittick, "The Book of the Zenj and the Mijikenda," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 9 (1976), 70.

[43] Thomas Hinnebusch, "The Shungwaya Hypothesis: A Linguistic Reappraisal," in Gallagher, Joseph T. (ed.), *East African Cultural History* (Syracuse, NY: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1976), 1–42.

[44] Hinnebusch, "Linguistic Reappraisal," 25.

[45] Morton, "New Evidence," 633.

[46] Morton, "New Evidence," 643.

"a case study in the application of linguistic evidence to historical data."[47] The first salient point from this revision was the acknowledgment that time depths derived from linguistic classifications did not align precisely with historical events recalled in oral traditions. He therefore conceded that Shungwaya could not be the homeland of all Northeast Coast Bantu, but he still felt that four centuries was sufficient time to account for the more recent division of its Sabaki subgroup into Pokomo and Mijikenda; he pointed to archaic features in Kiswahili to suggest its speakers separated themselves earlier.[48] Second, since the Taita and Segeju languages could not be classified as Sabaki or even Northeast Coast Bantu, he agreed that they had adopted the myth later from groups that had migrated from Shungwaya. Third, he accepted the grouping of Swahili with the Mijikenda and Pokomo, which allowed him to apply evidence in debates about Swahili origins to the Shungwaya problem. However, his new interpretation relied on what he misread as finds of Kwale ware pottery between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries in southern Somalia, as well as assumptions that Kiswahili was a mixture of Bantu and immigrant "Shirazi" settlers from Persia to that area around the tenth century CE.[49]

This second phase of debate thus illustrated the hazards Africanist scholars faced as they felt their way toward interdisciplinary approaches by educating one another about their respective disciplines. When Morton reinterpreted pottery and Chittick analyzed the *Kitab al-Zunuj*, they made what seemed to be valid conclusions but also overlooked historiological assumptions of the discipline that generated the data. Morton's suggestion that the ease of learning a specific pottery decoration made it unsuitable for identifying past peoples unwittingly confirmed why pottery decorations are a useful measure of contact among historical populations. Chittick's analysis of a single manuscript was similarly unsophisticated in his reliance on a single manuscript filtered through two translations, as well as his failure to discuss the complex relationships in East Africa between written texts and oral narratives.[50] While these two scholars seemed to talk past one another,

---

[47] Thomas T. Spear, "Traditional Myths and Linguistic Analysis: Singwaya Revisited," *History in Africa* 4 (1977), 229.

[48] Spear, "Traditional Myths and Linguistic Analysis," 234.

[49] Spear misread Chittick, "The Book of the Zenj and the Mijikenda," which cited Chittick, "An Archeological Reconnaissance of the Southern Somali Coast," 120. In that latter work, Chittick used imported sgraffiato pottery (not Kwale ware) at Munghia in Southern Somalia to date the settlement to the eleventh or twelfth century. Archeologists have not recovered Kwale ware in Somalia. They date its use between ca. 150 BCE and 600 CE (Richard Helm, "Conflicting Histories: The Archeology of the Iron-Working, Farming Communities in the Central and Southern Coast Region of Kenya" [unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bristol, 2000], 50–54).

[50] Cf. Adrien Delmas, "Writing in Africa: The Kilwa Chronicle and Other Sixteenth-Century Portuguese Testimonies," in Brigaglia, Andrea and Nobili, Mauro

Hinnebusch and Spear's engagement enabled scholars to integrate discussions on Mijikenda migrations into wider debates about Swahili origins.

Scholars' disagreements over how to understand relationships among different communities in coastal Kenya dominated the third phase of research. Historians focused on reconciling the Mijikenda migration narratives with the oral traditions of Swahili communities, which had claimed descent from immigrants hailing from either Shiraz (in Iran) or various sites in Arabia since the sixteenth century. Scholars and laypeople had long considered the Swahili a creole population formed through the mixture of Africans with Arab or Persian migrants.[51] However, surveys and excavations by George Abungu in the Tana River estuary and Mark Horton at the seaside settlement of Shanga indicated that East Africa's indigenous residents established dense coastal settlements prior to significant Arab or Persian influence.[52] Archeologist Henry Mutoro also began the first surveys and excavations along Kenya's coastal escarpment that indicated earlier occupation than the Shungwaya migration narrative anticipated.[53] These findings led historians to consider the possibility of relationships among Mijikenda, Swahili, and other communities in Kenya prior to the purported migration from Shungwaya.

For Randall Pouwels, Shungwaya denoted a pre-Islamic period when Sabaki speakers (the forebears of the Swahili and Mijikenda) worked out strategies for managing the diverse ecologies of littoral East Africa. He cited the archeological research of Mutoro, Abungu, and Horton, as well as linguistic research by Derek Nurse, to suggest that pastoralists speaking Cushitic languages must have played some role in their success, at least in Kenya.[54] Pouwels presented the formation of Shirazi societies as the next era, when established "Shungwaya" communities converted to Islam,

---

(eds.), *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2017).

[51] On Shirazi myths, see Randall L. Pouwels, "Oral Historiography and the Problem of the Shirazi of the East African Coast," *History in Africa* 11 (1984), 237–267.

[52] George H. O. Abungu, "Communities on the River Tana, Kenya: An Archaeological Study of Relations Between the Delta and the River Basin, 700–1890 A.D," (unpublished PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1989); and Mark Horton, Helen W. Brown, and Nina Mudida, *Shanga: The Archaeology of a Muslim Trading Community on the Coast of East Africa* (London: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1996).

[53] Henry W. Mutoro, "An Archaeological Study of the Mijikenda 'kaya' Settlements on Hinterland Kenya Coast" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1987).

[54] Pouwels published his monograph in 1987, but he first presented this interpretation at a conference in 1983. Randall L. Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800–1900* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Randall L. Pouwels, "Shungwaya and the Roots of East African Coastal Civilization," paper presented at African Studies Association of Austrolasia, 1983, http://afsaap.org.au/assets/1983_Pouwels-L.-Randall.pdf.

followed by a third era of "Swahili" communities who encountered Portuguese visitors and forged political relationships with Omani Arabs. Pouwels's work treated hinterland communities as marginal to (because they were marginalized by) Swahili communities. However, his Shungwaya epoch also incorporated Mijikenda, other Sabaki speakers, and Cushitic speakers into the broader sweep of Swahili history in order to dismantle the prevailing theory of Asiatic colonization.

