

Introduction

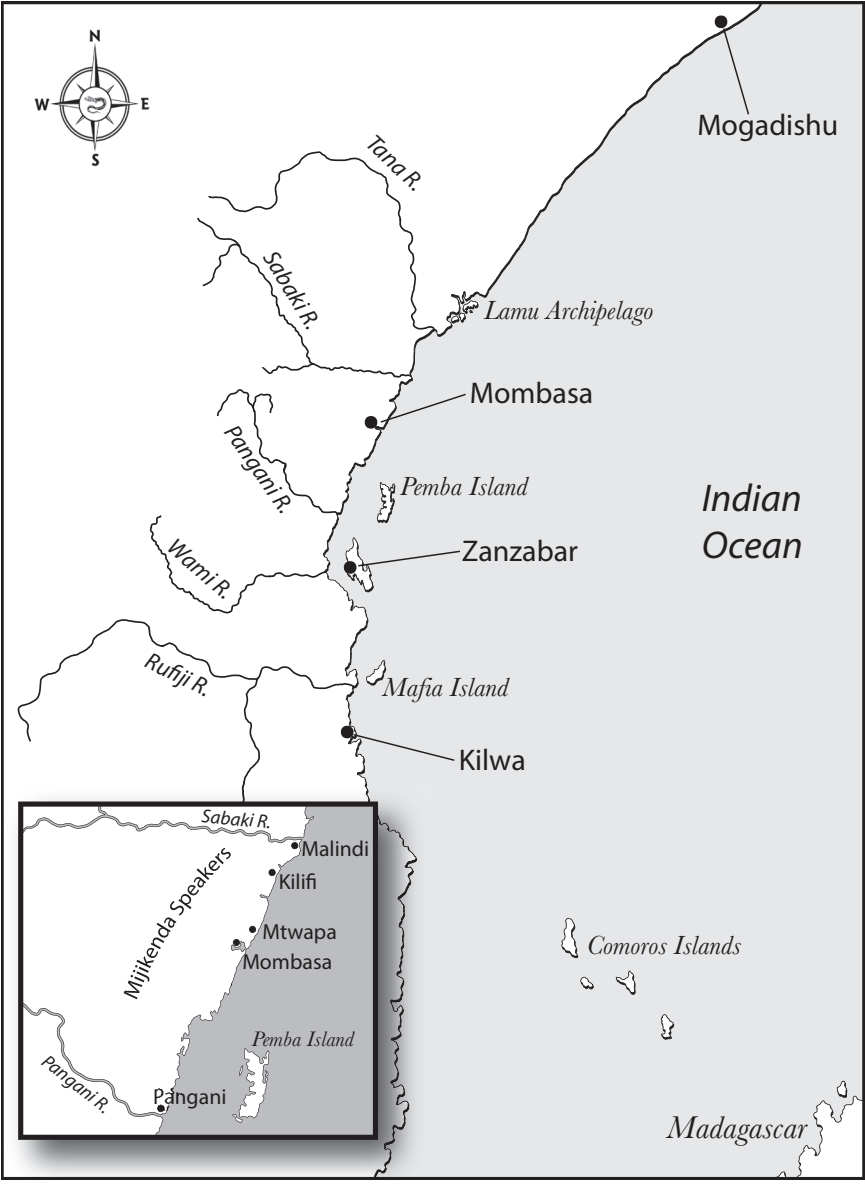
A few kilometers inland from the port city of Mombasa, the coastal plain begins to rise into a fertile upland ridge. Lithic-using groups settled here, as early as seventy-eight thousand years ago, around limestone cliffs dotting the coastal upland's forested eastern flanks.¹ Early in the first millennium CE, ironworking farmers also made the coastal forests of Mombasa's interior their home. Not all remained inland, however. During the second half of the millennium, settlements flourished along the coast and its offshore islands. Within a few centuries, the descendants of these coastal settlers, by then speaking an early form of Swahili, began converting to Islam, a religion introduced through interactions with visiting merchants from Persia and southern Arabia. Towns like Mombasa and Kilwa emerged as important trading hubs within the network of port cities that are today grouped together under the heuristic of the Indian Ocean world. This is a book about this interconnected oceanic world, told from the vantage point of Mijikenda-speaking groups who remained on the forested upland ridges in Mombasa's interior.

While Mombasa occupies an important place in East Africa's global history, its interior registers inconsistently within historical accounts of the city. Arabic geographic texts reference Mombasa as early as the twelfth century, describing the island's interior as "uninhabited" forest occupied by "every kind of wild beast."² When the North African traveler and scholar Ibn Battuta visited Mombasa in 1331, he remarked on its characteristically Islamic appearance, noting the city featured well-built mosques and a pious local population. But perplexingly, he also commented that the island city had "no mainland."³ Mombasa is bordered by two estuarian creeks that form a horseshoe around the island, separating it from the mainland by only a few hundred meters at the narrowest points. Battuta's dhow likely entered on the northeastern part of the island, following the creek to

Mombasa's largest settlement, located around the Friday mosque.⁴ Standing on the island side of Mombasa's old harbor today, you can easily see the bustle on the opposing side of the waterway. Since the island city so clearly has a mainland, scholars have suggested that Ibn Battuta did not actually mean that Mombasa lacked one, but instead had meant that Mombasa had no "hinterland," or that it "possesse[d] no territory on the mainland."⁵ Battuta only spent one day in Mombasa amid nearly thirty years of global travels, so it is just as likely that he forgot specific details of its geography.⁶ The forgetful mind of a weary traveler is perhaps the most likely explanation for Battuta's odd remark. Still, his suggestion that the town had no hinterland or rural dependency was in some ways prescient. Mombasa's mainland was populated by Mijikenda-speaking groups who had been active in oceanic trade for centuries by the time of Battuta's travels.⁷ Yet their relationship to the port city can hardly be categorized as that of a hinterland dependency.

