

IN CONVERSATION: DAREN RAY ON *ETHNICITY, IDENTITY, AND CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNITY IN INDIAN OCEAN EAST AFRICA*

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, Daren Ray discusses his book, *Ethnicity, Identity, and Conceptualizing Community in Indian Ocean East Africa*, which was published in the Indian Ocean Studies Series of Ohio University Press at the end of 2023.¹

Philip Gooding (PG): Could you explain the origins and development of the project that led to the creation of this book. How did you come to frame a very long-term historical trajectory around ethnicity, when studies focusing on ethnicity in Africa have regularly focused on the period since the establishment of European colonial rule at the end of the nineteenth century?

Daren Ray (DR): This project started in the classic rabbit hole fashion. I began examining a runaway slave village called Fuladoyo, in the coastal hinterland of present-day Kenya, as part of my undergraduate research. This village was populated by formerly enslaved people who had fled from the eastern African coast and moved into the hills. However, as I entered graduate study, I realized I knew very little about the people among whom they settled: the Giriama people, which is one of several Mijikenda groups in Kenya's coastal hinterland. In examining this history, I then started to think about Fuladayo, the Giriama, and the Mijikenda within wider conceptual and spatial frameworks, notably around *grand marronage* and the Indian Ocean. This developed finally into a master's thesis, which I called 'The Complexities of Being Mijikenda.'

¹ Daren Ray, *Ethnicity, Identity, and Conceptualizing Community in Indian Ocean East Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2023).

Some of this early research built on Thomas Spear's book, *The Kaya Complex*.² But I was also trying to challenge this work. Instead of thinking about the Mijikenda as emerging from a complex that was inherited from the deep past as a single coherent tradition, I sought to break up the pieces of the kaya complex by asking additional questions. Where did each element of the complex come from? When did they emerge? And with what influences? And asking these questions enabled me to think productively about identity. Moreover, the multitude of sources that I addressed, which came from a range of disciplines including linguistics, archaeology, and anthropology, enabled me to change many of the assumptions that I had developed from my analysis of the existing literature. The evidence continually pointed me in new directions. It also pushed me away from just studying Fuladayo – there was a much larger story to tell.

As I was thinking through how to understand the Mijikenda complex and its development over multiple centuries, I was dissatisfied with two major divides. First, the division of history in Kenya into ethnic groups. Broadly speaking (and despite exceptions), Kenyan history has been divided so that there is a book on the Swahili, a book on the Mijikenda, a book on the Kamba, a book on the Taita, and so on. This has the consequence of separating all these groups by ethnic group, despite knowing that these groups were 'invented' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Second, I was dissatisfied with the divide in the historiography of Africa between the early and modern periods. Although some scholars focusing on ethnicity in Africa have attempted to push back to periods before the nineteenth century, there has been limited agreement on how this can be achieved. One trend has been to suggest that 'ethnicity' is old, and that early African communities were organized by ethnicity in ways that are like the present, although with a looser definition of the term. But this reasoning dilutes the theoretical power and effectiveness of 'ethnicity' for explaining relationships among communities in the modern era, and between those communities and states. I believed there were better ways to link the early and modern eras.

My first solution to thinking through this problem of conceptualizing ethnicity in the long-term was to frame the history of the Kenyan littoral through language families. The works of David Schoenbrun, Kathryn De Luna, and Rhiannon Stephens provided a model for thinking about questions of belonging, economics, and politics in deep time

² Thomas T. Spear, *The Kaya Complex: A history of the Mijikenda peoples of the Kenya coast to 1900* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978).

using historical linguistics and speech communities as a basic unit.³ In that sense, I sought to combine the Mijikenda and Swahili as an integrated unit of analysis, because they share a common linguistic background: they are both part of the Sabaki language family. This enabled me to blur the ethnic categories that have influenced the study of deep time in Kenya, whose origins lie in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My next step was to examine the ancestry of ethnicity from the past to the present: If ethnicity is largely a nineteenth-twentieth-century phenomenon, I sought to examine its antecedents in deep time.