Conversely, Spear's publications reinforced the division of Swahili and Mijikenda communities into different ethnicized historiographies. Having corrected his linguistic interpretations, he presented the history of the Mijikenda in three publications: *The Kaya Complex* (1978), *Kenya's Past* (1981), and *Traditions of Origin and their Interpretation: The Mijikenda of Kenya* (1981).[55] These works presented Shungwaya as the origin of the Mijikenda and Pokomo, while acknowledging the presence of some Swahili communities. He also collaborated with linguist Derek Nurse to publish *The Swahili: Reconstructing the History and Language of an African Society* in 1984.[56] This book soundly repudiated myths of Asiatic colonization by presenting the Swahili as an African people rather than a creole community. However, it also categorically distinguished the Swahili from their nearest neighbors and linguistic cousins.[57]

Pouwels's and Spear's work complemented the work of other Africanists by demonstrating how the confirmation approach of multidisciplinary research effectively dismantled colonial historiography. However, historian James de Vere Allen offered some doubts. In particular, he dismissed linguistic and archeological evidence that seemed to contradict his interpretations of oral traditions he had collected during his long residence in East Africa. He favored a fully integrated narrative of East Africa's littoral history that recast Shirazi myths as Islamized variants of Shungwaya myths and emphasized multilingual collaborations in East Africa that accorded with the findings of other scholars. However, he also advanced extravagant claims about the occupation, collapse, and legacy of a Shungwaya state. Allen's monograph was published posthumously in 1993, but he first outlined his hypothesis in a 1983 review of the Mijikenda traditions published by Spear.[58]

---

[55] Thomas T. Spear, *The Kaya Complex: A History of the Mijikenda Peoples of the Kenya Coast to 1900* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978); Thomas T. Spear, *Kenya's Past: An Introduction to Historical Method in Africa* (London: Longman, 1981); Thomas T. Spear, *Traditions of Origin.*

[56] Derek Nurse and Thomas T. Spear, *The Swahili: Reconstructing the History and Language of an African Society, 800–1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984).

[57] Cf. John Middleton, *The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

[58] James de Vere Allen, "Shungwaya, the Mijikenda, and the Traditions," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 16 (1983), 455–485. Also see Allen's

This review is worth detailing because it illustrates how historians' entangled their disagreements over interdisciplinary evidence with their commitment to magnifying African voices. Allen began by admiring the tremendous collection of oral traditions that Spear had published; but he worried that historians would subsequently disregard less systematic collections of oral traditions as deficient. He also accused Spear of prematurely dismissing Segeju oral traditions in "his haste to accommodate linguistic data."[59] For Allen, the Segeju were essential to his hypothesis that Shungwaya was a multilinguistic state in northern Kenya with Cushitic rulers and Bantu subjects, which broke up into several successor states shortly before the arrival of Portuguese travelers. In his interpretation, the Mijikenda lived on the outskirts of this state, but they adopted Shungwaya's traditions and institutions from Segeju migrants as the state collapsed. Allen's elaborate description of an expansive Shungwaya state, a Shirazi "mode of dominance," and loose associations of ethnonyms with languages overshadowed his keen observation that Segeju influence needed more attention.

Spear declined to dispute the details of Allen's critique when the journal editors requested a response before publishing the review. Instead, he characterized Allen's hypothesis as a "conflation of fact and fiction," derided him for collecting facts like "children collect shells, pebbles, and bits of seaweed on the beach," and described him as disdainful of the "lessons of historical linguistics, anthropology, history, or archeology."[60] He concluded by characterizing Allen's work as "parahistory." Though Allen and Spear disagreed sharply about how to evaluate the information they provided or confirm these narratives with other evidence, they both stalwartly defended the potential of oral traditions to elevate Africans' knowledge of the past. Their dispute cemented Spear's interpretation of migration as conventional, even as archeological and linguistic research complicated its underlying assumption that communities moved great distances in relative isolation from one another.

The fourth, most recent, phase of sustained research on Shungwaya dismantled the migration hypothesis from two different directions. Scholars reassessed how the migration narrative reflected colonial identity politics and increased the archeological evidence available on Kenya's coastal escarpment (rather than Somalia or Tanzania). Anthropologist Martin Walsh offered an opening salvo in a 1992 literature review of the Shungwaya debate that supported Morton's hypothesis for a Kenyan origin of the Mijikenda.[61]

---

posthumously published monograph *Swahili Origins: Swahili Culture and the Shungwaya Phenomenon* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993).

[59] Allen, "Shungwaya, the Mijikenda, and the Traditions," 466.

[60] Thomas T. Spear, "A Reply by Thomas Spear," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 16 (1983), 484.

[61] Martin Walsh, "Mijikenda Origins: A Review of the Evidence," *Transafrican Journal of History* 21 (1992), 1–18.

He expanded on previous critiques of Spear's research, such as the inconsistency of the age-set lists that Spear used to date the migration and his undue confidence in the precision of Portuguese maps. Walsh also stridently critiqued Spear's method for reducing the myth to a "single historical truth" by ignoring variants, especially in the widely read *Kaya Complex*. He also suggested that Spear "suffered from a '*kaya* complex'" that made him overlook incongruities between the "number and organization" of *makaya* described in the traditions and the empirically observed pattern of Mijikenda settlements.[62]

Historian Justin Willis was already thinking along similar lines. His (1993) monograph examined how the Swahili and Mijikenda ethnic groups mutually constituted one another as their proponents negotiated with the British colonial government in the early twentieth century.[63] He criticized Spear and other scholars for projecting the modern Mijikenda ethnic identity and Wanyika epithet onto sixteenth-century Mozungullos without examining the distinct contexts in which Africans created these successive identities. By focusing on the formation of the most recent escarpment identity, he showed that Mijikenda speakers began circulating the Shungwaya myth to unify their interests decades before World War II, when Swahili communities expelled those who sought assimilation in colonial Mombasa. Hence, the variability of Shungwaya traditions among Mijikenda communities was not an erosion of a single ancient tradition, as presumed by Spear, but the result of recent, uneven adoption.[64] Willis also followed through on Walsh's suggestion to survey Mijikenda settlements. Even excluding Digo sites, he identified more than forty *makaya*. The complex landscape could not accommodate Spear's hypothesis of a staggered migration into nine settlements that remained isolated from one another until the nineteenth century.[65]

In 2000, Richard Helm's report on his archeological survey of settlement sites along Kenya's escarpment similarly challenged this migration hypothesis; but he also convincingly showed that Mijikenda knowledge about the past extended much deeper in time than previously considered.[66] Helm applied the seriation of local pottery wares that archeologists had developed for coastal settlements in the previous decade to sequence and date dozens of settlement sites in the escarpment where most Mijikenda

---

[62] Walsh, "Mijikenda Origins," 10.

[63] Justin Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[64] Spear's brief response (tucked into his landmark survey of research on ethnicity in Africa) dismissed Willis for ignoring the underlying cultural unity that extended centuries into the precolonial past, regardless of their names. See Thomas T. Spear, "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa," *Journal of African History* 44–1 (2003), 20.

[65] Justin Willis, "The Northern Kayas of the Mijikenda: A Gazetteer, and an Historical Reassessment," *Azania* 31 (1996), 75–98.