Later accounts provide a clearer sense of Mijikenda speakers' varied and important roles in the town, despite their invisibility in earlier records. They supplied Mombasa's merchants with ivory, gum copal, and other valued trade goods, and they formed political and military alliances with the town's elites.⁸ Sometimes they also raided the island, crossing the narrow ford separating Mombasa and its mainland, to secure preferred terms in these partnerships. One Portuguese writer reported that during the early seventeenth century, 10 percent of Mombasa's budget was allocated to textiles for neighboring inland villages, given as tribute and compensation for these alliances. The people of Mombasa, according to the author, were "like prisoners" to Mijikenda communities due to their constant raiding, their tight control over interior trade goods, and their demands for textiles.⁹ Inland leaders were given audiences with Mombasa's elites when they visited the city, and some even traveled abroad to southern Arabia as delegates.¹⁰ Even farther afield, in Portuguese Goa, officials wrote of the people of Mombasa's interior, recognizing their importance to the flow of trade goods across the ocean basin and the trajectories of its politics.¹¹

The disconnect between Mijikenda speakers' active role in East Africa's oceanic connections and their comparative marginality in many accounts of these connections—evidenced in Ibn Battuta's commentary—are central to the questions animating this book. Battuta's odd quip on Mombasa's absent mainland captures a ubiquitous tendency in the conceptual frames that scholars use—to this day—to write about histories of the Indian Ocean. Abdul Sheriff and Edward Alpers have described the Indian Ocean as a "Muslim Lake" and an "Islamic Sea," respectively.¹² To Janet Abu-Lughod, the premodern Indian Ocean was constituted by an "archipelago of 'world cities.'"¹³ More recently, Sebastian Prange developed the concept of "monsoon Islam" to emphasize the agency of Muslim merchants in the history of oceanic trade in India's Malabar coast.¹⁴ This scholarship underscores the critical role of Islam and port cities for the development of transregional connections in the Indian Ocean. However, many places adjacent to port cities



MAP 1. The East African coast. Inset shows Mombasa region and Mijikenda settlement area. Map created by John Wyatt Greenlee, Surprised Eel Mapping.

remain an uneasy fit within the conceptual imaginaries that render the Indian Ocean a “Muslim Lake.” As a result, the social actions, cultural ideas, and ambitions of those living in the Indian Ocean’s “hinterlands” have become a backdrop to the Islamic port cities that remain focal points of global histories of this region.¹⁵

Inland from Mombasa is a *longue durée* history of the Swahili port city of Mombasa from the vantage point of the Mijikenda-speaking communities that lived on the city’s rural edges. I argue that Mijikenda speakers influenced East Africa’s connections to the Indian Ocean precisely because they turned away from the Islamic-maritime practices of this transregional arena. As the book shows, Mijikenda communities shrunk their settlements as Mombasa urbanized; they were receptive to the ritual knowledge of outsiders, but they never converted to Islam; and they pioneered long-distance trade routes in East Africa’s interior, but they selectively embraced the material signatures of Indian Ocean wealth. By bringing together a multidisciplinary source base, including evidence from historical linguistics, oral traditions, ethnography, and archaeology, I show that their settlement organization, economic practices, and ritual ideas, though distinctive from those of Mombasa and similar ports, offered a critical means to participate in and influence transregional trade and politics.

Inland communities and village dwellers are most often the focus of local histories rather than the transregional or global narratives that have traditionally oriented accounts of the Indian Ocean’s past.¹⁶ In foregrounding the interior, I am not suggesting that port cities were not important to the Indian Ocean region’s history, or that interior communities were more powerful or somehow more important. Instead, I am interested in what inland communities’ highly selective engagements—and disengagements—with this oceanic world reveal about the dynamics that drive interactions between a network of port cities. In Mombasa’s case, Mijikenda speakers played an active role in generating commercial, cultural, and political connections between East Africa and other world regions. But they participated in this globally connected world through social actions and pursuits that often diverged from the norms and practices of Islamic port cities.

MOMBASA AND THE MIJIKENDA: CONNECTING DIVIDED HISTORIOGRAPHIES

In the introduction to his 1891 *Giryama* dictionary, missionary William Taylor saw it fitting to include a note on the linguistic similarities between *Giryama* (a Mijikenda language) and Swahili. Taylor explained that “*Giryama* and Swahili,” like other Bantu languages, seemed “to have been once a single language that at some time or another became split into two ever-increasingly divergent dialects.” But despite their similarities, in the missionary’s estimation, “there could hardly be a huger contrast” between the people who spoke these languages. The Swahili were “a seafaring, barter-loving” people who had embraced Islam and incorporated

“immigrants from Persia, Arabia, and Western India” into their communities. By contrast, he found Giriyama communities to be “small, compact; essentially inland” and “uncommercial.” They were “confined as to habitat” (compared to Swahili settlements dotting East Africa’s littoral) and, as a result, they remained “conservative of manners, custom, and the Bantu religion.” Taylor concluded that the discrepancies between Mijikenda and Swahili could only be the result of a “history—so very different in surroundings and fate”: the speakers of one language influenced by their external connections to the world, and the speakers of the other language living virtually unchanged since the two languages diverged from one another.¹⁷

Even without the cultural lens of a nineteenth-century missionary, a visitor to Mombasa today might also conclude that Swahili and Mijikenda communities had experienced radically different historical circumstances. Today, Mombasa’s population swells to well over a million people on the island and the surrounding mainland. The Kenya-Uganda Railway, Moi International Airport, and bustling shipping port at Kilindini Harbor all signal the city’s connections to international centers. A stroll through Mombasa’s Old Town neighborhood provides a vivid reminder of the antiquity of these connections.

One is likely to first enter Old Town on the southeastern part of the island, where the centuries-old Portuguese garrison Fort Jesus dominates the sight line. The cannons and massive weathered walls of the fort, which was constructed in the 1590s, signal Mombasa’s important place in Indian Ocean politics during the early modern period. Moving past Fort Jesus, one enters the Kibokoni neighborhood of Old Town. Ignoring the curio shops that mark the entryway to Kibokoni today, a visitor might notice a fenced-in graveyard with burial stones and tombs honoring the Mazrui family, the Omani dynasty that governed Mombasa from the 1730s until the 1830s. Arabic inscriptions on doors and the resonance of the call to prayer attest to Old Town’s thoroughly Islamic character, something observed by visitors like Ibn Battuta as far back as 1331. Mombasa’s old port—popularly known as dhow harbor—further conjures the city’s long-standing connections to the Indian Ocean, even if the iconic dhow sailboats from which the harbor takes its name are now little more than relics of an earlier era of transoceanic trade.