My field research was organized to assess these problems in two ways. First was the archival work. The archives, as well as around a dozen dissertations from which I pulled oral traditions and other interviews that scholars have done, helped me piece together how Swahili and Mijikenda ethnicity define each other, how they are in conversation with each other, how they regarded themselves as part of a common continuum of littoral communities, and how they defined another set of communities outside of them. And so, in the first chapter of the book, I examined how speakers of Sabaki languages thought about kinship and how this directly influences the way that they think about ethnicity today. This analysis suggested that modern conceptions of ethnicity, including among Swahili and Mijikenda, do not necessarily fit the rubric for anthropological theory about what ethnicity is, even if there are some similarities. The archives helped me to piece together how modern conceptions became cemented into the ways that Swahili and Mijikenda people speak to each other about ethnicity.

Archives also enabled me to think about when ethnicity started. This did not just mean thinking about the nineteenth century and twentieth centuries. Rather, it necessitated examining how speech communities, such as the Sabaki, started to think of themselves as divided into actual separate communities. This meant analyzing evidence related to the fifteenth-seventeenth centuries, especially during the period when the Omani Sultan began to control the coast. In this context, Muslim communities became motivated to assert their difference from non-Muslim communities. This became the building block of what eventually became a clearly defined boundary between Swahili and Mijikenda

³ David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, a Good Place: Agrarian change, gender, and social identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998); Kathryn De Luna, *Collecting Food, Cultivating People: Subsistence and society in central Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); Rhiannon Stephens, *A History of African Motherhood: The case of Uganda, 700-1900* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

communities. Archives then helped me to piece together the jurisdictional politics of the British Empire: how they tried to create these different legal jurisdictions, bound by culture, language, and tradition—basically, the formation of ‘tribes.’ Sabaki speakers, as they did in earlier centuries, manipulated that process to their advantage, and then defined it in their own terms as much as possible.

The other way of assessing the problems identified as part of the project was through oral sources. My interviews were semi formal. I thought of them as ‘tutorials in culture’—I was there to learn about my interviewees’ culture with as few preconceptions as possible. I tried not to be very strict by looking for specific data points or by trying to reconstruct clan histories. I thought that would be imposing too much of a framework. Rather, I mainly just asked people about their parties, about their celebrations: How did they celebrate their ethnic identities? How did they celebrate their community? What kind of activities did they do? This approach was influenced by Carolyn Adenaike’s *Pursuit of History* volume.⁴ I read this in graduate school, and it inspired me to embrace the messiness of fieldwork. In hindsight, another year of preparation would have been useful. But I picked up cultural knowledge as best I could, and only later did I think about reconstituting it into a framework for scholarly analysis. Ultimately, this helped me to think through how my interviewees understood belonging and the principles that they used to build their communities (or ethnic groups) together. Later, it also led me to examine the antecedents to these forms of social organization.

Thus, I developed the idea of ‘ancestors of ethnicity.’ These ancestors include all the different categories of identification that Sabaki speakers developed over hundreds of years in different historical contexts. I believe that one of my major contributions is to show how what might appear to be a very disparate history, one that contains a range of categories of identity from different time-periods, is linked to the present. It compiles the emergence and development of different identities into something that we recognize today as ethnicity, or *kabila* in Swahili. It does not trace ethnicity backwards to pre-modern eras so much as it assesses how inherited forms of identity informed ethnicity later.

PG: One of the features of your book is its interdisciplinarity. You mentioned historical linguistics, anthropology, and ethnographies, and you also consulted several archives—which are usually associated with historians. Thus, can you speak to your training? How

⁴ Carolyn Keyes Adenaike (ed.), *In Pursuit of History: Fieldwork in Africa* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996).

were you able to develop this interdisciplinary perspective? And how do you see interdisciplinarity as important to the study of the African past and present?

DR: Especially if we're examining early Africa, interdisciplinarity is essential. My training with Joe Miller at the University of Virginia was 'disciplinarily agnostic' in terms of methodology, but firmly grounded in historical thinking. For much of his career, Miller pushed the boundaries of how we think about and interpret oral traditions. He was a supporter of linguistic histories, such as those by David Schoenbrun and Christopher Ehret, and was interested in the kinds of access we can get to deep past mentalities through language.⁵ And so, it was important to me as my training developed to understand each of these disciplines on their own terms. My program fostered this: there were archaeologists, linguists, ritual studies specialists, and religious studies students in my cohort. And we had conversations all the time about how we were thinking about evidence and how we were processing it.