[66] Helm, "Re-Evaluating Traditional Histories."

live. He found that the sequence derived from this objective data aligned with Mijikenda informants' independent classification of the sites as pre-*kaya*, *kaya*, or post-*kaya* settlements. They had retained knowledge about the occupation sequence of settlement sites for over a thousand years, perhaps because the physical features of the landscapes served as effective mnemonics.[67]

Helm also presented a remarkable plot twist: escarpment residents abandoned their *makaya* right around the time that Spear claimed they were founded. As anticipated in Mutoro's excavations, his survey showed Kenya's coastal escarpment had been occupied continuously by (likely) Bantu speakers since at least 100 CE, as opposed to 1500 CE. In addition, the changes in size, density, and expanding ecological distribution of these settlements matched those of "Swahili" coastal settlements. These settlement patterns did not diverge until the seventeenth century. At that point, the number of large, dense settlements (i.e., *makaya*) decreased and scattered homesteads increased until the escarpment resembled the modern rural landscape.[68]

As archeologists Peter Schmidt and Jonathan Walz noted over a decade ago, Helm's work "overturns how historians have used oral tradition to represent the history of the region."[69] Yet his findings barely percolated beyond his discipline. Anthropologists Janet McIntosh (2009) and Jeong Kyung Park (2012) built on David Parkin's foundational work of Giriama ethnography to examine the roles of *makaya* in contemporary Mijikenda societies but limited their analysis to colonial and postcolonial times.[70] A multidisciplinary collection in 2014 similarly sidestepped discussions of Helm's archeological evidence, even though the volume intended to recenter Mijikenda perspectives in Kenya's coastal history.[71] The sole archeological chapter presented evidence for connections between the coast and the Taita Hills without discussing the escarpment between them. Walsh's contribution to the volume made just a passing reference to Helm to support his hypothesis that the Mijikenda adopted the Shungwaya myth (and many loanwords) from Segeju migrants rather than migrate themselves.[72] Walsh disclaimed

[67] Cf. Jan Bender Shetler, *Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory in Tanzania from Earliest Times to the Present* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

[68] Helm, "Re-Evaluating Traditional Histories," 74.

[69] Schmidt and Walz, "Re-Representing African Pasts," 60.

[70] Janet McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam: Power, Personhood, and Ethnoreligious Boundaries on the Kenya Coast* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Jeong Kyung Park, "Singwaya;" David Parkin, *Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual Among the Giriama of Kenya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[71] Rebecca Gearhart and Linda L. Giles (eds.), *Contesting Identities: The Mijikenda and Their Neighbors in Kenyan Coastal Society* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2014).

[72] Chapurukha M. Kusimba, Janet M. Monge, and Sibel B. Kusimba, "The Identity of Early Kenyan Coastal Peoples: A Comparative Analysis of Human Remains

assumptions that he was a linguist and invited other scholars to evaluate the data. For now, he has had the last word. Scholars have largely abandoned the search for origins and migration paths that animated Shungwaya debates in the twentieth century.

The Shungwaya debates became increasingly acrimonious as participants accused one another of peddling myths, engaging in parahistory, or suffering from a "complex." When historians borrowed evidence from linguistics or archeology in the Shungwaya debates, they often received advice professionally and modified their hypotheses. However, when they suspected their colleagues of dismissing Africans' knowledge about the past, they peppered their critiques with biting rhetoric. Chittick, Spear, and others did not pile on their criticisms of Morton's hypothesis simply because they disagreed with his analysis of *Kitab al-Zunuj*. Rather, they objected to the presumptuous extension of his dismissal to all Shungwaya traditions. Allen seemed less concerned about Spear's use of linguistic data than his wholesale rejection of Segeju traditions; and Spear's belittling retort was prompted by his concern that oral traditions needed systematic analysis to establish them as verifiable historical evidence.

Uganga: An African Historiology

The way that Spear and other Africanist historians collected and interpreted oral traditions sometimes made it difficult to see the individual contributions of their informants. Spear's published collection of Shungwaya traditions included dozens of transcribed interviews, translated into English. Unfortunately, the original ChiMijikenda words are available only as archived audio recordings.[73] Besides preserving these African voices only in translation, Spear's remarkable synthesis of the traditions in the widely distributed *Kaya Complex* pays minimal attention to the variants and reasoning of individual historiologists.

In this section, I highlight the contribution of just one of Spear's informants, Thomas Govi. Spear noted Govi's subclan, residence, and status as "one of the most knowledgeable elders regarding the origins of the Chonyi [a Mijikenda confederation] and their *rika* [age-set] system," but no other personal information.[74] The published excerpt from his testimony is just five pages long. It serves well as a data point because he corroborated historical

---

from Mtwapa, Shanga, and Taita Hills," in Gearhart, Rebecca and Giles, Linda L. (eds.), *Contesting Identities*; Martin T. Walsh, "The Segeju Complex? Linguistic Evidence for the Precolonial Making of the Mijikenda," in Gearhart, Rebecca and Giles, Linda L. (eds.), *Contesting Identities*.

[73] Spear reported that he deposited recordings at the University of Nairobi and Indiana University. They may also be available in his recently deposited collections at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

[74] Spear, *Traditions of Origin*, 71.

details shared by other informants. However, he also offered a novel understanding of the concept *uganga*.

Scholars gloss *uganga* as "medicine" throughout the Bantu-speaking world. The form of the word has not changed for thousands of years, and its derivations are mostly limited to words for medicine-man and a generic word for "roots." However, the conventional gloss does not capture the full range of meanings that Mijikenda associate with *uganga* in the oral traditions collected by Spear. As a category, *uganga* includes the healing arts but also techniques of iron working, rain making, clearing paths, negotiating peace, leading a war party, carving grave markers, moving sacred drums, composing songs, and communicating with ancestors. *Uganga* are thus techniques that draw power from the unseen world. One of my consultants, Gona Dzoka, described *uganga* in 2010 as personal skills that he acquired as he matured; other consultants said they inherited *uganga* from their ancestors or purchased it from healers.[75]

In contrast, Thomas Govi elaborated on these meanings in order to emphasize the importance of clans in Mijikenda history. Instead of treating *uganga* as an individual's esoteric skills, he described *uganga* as the assets of particular clans. "Each [clan] had its own *uganga*… . There was *uganga* to evade an epidemic, *uganga* to stop an epidemic from spreading further, *uganga* for starting war, … and *uganga* to stop a war. You cannot divide all these by a few [clans]; people of the same [clan] were given two or three different types of *uganga*." Govi then emphasized that clans must assist one another because all these different *uganga* were necessary to "make a peaceful home."[76]

Govi thus applied the concept of *uganga* historiologically – to explain the contemporary relationships among Mijikenda clans through their acquisition of various kinds of knowledge in the past. Although he is not available to engage in extended discussions about the Mijikenda past, the following section holds up his interpretation of *uganga* as a vernacular historiology – a theory about the past – that scholars can recycle to interrogate other evidence from oral traditions, linguistics, archeology, and documents. Govi's theory of *uganga* illuminates at least three transitions in the settlement history of littoral East Africa: the intensification of cross-linguistic collaborations, the development of multi-component sites that archeologists classify as "towns," and coastal communities' conversion to Islam.