Mombasa makes its first-known appearance in textual accounts of the Indian Ocean in Muhammad al-Idrisi’s twelfth-century description of the world’s geography. Based on knowledge obtained from merchants and travelers in Sicily, the account accompanies the geographer’s famed world map, known as the *Tabula Rogeriana*. According to al-Idrisi, Mombasa was at the time a small town compared to other coastal towns like Malindi and Unguja.¹⁸ Mombasa’s comparative humbleness to other ports is supported by Ibn Battuta’s accounts of his travels to the island two centuries later. Mombasa was legible within the religious registers of the Indian Ocean by the time of Battuta’s visit, evident in its “pious” Muslim population and “admirably constructed” mosques.¹⁹ But the traveler spent just one night in the town, using it as a stopover between lengthier trips to the bustling

port centers of Mogadishu and Kilwa, where he hobnobbed with local sultans and itinerant scholars from the Hijaz. Mombasa became far more prominent in the century or so after Ibn Battuta's brief visit. In the fifteenth century, Ahmad ibn Majid, a geographer from Julfar (a port city in the Persian Gulf) wrote that the East African coast featured "many ports for travellers, the best known of which are Moqadishū, Barāwa, Mombasa, and the land of Sofāla."²⁰ By the time Portuguese ships reached East Africa in 1498, Mombasa was the most prosperous town along the entire coast.²¹

The fact that Mombasa was one of the main geographic reference points in Arabic writings on East Africa across the early second millennium indicates the town's clear significance to the region's oceanic connections. Archaeological records offer some insights into local developments that overlapped with these scattered references.²² The earliest human settlers around the island were lithic-using Early, Middle, and Late Stone Age groups, some of whom lived immediately across the creek to the south of Mombasa and likely crossed onto the island intermittently.²³ In the early first millennium, ironworking communities (presumed to speak a language ancestral to Swahili and Mijikenda) planted settlements along the forested ridges immediately inland from the coast, with some moving onto the island itself by the latter part of the millennium.²⁴ The earliest known settlement on Mombasa dates to the eleventh century, on the northern part of the island. By the thirteenth century, the island's archaeological records begin to show clearer signs of characteristic Swahili ports, specifically coral stone architecture. An increasing number of imported ceramics in archaeological assemblages during this same time demonstrates the town's growing material connections to the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, and China.²⁵ Between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, Mombasa's interior developed as a significant region for ivory procurement (in addition to circulations in other inland trade goods such as beeswax and rhinoceros horn), which no doubt supported the town's growing maritime interactions and its emergence as a leading port.²⁶

While Mombasa's history fits well within narratives of Indian Ocean port cities, the communities living adjacent to the town are far less integrated into this history. Mijikenda speakers' oral traditions explain that they migrated to the Mombasa region from a mythical northern homeland called Shungwaya, after which they settled in hilltop forested settlements called *kayas*. "Mijikenda" literally means the "nine towns." In standard renderings of the traditions, there were nine *kayas*, with one representing each of the nine modern Mijikenda subgroups.²⁷ Analyses of the migration myths—and their veracity—have long been a focal point of scholarship on Mijikenda communities. This work is best represented by Thomas Spear's 1978 book *The Kaya Complex*, which argued, based on details in the oral traditions, that Mijikenda communities only reached Mombasa's interior around the sixteenth century.²⁸ Subsequent scholars, most prominently Justin Willis, have critiqued Spear's interpretation of the origin traditions. However, Willis did not focus on

periods prior to the nineteenth century, instead looking at the origin traditions as vehicles for constructing a Mijikenda ethnic identity during the colonial period.²⁹ Ultimately, the heavy focus on the veracity of oral traditions erased places just kilometers inland from Mombasa from deeper narratives of the littoral's past.³⁰

Research by archaeologists Henry Mutoro and Richard Helm and historian Daren Ray has begun to rectify the exclusion of Mijikenda and other inland speech communities from Mombasa's earlier history. Excavations in southeast Kenya have established a complex settlement history that runs far deeper into the past, encompassing far larger scales and interactions than the temporal and geographic frameworks adopted by Spear and other early scholars.³¹ Employing a mixed methodology, including evidence from historical linguistics, Ray has illuminated longer-term collaboration strategies between inland and coastal groups, challenging the scholarly tendencies to bifurcate histories of "the Swahili" and "the Mijikenda." In doing so, Ray expands coastal Kenya's littoral history into its near interior and historicizes long-term processes of community formation from the distant past to the present.³² Together, these scholars' close engagements with deeper histories of coastal-interior entanglements offer an important foundation for my own analysis, which addresses the ways that inland social ideas and actions—including those diverging from oceanic norms—influenced the broader commercial and political milieu of the western Indian Ocean.

My analysis also benefits from—and builds off—a broader shift among archaeologists and historians toward studying the role of local political economies and material ambitions in eastern and southern Africa's oceanic connections. In both coastal and interior regions, people integrated trade goods into their own suite of social ideas and practices. They "domesticated" foreign objects, incorporating them into contexts like feasts and ancestral veneration rituals, while adapting material goods to suit local tastes and fashion preferences. When imported goods didn't suit their individual goals, they rejected them.³³ In many cases, trade goods moved along multidirectional exchange networks, not solely, or even primarily, oriented around provisioning oceanic trade.³⁴ This literature shows that even people who did not have direct interactions with coastal merchants, and who did not envision themselves as part of any cosmopolitan imaginary, were, nonetheless, key agents of larger interconnections.