For example, I had a moment at a coffee shop at the University of Virginia library, where I got together with archaeologists Matthew Pawlowicz and Lydia Marshall, and I asked them, 'Hey, I need to understand: what's the deal with pottery? Why are you guys so obsessed with pottery all the time? I don't quite get it.' And they just sat me down and walked me through it. From there, I was able to make better sense of work by Jeffrey Fleisher, Stephanie Wynne Jones, and others, and I really began to understand how archaeological methods help to interpret material culture. This was despite not having conducted any archaeological research myself.

In the same respect, my training in historical linguistics was somewhat informal. I took some linguistic courses in graduate school, but I gained most of my knowledge from the work of early Africanists, especially those working in eastern and central Africa. This includes, for example, Derek Nurse and Thomas Hinnebusch's wonderful compilation of data on the eastern African languages of Sabaki and Swahili.⁶ Just working through that book and understanding what the authors were saying, what the evidence was, and how to make sense of the jargon helped me think through all the problems of belonging and ethnicity that underpinned my research. Referring to evidence from multiple disciplines enabled a multi-faceted perspective on the ways in which people interacted with each

⁵ Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, a Good Place*; Christopher Ehret, *History and the Testimony of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁶ Derek Nurse and Thomas J. Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki: A linguistic history* (Berkeley: University of Los Angeles Press, 1993).

other and formed groups during different historical epochs. So, my training was very eclectic and somewhat self-directed, but I took advantage of the opportunities I had to work closely with archaeologists, linguists, historians, and religious studies specialists.

PG: One thing you touched on in your opening answer was the ostensible dichotomy between the Swahili and Mijikenda. A lot of ink has been spilled on the origins of the Swahili as either an Arab or African civilization and the Mijikenda as definitively African. How does your work build on or challenge this ostensible dichotomy? I am very much taken by a short phrase towards the end of your second chapter in which you write, ‘Shanga [which was a town in the Lamu archipelago] was not only a Swahili town, but also a Sabaki one.’ Additionally, in chapters five and six, you chart some of the imperialist origins of the ostensible distinction between the Arab coast and the African interior, or the Arab-Swahili and the African-Mijikenda. Thus, what does your book mean for understandings of the origins of the Swahili and the Mijikenda? How do you build on or challenge the ostensible dichotomy between these two civilizations?

DR: Let me start with this idea that you presented that the Swahili are also Sabaki. I think that is an important way to think about all ethnic groups in Africa, the Indian Ocean, and beyond: that people of one ethnic group are always also something else. They are regularly part of larger cultural traditions. And so, while we do not need to diminish the distinction between what it means to live on the shore as a maritime person, as a Kiswahili speaker, who has a different way of speaking and a different vocabulary to many inland populations, we can acknowledge that they are also integrated in different ways. And I think that is the power of thinking about the Sabaki language as a unit of shared history and heritage, as well as the ways in which they communicated and built a much more vibrant community than one that is implied by the idea of an ethnic community being distinct and isolated. In Spear’s original description of the Kaya complex, for example, embedded in his methodology was the assumption that the Mijikenda were isolated, not only from the Swahili coast, but also from each other.⁷ He argued that it was only by coming together that they, in the twentieth century, established themselves as the Mijikenda ethnic community. By contrast, thinking of the linguistic framework of Sabaki forces us to come to terms with the fact that they interacted with each other over a much longer time period.

⁷ Spear, *Kaya Complex*.

The cis-oceanic framework, which I develop in this book, similarly helps me to go beyond a narrow linguistic perspective. For example, if I only analyzed Sabaki speakers, the question arises of how to incorporate the British, the Arabs, the Kamba, the central Kenya Bantu speakers, the Cushitic speakers, and the Oromo who came into the area at various points during the last 1,500 years. They cannot exist in my story if I only focus on speakers of Sabaki languages. Thus, the cis-oceanic framework is a term I have adopted from David Armitage's work on the Atlantic.⁸ The idea of the cis-oceanic (or the cis-Atlantic) is that it focuses on all the influences that connections with the ocean has on a particular region or territory. Such influences could be economic flows, migrant flows, intellectual ideas, and much else. But the intention is not to examine the transmission of those flows or ideas, it is to analyze their reception. Further, it examines how such patterns of reception affected the coast and the ocean, in ways that are in some ways reciprocal and mutually constitutive.