---

[75] Interview with Gona Dzoka (Rabai, Kenya), 16 August 2010.
[76] Spear, *Traditions*, 75. Govi uses *mbari* (clan), a loanword into Mijikenda dialects from Central Kenyan Bantu languages that replaced *lukólò*, the Proto-Sabaki word for clan discussed below.

Reimagining the Settlement Histories of Littoral East Africa

First, linking *uganga* to clanship explains why cross-linguistic collaborations became more common as speakers of Sabaki Bantu languages moved into more diverse environments between 500 CE and 1250 CE in Kenya. Though foragers, Bantu speakers, and Southern Cushitic speakers occasionally interacted in the region before then, they usually confined their activities to different ecological niches that suited their respective subsistence strategies. This pattern began to change around 500 CE, just as Proto-Sabaki Bantu began diverging into its daughter languages: Kiswahili, Elwana, Comorian, Pokomo, and Mijikenda.[77] Archaeologists and linguists usually explain the increase in cross-linguistic collaboration during this period as a consequence of intermarriage. However, interrogating this explanation from Govi's theoretical perspective on clanship and *uganga* suggests that speakers of Sabaki languages began organizing clans around distinctive knowledge as well as ancestry. This innovation enabled them to integrate communities who spoke unrelated languages and pursued different subsistence strategies into a shared society without the burdens of intermarriage.

Oral traditions emphasize that Bantu speakers in littoral East Africa depended on foragers for their specialized knowledge of the forests, where they could find well-watered areas for cultivating gardens.[78] Helm's initial survey of the coastal escarpment confirmed that Bantu speakers settled in places previously occupied by foragers.[79] Yet, other surveys of contemporary forager and farmer sites in the early first millennium CE show no signs that they traded items or otherwise shared a common material culture, even when located within walking distance of one another. Archeologists have thus concluded that foragers and iron-working farmers did not interact frequently in the "pioneer phase" of Bantu settlement.[80]

Their collaborations changed between 500 and 1250 CE. Speakers of Sabaki languages in Kenya's coastal escarpment started organizing a three-tier settlement hierarchy (hamlet, village, town) that accommodated larger, more complex settlements as they stretched into new environments.[81] This expansion almost certainly displaced foragers; but archeologists also found oceanic imports and pottery (which they associate with Bantu speakers) at

---

[77] Derek Nurse and Thomas Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki: A Linguistic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[78] Interview with Bukardi Ndzovu, in Spear, *Traditions of Origin*, 45.

[79] Helm, "Conflicting Histories," 136.

[80] C. Shipton, R. Helm, N. Boivin, A. Crowther, P. Austin, and D. Q. Fuller, "Intersections, Networks and the Genesis of Social Complexity on the Nyali Coast of East Africa," *African Archeological Review* 30–4 (2013), 438.

[81] Helm, "Re-Evaluating Traditional Histories"; Thomas H. Wilson, "Spatial Analysis and Settlement Patterns on the East African Coast," *Paideuma* 28 (1982), 201–219.

foraging sites in the later first millennium CE. These finds suggest the two populations had begun trading frequently with one another.

Instead of detailing foragers' displacement or their roles in trade, Mijikenda oral traditions focus on the knowledge that would have motivated Bantu-speaking communities to integrate them into their communities. For example, Toya wa Kiti told Spear, "I can't explain exactly who they [the foragers] were, but they were *waganga* [medicine-men]."[82] Some of Spear's other informants emphasized that foragers taught them rituals, war strategies, and how to hunt (and fight) with bows and arrows. Mijikenda traditions thus describe their ancestors' relationships with foragers in positive terms because of the *uganga* they contributed.

Sabaki speakers also intensified their engagements with neighboring agro-pastoralists who spoke Southern Cushitic languages.[83] These neighbors provided knowledge about cultivating rain-fed crops (sorghum, finger millet, and pearl millet) that made it possible to live in drier environments. Archeologists have recovered traces of these crops in (likely) Bantu settlements starting as early as 200 CE but certainly by 600 CE.[84] Govi made the relationship between *uganga* and cultivation techniques explicit. He explained: "The Chonyi [i.e., his Mijikenda confederation] were magicians and they tested the land by using *uganga*.... They examined the soil and decided it was fertile and suitable for their crops."[85] In addition, ethnographic descriptions of agricultural practices in modern Swahili communities suggest that their forebears would have regarded rain-fed agriculture as a new kind of *uganga* because they select "guardians of the soil" who protect and oversee annual agricultural rituals.[86] Speakers of Sabaki languages thus regarded seemingly mundane knowledge – including where and when to plant – as *uganga* mediated through the unseen world.

Scholars conventionally use the generic process of intermarriage among Southern Cushitic- and Bantu-speaking populations to explain the transfer of knowledge that made settlement in more diverse ecologies possible in littoral Kenya. Dental consonants that Southern Cushitic languages share with Elwana, Upper Pokomo, and northern Kiswahili dialects, but not other Sabaki languages, support this hypothesis.[87] The distinction between dental and alveolar consonants is subtle enough that linguists assume Southern Cushitic-speaking parents introduced the sounds to children they raised with Sabaki speakers.

---

[82] Interview with Toya wa Kiti, in Spear, *Traditions of Origin*, 65.

[83] A Sabaki word for "pounding grain" (*-soola*) came from the Proto-Southern Cushitic word *-sool-* (pulverize) (Nurse and Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki*, 662).

[84] Richard Helm et al., "Exploring Agriculture, Interaction and Trade on the Eastern African Littoral: Preliminary Results from Kenya," *Azania* 47–1 (2012), 39–63.

[85] Interview with Thomas Govi, in Spear, *Traditions of Origin*, 72.

[86] Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent*, 91.

[87] Nurse and Hinnesbusch, *Swahili and Sabaki*, 487–490,

Although intermarriage provided a way to acquire knowledge over many generations, the link that Govi emphasized between *uganga* and clanship suggest speakers of Sabaki Bantu languages adopted a strategy that made the benefits of diverse knowledge available more rapidly. They integrated entire communities into their settlements as co-residential, but not intermarrying, groups. Since these groups focused on producing different resources, they could use the surrounding lands, rivers, forests, and ocean more effectively than a village with a single lineage or even a set of intermarrying lineages. These collaborations also enabled settlements in environmental transition zones that would otherwise be difficult for communities following a single subsistence strategy.[88]

Roderick McIntosh modeled a similar scenario for the Inland Niger Delta of West Africa, where residents increased their capacity to support larger populations and a more complex society by sharing the fruits of their respective knowledge.[89] This strategy depended on heterarchical relationships that maintained each community's internal coherence so that they could preserve hyper-specialized knowledge. McIntosh used modern occupational castes in West Africa as ethnographic analogies for how these communities would have supported rather than dominated one another. Govi's description of *uganga* as corporate knowledge suggests that the relevant ethnographic analogy in littoral Kenya would be clans.