Inland from Mombasa adds to this growing literature on eastern Africa's interior connections in three ways. First, by employing evidence from language, I bring greater focus to the social ideas conditioning inland trading interactions with Mombasa. I show that over centuries, Mijikenda speakers continuously adapted and innovated strategies for conducting trade over longer distances; they cultivated rituals for interacting with coastal merchants; and, often in concert with other inland groups, they adapted their healing ideas and settlement designs in response to new forms of wealth entering their villages. Second, I examine the above developments from a relatively situated vantage point, looking primarily

at one port city and one adjacent speech community. In doing so, I bring a fine-grained resolution to the specific ways that a port city's growing connections hinged on the agency and ambitions of its neighbors immediately inland. Third, I illuminate how inland agents' influences extended beyond their role as consumers or suppliers of trade goods and into other arenas of interaction such as global politics. As the last two chapters show, Mijikenda speakers built political capital from their advantageous trading position and influenced the trajectories of multiple oceanic empires in the process. Yet the full dynamics of Mijikenda speakers' influence in the western Indian Ocean is impossible to discern from written sources and archaeological evidence alone. To bring inland histories into broader narratives of the Indian Ocean requires anchoring in the methodologies of early African history, specifically comparative historical linguistics.

STUDYING LESS-DOCUMENTED HISTORIES USING WORDS

Scholars often struggle to incorporate smaller-scale societies into global histories because places that existed outside of mercantile, religious, or imperial networks typically lack a strong documentary presence. Thus, until recently, most scholarship on East Africa and other regions of the Indian Ocean portrayed inland communities as rural dependencies, sometimes affected by global networks but without any historical agency of their own.³⁵ To recover the historical connections between societies in Mombasa's interior and the Indian Ocean, I employ a multidisciplinary source base, drawing insights from historical linguistics, comparative ethnography, oral traditions, archaeology, and written records. An analysis of word histories generated through historical linguistics provides an especially important body of evidence. Word histories render legible the innovations, adaptations, and ancient knowledge that shaped the trading practices, rituals, and politics of Mijikenda speakers and other societies within inland-facing East African networks since the first millennium. Combining word histories with evidence from archaeology, oral traditions, ethnography, and documentary records enables me to bring together the narratives of these small-scale communities with those of the Swahili coast and wider Indian Ocean region.

Like all the world's languages, Mijikenda and Swahili both have rich histories that can offer entry points into the social and cultural worlds of the people who spoke these languages. Throughout the book, I refer to most actors as speakers of specific languages, e.g., "Mijikenda *speakers*" or "Swahili *speakers*." I do so to distinguish the historical speakers of a language (or protolanguage) from any modern claims about identity or ethnicity. Mijikenda, for instance, developed as an ethnic identity during the early to mid-twentieth century.³⁶ By contrast, the Mijikenda language has been spoken by communities inland from Mombasa since the late first millennium, diverging into mutually intelligible dialects over the course of the

second millennium. Thus, when I refer to Mijikenda speakers, I mean individuals who spoke different Mijikenda dialects.³⁷

Mijikenda and Swahili both descend from an ancestral language that linguists call proto-Sabaki or, simply, Sabaki. Sabaki is a protolanguage, meaning it is the proposed ancestral form of a language from which later languages emerged. Proto-Sabaki itself is a member of a larger group of languages called Northeast Coast Bantu (all proposed to descend from proto-Northeast Coast, which was spoken about two thousand years ago in eastern Tanzania). On an even larger linguistic scale, Mijikenda and Swahili are part of the Bantu family of languages, which includes hundreds of languages, all related to a common protolanguage—proto-Bantu—which was spoken more than five thousand years ago in modern-day Cameroon.³⁸

One of the most familiar examples of a language family is the Romance family, which includes Italian, Romanian, Portuguese, Spanish, and French. All these languages are related because they share a common protolanguage: proto-Romance (or Vulgar Latin), which itself is part of a larger web of language families and relationships stretching back to proto-Indo-European. Using Romance languages as a point of comparison, proto-Bantu is akin to proto-Indo-European while the Sabaki family is like proto-Romance.³⁹ In this schema, the linguistic relationship between Mijikenda and Swahili is roughly equivalent to that of French and Spanish. Like these two western European languages, Mijikenda and Swahili both feature notable internal diversity due to the differentiation and diffusion of speakers over time, manifesting in modern dialects.

Proto-Sabaki emerged from other Northeast Coast languages during the early first millennium. By the sixth or seventh century, Sabaki began to diverge into daughter languages of its own, first Elwana and Swahili, then Upper Pokomo, followed by Comorian by at least the eighth century, and Lower Pokomo and Mijikenda shortly thereafter. The earliest form of Swahili, or proto-Swahili, was spoken along large expanses of the littoral, forming two closely related dialect clusters (Northern and Southern Swahili) by the ninth century. Early Mijikenda, meanwhile, would have been spoken in southeast Kenya's coastal hinterlands by the end of the first millennium before gradually differentiating into a chain of closely related dialects during the second millennium.⁴⁰

Similar to how scholars of Indo-European languages traced the ancient roots of words in languages spoken across Eurasia, linguists working on Bantu languages have spent more than a century reconstructing the lexicon, grammar, and sounds of ancient languages spoken in Africa.⁴¹ Historians of Africa (and elsewhere) employ these reconstructed linguistic materials to study the histories of past societies for whom there are few documentary records.⁴² Their methodology is premised on the idea that words in each of the world's languages refer to things—whether they're material objects, abstract concepts, or practices—that were known to the speakers of that language. To treat a word as historical evidence, historical

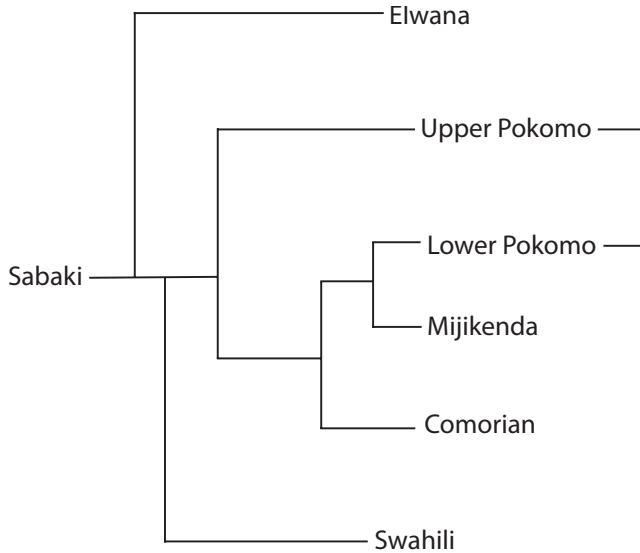


FIGURE 1. Divergence of Sabaki languages.