Indeed, this examination of the multi-directional linkages between coast and hinterland contributed to my dissatisfaction with my undergraduate research focusing on Fuladayo. In that research, I could only discuss influences from the coast affecting inland regions. I had very little conception of how inland influences, such as from Fuladayo, affected the coast and ocean. And so, by taking both influences equally seriously, then the coastal/littoral zone becomes a much more turbulent area from which people drew for a multitude of purposes in many directions.

Thus, to return to the question about Swahili origins: what my approach tells us is that the Swahili are an ethnic group, created largely in the twentieth century, but there were antecedents from previous eras. There was, for example, a religious community on the coast beforehand. In the nineteenth century, they would not necessarily have recognized themselves as 'Swahili' because they recognized themselves as members of various clan confederations. But, since the beginning of the Portuguese invasion from the sixteenth century, they often distinguished themselves by identifying as part of a distinctive Muslim population. But the Swahili, if we go further back in time, were also a speech community. They developed as an offshoot from the Sabaki mother tongue, moving into different regions that helped them develop a distinctive vocabulary. And so, we don't have to erase the whole history of the Swahili and say, well, they just never were a people. But what they were as a people has changed and been modified over many eras.

⁸ David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," in *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, eds. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

It would, therefore, be a mistake to argue that the Swahili in, say, the seventh century, were an ethnic group, because an ‘ethnic group’ has a very particular way of interacting with the world. It is for this reason that, throughout the book, I refer to those who lived along the Kenyan coast as Kiswahili speakers, at least until twentieth century, when thinking of them as a distinct Swahili ethnic group begins to make sense. Similarly, for the Mijikenda, I adopt the same sort of standard of appending the prefix: the Chimijikenda speakers, because they are not Mijikenda until the twentieth century. And so, by focusing on them as speakers, that allows me more flexibility to show how they interacted with oceanic *and* interior movements *and* with each other, and how they reformed their communities in different time-periods.

PG: Your idea of the cis-oceanic framework may have significant consequences for how to think about the Indian Ocean World at large. I am thinking here about the work of Michael Pearson, whose work on littoral societies in the 1980s and 2000s has been so fundamental to our field.⁹ How does your book challenge or refine our understandings of what usually constitutes a littoral society, as proposed by Pearson? Does the importance you place on Chimijikenda speakers and other inland groups have wider applicability? Or put another way, how should historians of coastal or littoral regions be thinking about their hinterlands?

DR: I will start with how I understand Michael Pearson’s thinking about the littoral. Firstly, it was a way of creating a comparative framework around the Indian Ocean, with an understanding that this was a space that people lived in, rather than just traveled through. By comparing all these different littoral regions to each other, we can identify, for instance, a common set of Arabic loanwords, common lifestyles, and common architectural styles. This helps us imagine the Indian Ocean World as a kind of cohesive space, where anywhere you go, it is familiar because it is like the places that you have come from. Originally, Pearson focused on the shore folk: literally the people who were involved in the ocean every day. But as he developed the idea over the years, he came closer to what Armitage describes as the cis-oceanic: that it is not just the people who live directly on the shore, but it is everywhere that oceanic activities reach. In fact, as littoral societies enrich themselves, they often extend their influence further inland to take control of their supply regions. In some cases, that includes conquest of hinterland areas. One

⁹ For example: Michael N. Pearson, “Littoral society: The concept and the problems,” *Journal of World History*, 17, 4 (2006); Michael N. Pearson, “Littoral society: the case for the coast,” *The Great Circle*, 7, 1 (1985).

thing that is interesting in the East African context is that there were no major conquests of the interior from littoral populations. Thus, some questions emerge: why does the hinterland matter? If the hinterland is not a place to be preyed upon by a littoral state to integrate into this political center, then what is it for?