A conventional definition of clan is a group of lineages who claim descent from a common ancestor but cannot trace precise genealogical links with one another. The most widespread word for this concept in Bantu-speaking East Africa is **lukólò*.[90] However, it is rare among Sabaki speakers: only some Kiswahili speakers use the reflex *ukoo* to mean a cognatic descent group.[91] Most Kiswahili and some ChiMijikenda speakers use their reflexes of **lukólò* to denote generic kinship instead.[92] Derivations from **lukólò* are absent from

[88] George H. O. Abungu and H. W. Mutoro, "Coast-Interior Settlements and Social Relations in the Kenya Coastal Hinterland," in Shaw, T., et al. (eds.), *Archeology of Africa: Foods, Metals, and Towns* (London: Routledge, 1993), 694–704.

[89] Roderick J. McIntosh, *Ancient Middle Niger: Urbanism and the Self-Organizing Landscape* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[90] For a discussion on **lukólò* among speakers of other Bantu languages, see Cymone Fourshey, Rhonda M. Gonzales, and Christine Saidi, *Bantu Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 47–50. The Tanzania Language Survey includes over a dozen terms for the gloss "clan," but reflexes of **lukólò* are the most common (Derek Nurse and Gérard Phillipson, "The North-East Bantu Languages of Tanzania and Kenya: A Classification," *KiSwahili* 45–2 [1975]: 1–28).

[91] Mark Horton and John Middleton, *The Swahili: The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 144.

[92] For example, Johann Ludwig Krapf and Johannes Rebmann, *A Nika-English Dictionary* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1887).

other Sabaki languages. Instead, the speakers of each Sabaki language innovated different words for clan as they diverged from one another.[93]

The link that Govi posited between clanship and *uganga* suggests they needed a new word to emphasize the knowledge that defined clans rather than common ancestry. As Neil Kodesh has suggested for early Buganda, these clans would have used strategies for forming sets of intermarrying lineages to distinguish and protect their networks of knowledge.[94] The earlier *lukólò* clans (i.e., defined only by intermarriage) could connect lineages from different settlements (and speech communities). However, articulating new words for clan (i.e., defined by distinctive knowledge) helped manage relationships with others in the same settlement without the burdens of assimilating people through marriage. Sabaki speakers thus innovated a cosmopolitan ethic that enabled rapid and sustained cross-linguistic collaboration.

Since Sabaki speakers materialized these social divisions in the organization of their towns, Govi's association of *uganga* with clanship also clarifies the innovation of multi-component settlements in the latter half of the first millennium CE. Archeologists identify these sites as the antecedents of Swahili "stone towns." However, Helm's survey of escarpment communities showed that they also joined in this centuries-long transition to denser (if not quite urban) living prior to 1650 CE. Although escarpment communities did not build with coral, the novel clan structure that speakers of most Sabaki languages innovated is visible in coastal towns like Shanga.

Shanga is a sea-side settlement on the island of Pate in the Lamu Archipelago near the Kenya-Somali border. It was founded in the eighth century CE and abandoned around 1400 CE. When Horton excavated Shanga, he drew directly on Mijikenda descriptions of *makaya* settlements as an ethnographic analogy to imagine its spaces.[95] He interpreted the town quarters as the domains of different clans while the central enclosure served as a communal space shared by the entire town. Residents later added mosques to this space, which Horton used in support of his interpretation that a large "hall" in the enclosure was a ritual building similar to *moro* shrines where Mijikenda elders stored sacred objects in their *makaya*. He also suggested that clans established different cemeteries outside of town that suggest a concern for descent that would be expected of *lukólò* clans.

Govi's observation that communities need a lot of *uganga* to build a "peaceful home" does not substantially alter Horton's interpretation. However, narratives in Mijikenda oral tradition about learning new *uganga* from

---

[93] For example, *gosa* (KiElwana), *sindo* (KiPokomo), *dzuwo* (ShiComorian), *mbari* (ChiMijikenda, some KiSwahili), *k'amasi* (Bajuni Kiswahili), and *taifa* (Mombasa [Mvita] Kiswahili < Arabic).

[94] Neil Kodesh, "Networks of Knowledge: Clanship and Collective Well-Being in Buganda," *Journal of African History* 49–2 (2008), 197–216.

[95] Horton, Brown, and Mudida, *Shanga*, 398.

foragers, or clan members who had been "lost" in the migration from Shungwaya, suggests that Sabaki speakers consciously developed new knowledge to distinguish their clans from others in their shared settlements. Compared to the relatively dispersed, small settlements of Bantu-speaking communities prior to 500 CE, multi-component towns created a new dimension of public rivalry. One of the ways that clans could assert themselves in negotiations over space and influence was by developing useful *uganga*. As Govi noted, every clan acquired "two or three different kinds of *uganga*." At Shanga, for instance, residents innovated new subsistence techniques (e.g., deep-sea fishing and cattle husbandry) and craft specialties (e.g., carving coral basins and casting silver coins) over several centuries. Horton's excavations show that the products of these specialized activities were often dispersed to different residential areas of the town.

Entrusting the stewardship of knowledge and space to clans appears to be the key innovation that enabled Sabaki speakers to stretch out their settlements from Somalia to Mozambique, as well as the Comoros Islands, the inland estuary of the Tana River, and Kenya's littoral escarpment. The other Northeast Coast Bantu speech communities (Ruvu, Seuta, and Pare in Tanzania) remained relatively stationary in comparison.[96] Early scholars' theory of Asiatic colonization had suggested that immigrants were responsible for the rapid growth of coastal communities during this era. Interpreting these innovations as *uganga* instead suggests speakers of Sabaki languages developed new innovations at a relatively rapid pace because they were motivated by inter-clan competition. As in the Inland Niger Delta, they were well on their way to urbanism before intensifying their participation in transregional commerce.

The third transition illuminated by Govi's interpretive framework is the integration of Islamic knowledge by coastal towns. Specifically, it reveals the conceptual framework into which early Kiswahili speakers would have adopted specific Islamic practices and explains why Muslim communities on the coast did not proselytize to their neighbors. Scholars often suggest that Africans adopted Islamic practices to engender trust with traveling Muslim merchants. However, the residents of littoral East Africa also sought instruction in Islamic techniques for healing maladies, praying for rain, and guarding against malevolent spirits. Just as clans relied on one another to provide a wide variety of food and other resources from the surrounding landscapes and seascapes, they valued multiple forms of spiritual power, including Islamic ones, to protect and benefit the entire town.