linguists analyze its phonetic shape and distribution in modern languages, using a classification of the languages where the word is spoken as a guiding framework.⁴³ Not all words' histories can be reconstructed. But assuming a scholar has adequate linguistic data and assuming the word has been affected by sound changes in the languages under study, it is sometimes possible to determine the past language (or protolanguage) in which a word was first spoken and its status in that language. Furthermore, by studying a word's meaning in extant languages, dictionaries, and ethnographic sources, as well as its derivational features, historical linguists can hypothesize its earliest meaning and determine whether that meaning has changed over time. Some words are inherited from distant linguistic ancestors while others are the product of innovations in an individual language (or language family). In other cases, speakers of a language may begin using a word after borrowing it from another language. Whenever people invented a new technology, idea, or social practice, they also needed to create or adopt a new word (or adapt an existing word) to refer to it. Thus, that same word's derivation can provide clues into concepts and associations that underlie its meaning. Bringing together these details—that is, a word's history in a particular language or group of languages, its derivation, and changes to its meaning over time—can provide scholars with rich materials for historical analysis.⁴⁴

Let's consider as an example a word that is shared in both Mijikenda and Swahili: *muzimu* (or *mzimu*). If we look up these words in some of the earliest Swahili dictionaries from the nineteenth century, we find descriptions like “a place where sacrifices are offered to an evil spirit which is thought to haunt it; e.g., near

an *mbuyu* [baobab] tree,” and “a native place of worship, i.e. where offerings and prayers are made to the spirits, whether of ancestors or others,” located around “a rock, a cave, tree, or ruin.”⁴⁵ In Mijikenda, *muzimu* similarly represented “nature spirits . . . which live permanently in caves or at the baobab trees.”⁴⁶ From these materials, we can quickly conclude that a type of spirit called *muzimu* or *mzimu* occupied natural spaces like caves or baobab trees around the East African coast during the nineteenth century and later. We can also see that sometimes people made offerings to appease these spirits. Looking beyond Mijikenda and Swahili, however, we can see that this type of spirit—and the practices surrounding them—have much deeper histories.

Muzimu is derived from the proto-Bantu root **-dīm-*, which linguists have reconstructed as meaning “be extinguished, extinguish, get lost.”⁴⁷ The proto-Bantu lexicon also included a noun derived from this root: **mudīmù* or “spirit” (the ancient form of the Swahili and Mijikenda terms), which historical linguists propose specifically connoted an “ancestral spirit” or “spirit of a long departed person.”⁴⁸ Speakers of Bantu languages create nouns by attaching prefixes and suffixes to root words, in this case the noun prefix *mu-* and the suffix *-u*. Studying these units of grammar along with the root makes it possible to discern the meanings that speakers embedded in this cluster of sounds that signaled a “spirit” dating back at least five thousand years. The prefix *mu-* indicates the term’s noun class—a classification system that speakers of Bantu languages use to group nouns based on their semantic characteristics. In Bantu languages this noun class mostly consists of trees and plants, body parts, and other natural phenomena. However, scholars have proposed that this noun class also included “entities with vitality,” which were “neither human nor prototypically animal,” such as supernatural phenomena (ancestral spirits) and human collectives (villages and clans).⁴⁹

On an etymological level, spirits designated by the term *muzimu* were understood to be entities that were “extinguished” or “lost” yet still lived or had vitality. If this seems contradictory at face value (after all, how can something lost or extinguished have vitality?) it makes much more sense when viewed in the context of human relationships with *mizimu* (the word’s plural form). This is where comparative ethnographic evidence becomes useful, allowing us to connect words and their meanings to specific practices in the social worlds of speakers of distant languages. In the recent past, communities across the continent understood spirits or ancestral ghosts (called by names derived from the proto-Bantu word **mudīmù*) to play a role in their physical worlds. In Ganda-speaking communities (Uganda) these spirits often appeared as snakes and resided around bodies of water, while among Tonga speakers (Zambia) they acted as guardians and shared kinship relations with entire households.⁵⁰ In both Swahili and Mijikenda, *mizimu* were linked to specific places on the landscape, often caves, holes in trees, or small shrines that people built themselves.⁵¹ Looking at other Northeast Coast languages, we find that many of the ideas and practices surrounding these ancestral spirits mirror those

of Mijikenda- and Swahili-speaking communities. For instance, in communities that spoke Zaramo (a Ruvu language spoken in central coastal Tanzania) healers propitiated *mizimu* that lived in small huts or trees (often baobabs) with offerings, including strips of cloth and medicine gourds. In Seuta languages spoken in north-east Tanzania, *mizimu* dwelled in groves of trees, around prominent rocks, or at ancestral gravesites where they needed to be supplicated with offerings.⁵²

From this comparative evidence, we can conclude that practices of constructing shrines in small huts or in natural spaces and presenting offerings to the spirits occupying these spaces date to at least proto-Northeast Coast, approximately two thousand years ago. This is just one example, but it illustrates how studying the words people used in the past can provide a rich background for writing social histories for distant societies. Such evidence is not limited to the ritual realm. As we'll see, historical linguistics can yield similar insights into the social incorporation practices of past societies, changes and continuities in their livelihood activities, and trading interactions across social and linguistic boundaries. From the viewpoint of port cities or from the deck of a dhow, East Africa's interior was an unknown territory. But by layering linguistic evidence alongside other sources, including archaeological evidence, oral traditions, and written documents, it is possible to view the histories of smaller communities in Mombasa's interior within the much larger purview of the global Indian Ocean.