One way to work through these questions is by acknowledging that the Mijikenda should be regarded as a littoral people. I came to this conclusion because the Mijikenda regard themselves as littoral peoples – despite what much of the historiography says about them. I make this point with the Digo in the final substantive chapter of the book. The Digo are one of nine Mijikenda groups. They are in the southern part of the coast, and unlike all the Mijikenda to the north, they have settlements on the coast. They have fishing villages; they are engaged in trade; they are engaged in handicrafts; and they have worked their way into oceanic commerce. When they made maps defining themselves as a territorial community, they included Mombasa and pressed for the government to rename it Digo Island.

Similarly, I end my book with a ceremony by a community of Giriama, who more often live inland. In 2010, however, they came to the new Mashujaa Heroes' Day in Kenya to celebrate one of their great heroines, Mekatilili, and when they did so, they went to the coast. They installed a new elder in the Giriama title society, and they held a ceremony right on the ocean. This is an important place for them: They see themselves as part of the coast. If the people in the hinterland regard themselves as coastal people, then they are indeed a coastal people.

Beyond self-definition though, it is essential to consider how far the hinterland might stretch in terms of its influence on that littoral society. If we want to understand how a community in the littoral region, or in these transition regions between the interior and the ocean, are receiving information, products, people, and whatever else from the ocean, then we cannot assume that they are static. We also cannot assume they only receive things from the ocean, because they are also engaged with people further in the interior: We must also track what is coming to the littoral regions from the interior spaces. What are the implications for this for Indian Ocean historiography? In the introduction of my book, I mention that Indian Ocean specialists are often content to let people focus on inland territories do that history themselves, and they do not really integrate interior spaces into their oceanic stories. I think this is a mistake, because it gives the presumption that change only happens through the ocean, and that these communities, at least littoral communities, are only changing when something new comes from the ocean. However, we cannot understand how they receive things from the ocean if we ignore the other

factors at play transforming these societies. It is important to note, however, that these places would not be static without these influences. These societies develop their own ideas and technologies and ways of thinking about the world independent of all the other contexts and all the other influences on them from outside.

PG: Apart from this tension that exists in Indian Ocean and African studies between coast and inland, you also address a major tension in Africanist historiography, and that is the issue of ‘tribe.’ Africanist historians have long sought to eradicate the word ‘tribe’ from their vocabulary, noting how tribes were invented and underpinned by racialized colonialist ideologies. However, you are dissatisfied with one of the quick solutions that some Africanists have proposed, which is the replacement of the word ‘tribe’ with ‘ethnic groups.’ You discuss how ethnic groups were formed over a long period in eastern Africa, and you argue that the idea of ethnic groups obscures how peoples of present-day southeastern Kenya actively constituted tribes as an organizing principle, especially in the early twentieth century. In chapter seven of your book, you discuss another important context which helps you to explain this, and that is the idea of the ethnic patriot. How does the idea of the ethnic patriot shed more light on the origins of so-called tribes in Africa?

DR: I first became familiar with the term ethnic patriots from Derek Peterson’s work, although it originated with John Lonsdale.¹⁰ The idea of the ethnic patriot is in some ways a replacement of an earlier term that used to be very common, the ‘ethnic entrepreneur.’ The idea of the ethnic entrepreneur is rooted in the idea that entrepreneurship is about self-advancement and profit. It is very much to do with business activity. There was an idea that ethnic entrepreneurs were manipulating culture to enrich themselves by forming ethnic groups and creating new kinds of community that they could dominate. However, this term has negative connotations, and it distorts the self-positioning and self-awareness of many of these people who promoted the idea of ethnic identity. For me, ethnic patriots are people who try to positively reform their cultural heritage in a way that will bring the widest possible population of people together.

This is something I detail in chapter seven, where I trace a couple of these patriots. The most important one is Sheikh al-Amin Ali al-Mazrui, and he was very concerned that

¹⁰ Derek R. Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A history of dissent, c.1935-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); John Lonsdale, “Writing competitive patriotisms in eastern Africa,” in *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa*, eds. Derek R. Peterson and Giacomo Macola (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 251-68.