They elaborated their understanding of Islamic practices through familiar concepts. The testimony of Muslim writers from the time shows that it may have been relatively simple for Kiswahili speakers to extend their notions of *uganga* to include Islam. Bantu speakers had long ago developed the notion of a Creator God, albeit one far removed from the daily concerns of

---

[96] Gonzales, *Societies, Religion, and History.*

humans.[97] In addition, Muslim writers described many of the activities they observed in East Africa as religious. In the tenth century, Abū Zayd al-Ḥasan al-Sīrāfī reported that men "who devote themselves to a life of piety [preach] to them, calling on them to keep God in their minds … and describing to them the fate of their people who have died."[98] Al-Masʿudi wrote around the same time that East African communities "have an elegant language and men who preach [obedience to God] in it."[99] Al-Idrisi reported that non-Muslim East Africans called these people *mganga* as late as the twelfth century.[100] This last example emphasizes that in the minds of Muslim observers, *uganga* was a religious practice comparable to Islam. The early Kiswahili speakers at Shanga may have made the obverse conclusion that Islam was a kind of *uganga*, or perhaps many kinds of *uganga*.

This view of Islam as a collection of spiritual techniques rather than a single, abstract religion is precisely how Buzurg ibn Shahriyar described the conversion of an East African community to Islam in the tenth century. Allegedly told in the voice of an East African ruler whom Arab traders enslaved, the tale described conversion to Islam as a gradual unfolding of ritual knowledge rather than a spontaneous, all-encompassing conversion that required new Muslims to reject previous practices and beliefs. After Arab merchants kidnapped the ruler in East Africa, they sold him to a slaveholder in Oman, who took him to Basrah. There, the ruler learned to pray and fast, as well as read parts of the Qurʾan. After being sold to a man in Baghdad, he "completed [his] knowledge of the Qurʾan and prayed with the men in the mosque." Later, the enslaved ruler absconded with a caravan headed for Mecca, and the pilgrims taught him how to perform the ceremonies of *hajj*. After completing his pilgrimage, the ruler followed the banks of the Nile to

---

[97] Christopher Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 50.

[98] Philip F. Kennedy et al. (eds.), *Two Arabic Travel Books: Accounts of China and India and Mission to the Volga* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 121.

[99] G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *The East African Coast: Select Documents from the First to the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 16.

[100] Bernard Lewis, *Islam: From the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople II: Religion and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 118; Freeman-Grenville mistakenly records this word as *al-Musnafu* (*Select Documents*, 20). In the most commonly cited manuscript of al-Idrisi's *Book of Roger*, the word translated here as *mganga* is written المغنفا *al-mfanfa* (Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Idrisi, *Nuzhat al-mushtāq fi iāḥtirāq al-āfāq* [Book of Roger], Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits, Arabe 2221, folio 28v, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b52000446t/f64.item.r=arabe%202221). However, the Maghribi script of the manuscript uses ف to denote the letter *qaf* rather than the letter *fa*, and *qaf* is pronounced as /*g*/ in some Arabic dialects, which could give the pronunciation *al-maganga* or *al-mganga* (Personal Communication with Kevin Blankinship). Given the association with the Arabic word for sorcerer in the same passage, this makes the pronunciation of *mganga* or *maganga* likely.

return home, resumed his place as king, and taught his people the "precepts of Islam," which he summarized as "true faith, prayers, fasting, the pilgrimage, and what is permitted and what is forbidden."[101]

Though this apocryphal tale may not represent the authentic voice of any particular ruler in East Africa, it demonstrates that the tenth-century Arabs who told the story regarded Islam as a repertoire of spiritual techniques, just as Mijikenda orators describe *uganga* in their oral traditions. Scholars sometimes attempt to identify when various sects of Islam arrived in different parts of Africa, but examining Islam from the perspective of *uganga* (or other local systems of knowledge) emphasizes instead the specific Islamic practices that Africans integrated into their respective spiritual and technical schemas.[102] Coastal communities would have been motivated to seek proprietary Islamic knowledge for their clans as relationships with Muslim traders increased in importance – though no clan could monopolize Islamic knowledge.

The relationship between *uganga* and clan affiliation also answers a question that scholars have often asked about Islam in East Africa: why was conversion to Islam among Mijikenda and other inland communities limited to individuals rather than communities, until the late nineteenth century? Since Sabaki speakers regarded Islamic knowledge as a kind of *uganga,* their clans were loath to share their knowledge. They protected their Islamic knowledge and the coherence of their communities by not sharing it outside their clans. However, anyone could benefit from Islamic forms of *uganga* by allying with a Muslim clan or seeking the aid of a Muslim healer. Non-Muslims could also learn Islamic knowledge themselves, but only if they relinquished affiliations with their natal clan and joined a Muslim clan, which was the conventional process of conversion well into the nineteenth century.[103] The communal ownership of knowledge and the value that non-Muslims placed on their own *uganga* discouraged conversion efforts but also encouraged alliances among communities. It was only after Muslims in the Zanzibar Sultanate committed to exclusionary religious identities of Arab orthodoxy that ChiMijikenda-speaking *wanyika* became marginalized enough that people who aspired to lead inland communities rather than escape them sought conversion to Islam.

Govi's historiological intervention of linking *uganga* to clan affiliation clarifies how speakers of Sabaki languages integrated autochthonous communities in the lands they entered as well as newcomers to their shores and hills. Elevating his interpretation allows the historical knowledge that African

---

[101] Freeman-Grenville, *Select Documents*, 11–12.

[102] This interpretation contrasts with Pouwels's distinction of Islamic knowledge from *uganga* among Kiswahili speakers in later centuries; see Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent,* chaps. 3–5.

[103] David Colton Sperling, "The Growth of Islam Among the Mijikenda of the Kenya Coast, 1826–1930" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1988).

communities have curated about their past to interrogate the historiologies of Euro-American disciplines.

Conclusion

Since the mid-1990s, archeologists have led the way investigating characteristics shared among coastal, hinterland, and interior communities in littoral East Africa. Their approach has complicated the division of narratives into Swahili, Mijikenda, and other ethnic boxes that historians had conventionally followed in Kenyan history. At least one scholar has suggested that this project has discounted the unique contexts of Muslim communities along the shores.[104] However, emphasizing that maritime activities were just one specialty within a mosaic of lifeways that connected the land and sea offers opportunities to investigate multiple eras of change within Africa rather than presuming the "Swahili coast" was the product of a dynamic Indian Ocean history grafted onto a static Bantu Africa.[105]

Spear's insight that Mijikenda oral traditions can help reconstruct pasts relevant to the institutions they describe is one method of narrating this history. He interpreted these institutions as a single, unified "*kaya* complex" that operated between the sixteenth and nineteenth century. However, the Shungwaya debates, and Helm's survey of Kenya's escarpment in particular, complicate this picture by dramatically extending the timeline of Bantu settlement throughout littoral East Africa. The Shungwaya (and Shirazi) migration traditions were not simply a bundle of ideas brought south by influential migrants from the north in the sixteenth century. Instead, they served as schemas for containing many strategies, relationships, and ideas assembled over thousands of years. By identifying the contexts of specific elements in these traditions and correlating them with archeological and linguistic evidence through the confirmation model, scholars from historical disciplines can reconstruct a much more complex and dynamic African past. Scholars should also consult with colleagues in the disciplines that generated the evidence they want to recycle – to avoid mistakes but also to open new paths of interpretation.