TAKING AN EARLY AFRICAN HISTORY APPROACH TO GLOBAL AND INDIAN OCEAN HISTORY

The sources and methods detailed above offer us a way to approach the Indian Ocean's history from the perspective of smaller-scale, rural societies often peripheral to studies of this global macro-region. My aim, however, is to do more than simply add East Africa's interior into the existing framework of oceanic history. This book is foremost concerned with Mijikenda speakers' participation in commercial and political dynamics of the Indian Ocean. My use of "participation" as a framework is inspired by scholarship on the Eurasian steppe, which addresses practical, and often highly localized, ways that societies engaged in larger-scale worlds and processes.⁵³ In some cases, Mijikenda speakers' participation strategies aligned with the norms of individuals and communities engaged in trade in ports like Mombasa. But in other instances, they participated in transregional trade and politics by opting out of the dominant transregional norms and instead emphasizing social, ritual, or commercial links within a distinctively inland milieu.

By following Mijikenda speakers' alternative means of participating in the Indian Ocean world, *Inland from Mombasa* contributes to a recent turn in global history and Indian Ocean scholarship toward studying frictions, disconnections, and contingencies in transregional interactions. Much initial global scholarship—especially work on premodern periods—emphasized past movements of people,

commodities, or ideas across oceans or continents.⁵⁴ In most cases, the key agents of global histories were cosmopolitans, individuals who shared relationships and cultural affinities with people living in far afield locales, either through their own travels or their embracing of widely circulating cultural phenomena.⁵⁵ More recently, a growing number of historians have become critical of this overpowering emphasis on transregional mobility and cosmopolitanism in global history scholarship. In asking why people struggled with, or even rejected, new forms of connection, this emerging body of scholarship argues that disconnections were key constituting features of transregional interactions.⁵⁶ In the Indian Ocean, for instance, Nile Green has shown that travelers often struggled to comprehend the differences they encountered from one port to another, even when intermingling with fellow Muslims. To Green, the Indian Ocean was a space of “heterotopia,” or a “place of difference/otherness.” While some of its participants embraced the material or religious signatures of a shared oceanic imaginary, “cosmopolitanism was only one form of response.”⁵⁷

Africanist historians and anthropologists also have had a long-standing interest in the uneven ways the continent fits into narratives of the “global.” Scholarship on globalization, for example, has shown that different societies and places in Africa engaged with introduced commodities, religious ideas, and institutions in an unpredictable manner, confounding totalizing narratives of global processes.⁵⁸ Moreover, as studies of decentralized societies in precolonial West Africa demonstrate, many communities maintained distinctive social philosophies and village organization strategies while also participating in large-scale networks such as the trans-Saharan gold trade and the Atlantic economy.⁵⁹ Societies’ lacking of features like political centralization, writing, or “global” religious practices did not prevent them from forging connections with other regions of the continent and world. Instead, healing associations, spirit mediums, and ritual cosmologies cast as “local” by the conventional frames of historical scholarship could in fact constitute larger-scale connections.⁶⁰ Yet such “internal” developments in Africa have seldom resonated with global historians’ interests in transregional mobilities and cultural flows, despite rich evidence of intra-African connections across physiographic regions and language groups dating back millennia.⁶¹

Building on the above scholarship, I argue that the very features that make Mijikenda speakers’ histories appear insignificant or local within the context of broader narratives of the Indian Ocean were not divorced from East Africa’s global connections, but they in fact helped constitute those connections. One of the main reasons that spaces like inland villages remain peripheral to global narratives is a dearth of traditional written evidence. Mijikenda were an oral society, at least during the time periods covered in this book. The earliest written documentation, like the Portuguese records noted in the opening section, offer only a glimpse into Mijikenda speakers’ world at a very particular moment: when they visited Mombasa for trade or conflict. No detailed descriptions of inland villages and the social

ideas and practices animating them exist for periods prior to the nineteenth century. To understand the ideas and motivations that informed their engagements with the world, it is necessary to look to other types of evidence, including archaeology, oral traditions, and especially historical linguistics.

As discussed in the previous section, historians of Africa's distant past employ comparative historical linguistics to reconstruct large-scale histories of places without ample documentary records. Initial scholarship based on these methods focused on the movement of language groups, most famously in debates on the "Bantu expansions."⁶² By the 1990s, however, scholars began using reconstructed word histories to explore social histories and political ideologies of societies that lived thousands of years in the past.⁶³ More recent scholarship has continued expanding the thematic possibilities of historical linguistic methods, addressing topics like fame and bushcraft, gendered authority and motherhood, and concepts of wealth and poverty.⁶⁴ While such scholarship focuses predominantly on histories internal to the African continent, other work has shown potential applications of these methods for studying transcontinental topics like Atlantic slavery.⁶⁵ For East Africa, Rhonda Gonzales, Yaari Seligman, and Daren Ray have illuminated the vast inland interactive spheres with which Swahili society was connected in their respective histories of religious life, trade, and community formation for different societies in the coastal interior.⁶⁶ Yet, the project of using these methods to incorporate "the perspective of those left out of or marginalized in traditional global history archives and metanarratives" remains at its most nascent stages.⁶⁷

DISAGGREGATING THE CONNECTED HISTORIES OF INDIAN OCEAN PORTS

By bringing the histories of small-scale, inland-oriented societies like Mijikenda into the foreground, we can reimagine a diverse array of people and places playing an active role in forging transregional connections across the Indian Ocean. Historians of the Indian Ocean are increasingly interested in linking histories of specific ports, actors, and networks to broader narratives of the region, bringing a new focus to its heterogeneity and diversity. The earliest studies on the Indian Ocean focused on vast scales. Taking their cue from Ferdinand Braudel's model for understanding the Mediterranean, scholars illuminated the cohesiveness of cultural idioms, economic practices, and religious ideas across the "world" constituted by the Indian Ocean.⁶⁸ But in endeavoring to study the Indian Ocean as a world or a unified economic system, scholars inadvertently erased the specificity and diversity of local circumstances in the different societies living along the ocean's shores.⁶⁹

Over the last decade and a half, however, scholars have produced pathbreaking book-length studies of many ports and regions of the Indian Ocean.⁷⁰ As the field has shifted toward studying specific sites, diasporic communities, and networks,

scholars have demonstrated how people in far-flung port cities built and maintained connections to support trade, kinship ties, and religious communities.⁷¹ In turn, this work has offered an increasingly textured view into the social practices, legal and economic institutions, and technologies that supported people's interactions across the vastness of the Indian Ocean.⁷²