the British were dividing populations into tribes. He enumerated them, he described how many there were of each tribe. He also included racial categories, stating how many Indians there were, and how many Arabs there were. He counted himself among the Arabs. One of the things he was very conscious to do was to eliminate the distinction between Arabs who were recent immigrants, those came in the past c.300 years, and the so called 'Swahili,' or the 12 tribes, as they called themselves in Mombasa. He was very calculated in this, because if they eliminated those distinctions, and they could unify as a single group, then they would double their population and be of the same population size as the Indians in Kenya. He had other reasons for doing this as well. There were very close connections between these communities, such as being of the same faith. However, there was a curious decision that he made, in that he excluded the Digo from this equation. He said the Digo could not possibly be part of them. He allowed the 12 tribes of the Swahili to come into the Arab community, saying they all just regarded themselves as Arab. *Waarabu* is the word he used, which is just a Swahili person marker of Arab people, but he also used the word *wapwani*, which means a coastal people. This would seemingly allow for the possibility of including the Digo. Certainly, among the Mijikenda, the Digo were those who had most converted to Islam, so they were part of the same faith community. They lived on the coast, so they were definitely *wapwani*, but they did not fit that *Waarabu* category. They were obviously not descended from the Arabs because they did not even claim to be descended from the Arabs. In some ways, he was saying that the defining feature of Arabs is that they are Muslim. However, as an ethnic patriot, defining this Muslim and Arab community, he decided to focus on the Arab side instead of the Muslim side, and thus excluded the Digo from that formulation of what the tribe would look like in terms of the politics of Kenya. It was an interesting decision, because if he had accepted the Digo and created this faith-based and coast-based community, then that would have had tremendous implications on the Arab influence, theoretically even surpassing the influence of the Indian population, in the British colony.

Regarding the issue of tribes, I challenge the ways that we, as an Africanist scholarly community, have dealt with the term. It is confusing to students, it is confusing to scholars in other disciplines who have not accepted our convention, and it is confusing to us as researchers when we must research and talk about people who use the word tribe and define themselves as tribe. The word tribe is littered throughout the archival records, and we are constantly re-translating it to something else because we decided we cannot use this word, but it is a word that people use all the time in their everyday speech. Also, to the point that you began with, it is not a precise fit with ethnic group. Ethnic group is a

scholarly theory first developed to understand the interaction among immigrant populations as they moved into cities and new regions, and then the interactions between these groups and states. We have since developed that concept further in many different directions. There is a whole field of ethnic studies that applies this concept in very specific ways to contexts all around the world, and it does not fit exactly with what the British meant by tribe, what the Mijikenda meant by tribe, or what the Swahili meant by tribe in the early twentieth century.

My work builds up a vernacular understanding of tribe to emphasize that this is the word that they were working with, and it is really an excellent demonstration of how such schemas work. Schema is another key term I use throughout my book. Schemas are not tied to any culture, and they are not tied to any language. They do not have an identity of their own. They have no stake in politics, but they are an interface that people use to communicate with each other. And as people interact with each other, they add things to that schema. Tribe is an excellent example of a schema where the British came up with these ideas about German history, Roman history, and British history, and what a tribe means. They then filtered those ideas through their experience in South Asia, and they decided what a caste was versus a tribe, what a kingdom was versus sultanate, and so on. They decided what they understood a tribe to be, and they brought that concept with them to Africa, where they developed that idea further.

Meanwhile, Sabaki speakers had their own ideas about what communities should look like. They had ideas about descent and kinship and about how a territory relates to a community. They had ideas about culture and religion, and what the boundaries of culture and religion were. When those two ideas came together, a new formation emerged, which is the vernacular understanding of tribe in coastal Kenya. That schema, meanwhile, looked different everywhere. There were some common patterns, because the British and their preconceptions of tribe were a common thread across a vast area. However, the vernacular understanding of tribe was always going to be different everywhere within each individual community.

I think that concept is a little easier to explain both to students and other scholars, rather than just trying to shoehorn everything into ethnicity. Ethnicity is universal in its ambition, but tribe is always going to be localized. You always will have to pay attention to specific localities when talking about a tribe. I went back and forth throughout this whole project of when to use ethnic group, when to use ethnicity, and when to use tribe. What I settled on though, is that tribe is a very particular social formation that was developed in the early twentieth century, at least in the context I am studying, and it had

influences from the British and from local cultures, as well as from Arabs and others from across the ocean. In fact, it is important to note the Arabs added another dimension to the processes in southeastern Kenya that are the focus of my book, and they continue to be important and influential in Kenyan politics today. If I were to do more research on tribal schemas in Kenya, I would have to look more at regional differences. How is the schema of tribe different in coastal Kenya from central Kenya and the Great Lakes region? How have those different schemas, as they developed in the early twentieth century, now combined on the national stage in Kenya? And how has that schema then worked its way through post-independence politics? I imagine there is a story there. Thinking through this concept of schema really helps piece together all the different variations of tribe in much of Africa and the Indian Ocean World.