A recycling method that holds the unassimilable historiologies of each discipline up to interrogate one another can also serve as a model for recentering marginalized African perspectives. This article briefly examined how a vernacular theory that Thomas Govi offered in a single set of published oral traditions clarifies three major dynamics in the settlement history of littoral East Africa. Yet there are many more voices recorded in thousands of oral traditions collected by an entire generation of Africanist scholars. Recycling these troves of evidence, despite their shortcomings, can support new

[104] Stepháne Pradines, "Swahili Past in Peril: New Archeology in East Africa," *Journal of Oriental and African Studies* 26 (2017).

[105] Kusimba and Walz, "When Did the Swahili Become Maritime?"

research priorities as surely as they generated decades of historiographical debates for earlier scholars.

Daren E. Ray is an Assistant Professor in the History Department at Brigham Young University. Email: daren.ray@byu.edu

References

Abungu, George H. O., "Communities on the River Tana, Kenya: An Archaeological Study of Relations Between the Delta and the River Basin, 700–1890 A.D," PhD Dissertation, Cambridge University (Cambridge England 1989).

Abungu, George H. O., and H. W. Mutoro, "Coast-Interior Settlements and Social Relations in the Kenya Coastal Hinterland," in Shaw, T., Sinclair, P. J. J., Andah, B., and Okpoko, A. (eds.), *Archeology of Africa: Foods, Metals, and Towns* (London: Routledge, 1993).

Allen, James de Vere, "Shungwaya, the Mijikenda, and the Traditions," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 16 (1983), 455–485.

———, *Swahili Origins: Swahili Culture and the Shungwaya Phenomenon* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993).

Barber, Karin (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

Berger, Iris, "*Migrations of the Central Kenya Bantu: A Reconsideration of the Shungwaya Hypothesis,*" MA thesis, University of Wisconsin (Madison, WI, 1967).

Cerulli, Enrico (trans.), "Kitab al Zunuj," in *Somalia: Scritti Vari Editi Ed Inediti* (Rome: A Cura dell'Administrazione Fudiciaria Italiana dell Somalia, 1957).

Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Champion, Arthur Mortimer, *The Agiryama of Kenya* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain & Ireland, 1967).

Chittick, H. Neville, "An Archeological Reconnaissance of the Southern Somali Coast," *Azania* 4 (1969), 115–130.

———, "The Book of the Zenj and the Mijikenda," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 9 (1976), 68–73.

Connerton, Paul, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

De Luna, Kathryn M., and Jeffrey B. Fleisher, *Speaking with Substance* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2019).

De Luna, Kathryn M., Jeffrey B. Fleisher, and Susan Keech McIntosh, "Thinking Across the African Past: Interdisciplinarity and Early History," *African Archeological Review* 29–2–3 (September 18, 2012), 75–94.

Delmas, Adrien, "Writing in Africa: The Kilwa Chronicle and Other Sixteenth-Century Portuguese Testimonies," in Brigaglia, Andrea and Nobili, Mauro (eds.), *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2017).

Ehret, Christopher, *The Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002).

Elliot, J. A. G., "A Visit to the Bajun Islands. Part I: Brief Historical Sketch – Source of Origin of the Present and Past Population – Traditions Thereanent," *Journal of the Royal African Society* 25–97 (1925), 10–22.

Fourshey, Cymone, Rhonda M. Gonzales, and Christine Saidi, *Bantu Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Freeman-Grenville, G. S. P., *The East African Coast: Select Documents from the First to the Nineteenth Century,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

Gearhart, Rebecca, and Linda L. Giles (eds.), *Contesting Identities: The Mijikenda and Their Neighbors in Kenyan Coastal Society* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2014).

Gonzales, Rhonda M., *Societies, Religion, and History: Central-East Tanzanians and the World They Created, c. 200 BCE to 1800 CE* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

Grottanelli, Vinigi L., "A Lost African Metropolis," *Afrikanistiche Studien* 26 (1955), 231–42.

Guillain, Charles, *Documents Sur l'Historie, La Géographie, et Le Commerce de La Côte Orientale d'Afrique,* 3 vols. (Paris: Arthus Bertrand, 1856).

Helm, Richard, "Conflicting Histories: The Archeology of the Iron-Working, Farming Communities in the Central and Southern Coast Region of Kenya," PhD dissertation, University of Bristol, 2000.

Helm, Richard, "Re-Evaluating Traditional Histories on the Coast of Kenya: An Archeological Perspective" in Reid, Andres M. and Lane, Paul J. (eds.), *African Historical Archeologies* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004).

Helm, Richard, Alison Crowther, Ceri Shipton, Amini Tengeza, Dorian Fuller, and Nicole Boivin, "Exploring Agriculture, Interaction and Trade on the Eastern African Littoral: Preliminary Results from Kenya," *Azania* 47–1 (2012), 39–63.

Henige, David, "Impossible to Disprove Yet Impossible to Believe: The Unforgiving Epistemology of Deep-Time Oral Tradition," *History in Africa* 36 (2009), 127–234.

Hinnebusch, Thomas, "The Shungwaya Hypothesis: A Linguistic Reappraisal," in Gallagher, Joseph T. (ed.), *East African Cultural History* (Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1976).

Horton, Mark, Helen W. Brown, and Nina Mudida, *Shanga: The Archeology of a Muslim Trading Community on the Coast of East Africa* (London: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1996).

Horton, Mark, and John Middleton, *The Swahili: The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

al-Idrisi, Muhammad ibn Muhammad, *Nuzhat al-mushtāq fi iḥtirāq al-āfāq* [Book of Roger], Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Arabe 2221, Folio 28v. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b52000446t/f64.item.r=arabe%202221.

Kennedy, Philip F., Shawkat M. Toorawa, Tim Mackintosh-Smith, and James E. Montgomery, (eds.), *Two Arabic Travel Books: Accounts of China and India and Mission to the Volga* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

Kodesh, Neil, "Networks of Knowledge: Clanship and Collective Well-Being in Buganda," *Journal of African History* 49–2 (2008), 197–216.

Krapf, Johann Ludwig, and Johannes Rebmann, *A Nika-English Dictionary* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1887).

Kresse, Kai, *Philosophizing in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam, and Intellectual Practice on the Swahili Coast* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

Kusimba, Chapurukha M., Janet M. Monge, and Sibel B. Kusimba, "The Identity of Early Kenyan Coastal Peoples: A Comparative Analysis of Human Remains from Mtwapa, Shanga, and Taita Hills," in Gearhart, Rebecca and Giles, Linda L. (eds.), *Contesting Identities: The Mijikenda and Their Neighbors in Kenyan Coastal Society* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013).

Kusimba, Chapurukha M., and Jonathan R. Walz, "When Did the Swahili Become Maritime?: A Reply to Fleisher et al. (2015), and to the Resurgence of Maritime Myopia in the Archeology of the East African Coast," *American Anthropologist* 120–3 (2018), 429–443.