And yet the inland regions adjacent to port cities remain peripheral to most studies. For instance, we now have a much better understanding of the social and religious dynamics of port cities on the Malabar coast of India, but we still know very little about the hinterlands from where Malabar's most famous export—pepper—was procured.⁷³ Similarly, it has been established that by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, textiles from Gujarat (in northwestern India) circulated widely across the Indian Ocean and beyond, from Cairo to the Swahili coast, Southeast Asia, and China. Yet the cotton-producing and weaving regions based around villages in India's interior do not figure into analyses of the Indian Ocean prior to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷⁴ The common refrain is that while interior regions were linked to port cities, we do not have the source materials to fully elucidate the economic, political, and social worlds of these places beyond their vague role as suppliers.⁷⁵ Recently, some scholars have successfully shown that East Africa's interior was a distinctive Indian Ocean region by tracing movements of coastal individuals, religious practices, and imaginaries into the Great Lakes region during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁷⁶

But probing the rich role of inland "peripheries"—especially for earlier periods—requires taking a different analytical lens, one that moves beyond the littoral frameworks often associated with the Indian Ocean's past.⁷⁷ Differences between the littoral and interior are often used to justify the exclusion of inland societies from oceanic histories. Michael Pearson's concept of a "littoral society" has been an influential model for how scholars frame the geographic parameters of the Indian Ocean's history. Pearson defined littoral societies as those whose livelihoods and cultural identities were connected to oceans and seas and argued that this orientation toward the sea made them distinct from land-facing neighbors. To Pearson, the "shore folk" living in Indian Ocean cities like Mombasa, Surat, Aden, and Calicut had "more in common with other shore folk thousands of kilometers away on some other shore of the ocean than they do with those of their immediate hinterland."⁷⁸ Being a member of a littoral society was about more than one's location. It also meant possessing cultural connections to the ocean, such as a shared religious identity or kinship ties with people living in far-flung oceanic locales.⁷⁹ In such a framing, settlements on Mombasa's mainland, even those located within view of the Indian Ocean, are peripheral to the world of littoral. So, too, are the expert elephant hunters who supplied East Africa's most prized global trade good; and the cotton weavers in South Asian villages who produced textiles that were desired from Mombasa to Cairo to Southeast Asia.⁸⁰

I do not dispute that there are similarities—religious, legal, gastronomical, and so on—shared by people in Mombasa, Muscat, and other port cities. However, these mutual cultural characteristics do not fully explain connections between these places. As Thomas McDow argues, previous scholarship on the Indian Ocean generally lacked any sense of contingency. Writing on the nineteenth century, McDow shows that the movement of Omanis to East Africa to pursue commercial opportunities was not simply the predetermined byproduct of increasing transregional connections. Instead, a drought in Oman's interior in the 1840s pushed many rural date farmers to look for new prospects at sea. In East Africa, a mix of people including Arab migrants, manumitted slaves, and others pursued trading opportunities farther into the continent's interior over the course of the nineteenth century. This was partly due to the growth of long-distance caravan routes, but it also was the result of people needing to "buy time" by creating distance between themselves and their creditors in places like Zanzibar.⁸¹ In other words, trading connections between Oman and East Africa did not just happen naturally as the result of peoples' proximity to the sea, some common religious ideas, or even straightforward commercial aspirations. To understand the ocean as a space of interaction means paying attention to peoples' capacity to make these connections happen, sometimes for reasons that are not immediately apparent.

How, then, did people in Mombasa's interior partake in the boom of transregional connections that characterized Indian Ocean port cities during the second millennium? From one perspective, villages in Mombasa's immediate interior represent what James Scott termed "shadow" or "mirror" societies. For Scott, this refers to communities that position their social ideas, economic activities, or religious practices in contradiction to those of neighboring states or urban centers.⁸² In such a framing, Mijikenda speakers' rejection of Islam and emphasis on smaller-scale villages represent an intentional political project based around refusing the norms and values of nearby urban polities. In the chapters that follow, I show these were intentional choices; and, moreover, that key features of inland ritual, social, and economic life were the result of ongoing changes, adaptations, and interactions that "mirrored" parallel processes in the Islamicate Indian Ocean. However, peoples' decisions to organize themselves into small-scale societies or to reject a global religion like Islam were often about more than just resisting the values and norms of neighboring states or urban centers. I argue that Mijikenda speakers' choices were not about rejecting Mombasa and its oceanic connections but instead provided them with a means to participate in and influence trade and politics in the port city and beyond.

Port cities—and spaces like states and urban centers more generally—have always depended on economic, social, and political relationships with societies that have radically different social organization strategies, economic practices, and mobilities. As archaeologists Nicole Boivin and Michael Frachetti argue, "It is difficult to envision how early globalising processes might have unfolded if

we *do not* deprivilege states” precisely because of their dependency on smaller-scale societies.⁸³ The centrality of port cities to scholarship on the Indian Ocean is not going away—nor should it. At the same time, it is important to recognize that people living in the “peripheries” of urban centers were not required to enter trading or social relationships with neighboring urbanites and could sometimes strategically benefit from their lack of affiliations.⁸⁴ This reality opens questions about why and how people chose to participate in these relationships. What were their goals? What sorts of social ideas motivated their actions and ambitions? And how did these divergent goals and actions—divergent from an oceanic viewpoint, at least—influence larger processes of social and commercial transformation? As the chapters that follow will show, Mijikenda speakers prominently shaped East Africa’s oceanic connections through practices, relationships, and social pursuits that were frequently out of harmony with those of Indian Ocean ports.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book is organized into five chapters with a rough chronology, starting in the first millennium in chapter 1 and ending in the mid-nineteenth century in chapter 5. But the chapters are also arranged thematically, each one tackling a major theme in studies of East Africa’s Indian Ocean history, but from an inland vantage point: (1) the early roots of coastal society; (2) the formation of social and ritual connections with other societies; (3) long-distance trade; (4) oceanic imperialism; and (5) nineteenth-century transformations and integrations. Chapters 1 and 2 work together to trace the inland roots of Indian Ocean connections, providing a foundation for chapters 3 through 5, which turn to Mijikenda speakers’ relationships with Mombasa and the wider world and develop the book’s central arguments.