PG: In answering these questions, you have discussed the very deep past of linguistic groups. You have now brought it all the way to the post-independence era and to the present day, which reflects the temporal scope of your book. In fact, your final full chapter is entitled ‘Transcending Ethnicity,’ and it shows how nationalism transcended ostensible tribes in the nationalist and post-independence eras. However, you also introduced this chapter with the disputed 2017 election, following which there were some calls for the secession of certain areas, partly based on tribe, and you mentioned a series of lesser-known movements that have called for the secession of coastal areas. Additionally, your epilogue draws on the post-election violence of 2007 to 2008. There is a tension here, between both transcending ethnicity and reifying tribes, or *kabilas*, in Kenya. And with this in mind, and with the large temporal scope of your book in mind, I am now going to ask you to go even larger temporally speaking and to enter a bit of speculation. What is the future of ethnicity in Kenya?

DR: The future of ethnicity in Kenya is strong. Thinking otherwise in previous years has been a mistake of political scientists, sociologists, and historians. The idea that ethnicity and tribal identifications would fade as nationalism became more prominent created a false dichotomy between ethnicity and nationalism, as if the two could not exist together. This goes back to one of the first questions: the Swahili are an ethnic group, but they are also Sabaki. I started the book with a vignette of a Kenyan professor talking about the prospect of the Kiswahili language being used to reconcile all the people in Kenya. He specifically described the Swahili as a community within Kenya, which reflect the idea that they are an ethnic group within this larger national framework. After meeting with

consultants repeatedly, this is something that fundamentally transformed my understanding of how they think of ethnicity in relationship to nationalism. They see it as a constituent; it is a part of the nation. Some theories of nationalism, including in Kenya, include the idea that nationalism must efface or destroy all other loyalties. The argument being that the nation is all that matters and everything else needs to be destroyed; there cannot be any cultural associations, and there cannot be any sort of ethnic valorization. Meanwhile, politicians, who outwardly supported this view made all sorts of backroom deals with the representatives of all the ethnic groups who made the country run. As I detail in chapter six, district organization and the alignment of districts in the bureaucratic organization of the Kenyan government which originated in the colonial period have aligned with local conceptions of tribe. As long as those districts retain local authority and the ability to actually make government work, that heritage is going to carry on.

Ethnicity being strong and continuing to have a vibrant life in Kenya is not necessarily a bad thing. John Lonsdale has a great article, ‘KAU’s cultures.’¹¹ He makes the point that, because civil society has often been absent or captured by the state in Kenya, tribes have been the groups that have demanded reforms. They basically function as civil society in Kenya. Starting with the colonial period, people have turned to their tribes to make their voices heard by the government. Additionally, Sabaki speakers have created dozens of different categories of identity over time, and they have nested these identities into ethnicity. Some of them do not fit particularly well, and some of them still trespass ethnicity’s boundaries. Yet, Sabaki speakers have imagined a way to reconcile these other forms of loyalty with ethnicity. Many of them are actively working as ‘ethnic patriots’ to reconcile ethnicity with national patriotism. They want their ethnic communities to be valorized and recognized as part of the nation. For them, ethnicity is not a replacement for the nation; it is not a competitor to it. Ethnicity is a champion of nationalism: that is how my Swahili consultants described their prayer for peace at a Swahili New Year’s celebration, and that is how my Mijikenda consultants described their celebration of the heroine Mekatilili. These are resources for the nation, not just for their community. We do not need to be fearful of ethnicity. Ethnic groups are going to continue to be vibrant, active parts of Kenyan and African politics.

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¹¹ John Lonsdale, “KAU’s cultures: Imaginations of community and constructions of leadership in Kenya after the Second World War,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 13, 1 (2000), 107-24.