Lambert, H. E., *The Systems of Land Tenure in the Kikuyu Land Unit: Part I, History of the Tribal Occupation of the Land* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1950).

Lewis, Bernard, *Islam: From the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople II: Religion and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

McIntosh, Janet, *The Edge of Islam: Power, Personhood, and Ethnoreligious Boundaries on the Kenya Coast* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

McIntosh, Roderick J., *Ancient Middle Niger: Urbanism and the Self-Organizing Landscape* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Middleton, John, *The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

Miller, Joseph C., "Introduction: Listening for the African Past," in Miller, Joseph C. (ed.), *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1980).

Miller, Joseph C., "Life Begins at Fifty: African Studies Enters Its Age of Awareness," *African Studies Review* 50–2 (2007), 1–35.

Moore, Henrietta L., "The Changing Nature of Anthropological Knowledge," in Moore, Henrietta L. (ed.), *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge* (London: Psychology Press, 1996).

Morton, R. F., "The Shungwaya Myth of Mijikenda Origins: A Problem of Late Nineteenth-Century Kenya Coastal History," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 5–3 (1972), 397–423.

Morton, R. F., "New Evidence Regarding the Shungwaya Myth of Miji Kenda Origins," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 10–4 (1977), 628–43.

Munro, J. Forbes, "Migrations of the Bantu-Speaking Peoples of the Eastern Kenya Highlands: A Reappraisal," *Journal of African History* 8–1 (1967), 25–28.

Mutoro, Henry W., "*An Archaeological Study of the Mijikenda 'kaya' Settlements on Hinterland Kenya Coast*," PhD dissertation, University of California (Los Angeles, 1987).

Newbury, David, "Contradictions at the Heart of the Canon: Jan Vansina and the Debate over Oral Historiography in Africa, 1960–1985," *History in Africa* 34 (2007), 213–254.

Nurse, Derek, and Gérard Phillipson, "The North-East Bantu Languages of Tanzania and Kenya: A Classification," *KiSwahili* 45–2 (1975), 1–28.

Nurse, Derek, and Thomas T. Spear, *The Swahili: Reconstructing the History and Language of an African Society, 800–1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984).

Nurse, Derek, and Thomas Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki: A Linguistic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

Park, Jeong Kyung, "'Singwaya Was a Mere Small Station': Islamization and Ethnic Primacy in Digo Oral Traditions of Origin and Migration," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 24–2 (December 2012), 157–170.

Parkin, David, *Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual Among the Giriama of Kenya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Peterson, Derek R., *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004).

Peterson, Derek R., Emma Hunter, and Stephanie Newall (eds.), *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

Pouwels, Randall L., "Shungwaya and the Roots of East African Coastal Civilization," In *African Studies Association of Austrolasia*, 1983, http://afsaap.org.au/assets/1983_Pouwels-L.-Randall.pdf.

Pouwels, Randall L., "Oral Historiography and the Problem of the Shirazi of the East African Coast," *History in Africa* 11 (1984), 237–267.

Pouwels, Randall L., *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800–1900* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Pradines, Stepháne, "Swahili Past in Peril: New Archeology in East Africa," *Journal of Oriental and African Studies* 26 (2017).

Prins, A. H. J., "Shungwaya, Die Urheimat Der Nordost Bantu," *Anthropos* 50 (1955), 273–281.

Prins, A. H. J., "The Shungwaya Problem: Traditional History and Cultural Likeness in Bantu North-East Africa," *Anthropos* 67–1–2 (1972), 9–35.

Reid, Richard, "Past and Presentism: The 'Precolonial' and the Foreshortening of African History," *Journal of African History* 52–2 (2011), 135–155.

Robertshaw, Peter, "Sibling Rivalry? The Intersection of Archeology and History." *History in Africa* 27 (2000), 261–286.

Schmidt, Peter R., and Jonathan R. Walz, "Re-Representing African Pasts through Historical Archeology," *American Antiquity* 72–1 (January 2007), 53–70.

Shetler, Jan Bender, "The Politics of Publishing Oral Sources from the Mara Region, Tanzania," *History in Africa* 29 (January 1, 2002), 413–426.

Shetler, Jan Bender, *Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory in Tanzania from Earliest Times to the Present* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

Shipton, C., R. Helm, N. Boivin, A. Crowther, P. Austin, and D. Q. Fuller, "Intersections, Networks and the Genesis of Social Complexity on the Nyali Coast of East Africa," *African Archeological Review* 30–4 (2013), 427–453.

Spear, Thomas, "Traditional Myths and Historian's Myths: Variations on the Singwaya Theme of Mijikenda Origins," *History in Africa* 1 (1974), 67–84.

Spear, Thomas, "Traditional Myths and Linguistic Analysis: Singwaya Revisited," *History in Africa* 4 (1977), 229–246.

Spear, Thomas, *The Kaya Complex: A History of the Mijikenda Peoples of the Kenya Coast to 1900* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978).

Spear, Thomas, *Kenya's Past: An Introduction to Historical Method in Africa* (London: Longman, 1981).

Spear, Thomas, "Oral Traditions: Whose History?" *History in Africa* 8 (1981), 165–181.

Spear, Thomas, *Traditions of Origin and Their Interpretation: The Mijikenda of Kenya* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1981).

Spear, Thomas, "A Reply by Thomas Spear" *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 16 (1983), 484.

Spear, Thomas, "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa," *Journal of African History* 44–1 (2003), 3–27.

Sperling, David Colton, "*The Growth of Islam Among the Mijikenda of the Kenya Coast, 1826–1930*," PhD dissertation, University of London (London, UK, 1988).

Vansina, Jan, *Oral Traditions as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

Vansina, Jan, "Historians, Are Archeologists Your Siblings?," *History in Africa* 22 (1995), 369–408.

Vansina, Jan, "Is a Journal of Method Still Necessary?" *History in Africa* 36 (2009), 421–438.

Walsh, Martin, "Mijikenda Origins: A Review of the Evidence," *Transafrican Journal of History* 21 (1992), 1–18.

Walsh, Martin, "The Segeju Complex? Linguistic Evidence for the Precolonial Making of the Mijikenda," in Gearhart, Rebecca and Giles, Linda L. (eds.), *Contesting Identities: The Mijikenda and Their Neighbors in Kenyan Coastal Society* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013).

Werner, Alice, *The Bantu Coast Tribes of the East Africa Protectorate* (London: Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1915).

White, Luise, Stephan Miescher, and David William Cohen, eds., *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

Willis, Justin, *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Willis, Justin, "The Northern Kayas of the Mijikenda: A Gazetteer, and an Historical Reassessment," *Azania* 31 (1996), 75–98.

Wilson, Thomas H., "Spatial Analysis and Settlement Patterns on the East African Coast," *Paideuma* 28 (1982), 201–219.