The book begins, quite intentionally, with a moment of discontinuity in the long-distance networks powered by the Indian Ocean monsoon. At the start of the first millennium, the East African coast was integrated within maritime trading networks. However, these linkages dwindled around the middle of the millennium due to overlapping ecological and political ruptures in the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean regions. Chapter 1 traces how the Sabaki-speaking ancestors of Swahili and Mijikenda capitalized on this down period in oceanic trade. They adapted new foods and agricultural technologies, shifting to cultivation strategies based around cereals, which enabled them to establish settlements across a greater range of ecologies. During this same time, coastal East Africans also developed the ideological tools to build larger communities. Ideas about land ownership, debt, and social reciprocity provided enterprising leaders with new strategies for expanding their communities of dependents. By the time Indian Ocean networks reemerged during the latter part of the first millennium, Sabaki speakers had developed the subsistence practices and social tools they needed to occupy

regions along the coast, to participate in expanding scales of exchange, and to build larger settlements.

By the end of the first millennium, coastal East Africa was a world rife with different social and economic possibilities, including but not limited to connections with the oceanic sphere. Chapter 2 explores the distinctive ways that Mijikenda communities built connections and adapted new ritual ideas during the Indian Ocean's emerging golden era. At the start of the second millennium, Mijikenda speakers possessed the same capabilities for organizing larger communities as their Swahili neighbors. However, they instead embraced smaller settlements and emphasized interactions with other communities in the interior. Analyzing evidence from archaeology, historical linguistics, ethnography, and oral traditions, I show that Mijikenda speakers cultivated strong social and ritual ties with neighboring inland groups across the second millennium. In the absence of a larger urban polity, specialized medicinal groups and spaces like forest clearings shaped the contours of political life and created linkages between dispersed homesteads. Because healing was a competitive arena, rural homestead heads sought out new medicines and ritual ideas, generating exchanges and associations with neighboring, non-Mijikenda-speaking groups in the process. Much like the transcultural practices that undergirded affiliations between merchants in Indian Ocean port cities, this budding inland interactive sphere created opportunities for inland communities to influence East Africa's connections to the world.

While the book's first two chapters set a foundation for understanding Mombasa's oceanic history from an inland perspective, the remainder of the book shifts to the specific ways that people living in inland villages influenced trading and political connections in the Indian Ocean. Chapter 3 examines how communities in Mombasa's interior shaped its maritime economy between the late first millennium and the early nineteenth century. By the fifteenth century, Mombasa was East Africa's most important port, a position that stemmed from its role in supplying valued trade goods for other parts of the Indian Ocean, especially ivory and gum copal. Extending the analysis from the previous chapter, I trace how the ties that Mijikenda speakers cultivated with their inland neighbors influenced maritime exchange circuits and laid the foundations for long-distance caravan routes. Over centuries, inland societies exchanged knowledge and built networks that supported long-distance trade. They developed social strategies for forming partnerships across sociolinguistic lines and came to share a mutual commercial vocabulary for things like markets, trade party leaders, and long-distance caravans. While Mijikenda speakers and their inland interlocutors supplied Mombasa with key oceanic trade goods, export goods like ivory moved along complex interior mosaics that were not primarily oriented around supplying the demands of the Indian Ocean economy. Tracking the story of Indian Ocean trade through the lens of East Africa's interior offers a novel perspective on the dynamics that drive connections between Mombasa and other Indian Ocean port cities.

The final two chapters explore Mijikenda speakers' influence on global politics during the eras of Portuguese and Omani imperialism. Chapter 4 traces inland communities' influence on these major oceanic empires. Building on chapter 3, I show how Mijikenda speakers' commercial influence in Mombasa extended into the realm of politics, giving them a powerful sway over the city. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, different maritime empires aspired to control the port city. Mombasa's fate ebbed and flowed around Mijikenda speakers' decisions to collaborate—or not—with these foreign interlocutors. The chapter illuminates how Mijikenda communities wielded their control over access to inland trade goods and critical food provisions to extract tributes from imperial powers and demand a voice in Mombasa's affairs. As fleets from Portuguese India and Oman attempted to control trade in Mombasa, they sent textiles to inland leaders, which formed the foundation of commercial, military, and diplomatic partnerships. Ultimately, I argue that inland communities' political decisions and commercial inventiveness were central to transimperial conflicts in the western Indian Ocean.

Chapter 5 examines how Mijikenda speakers understood their relationship with Mombasa, looking specifically at the rituals and practices that they used to maintain independence from the port city. Trade and political partnerships around Mombasa were constituted by two interlinked concepts: *heshima*—tributes that Mijikenda speakers received from Mombasa—and *kore*—a person exchanged to settle a debt. For centuries, Mijikenda communities maintained their relationships with Mombasa by claiming tributes, or *heshima*, while coastal merchants occasionally seized *kore* to ensure that these partnerships remained fair and balanced. I argue that Mijikenda communities remained fully independent from Mombasa so long as they continued to receive *heshima* from their urban partners, whether they were Swahili speakers, Omanis, or Europeans. However, between the 1830s and 1850s, Mombasa became formally part of the Busaidi Sultanate of Muscat and Zanzibar. This change undermined Mijikenda speakers' control over inland trade routes and, in the process, altered the balance between *heshima* and *kore*. The Busaidi era is typically seen as a period of intensive global integration, during which East Africa's interior became more directly connected to the Indian Ocean economy. In following these shifts in the region's political and economic history, I demonstrate how a familiar story of increasing global connections during the nineteenth century looks radically different from the vantage point of communities on Mombasa's mainland.

The book concludes by zooming out to other locations around the Indian Ocean to explore the influence of smaller-scale, inland societies on other ports and regions. Rather than simply comparing these case studies, I imagine the connections we might discern between these overlooked people and places living across this macro-region by paying attention to these out-of-harmony "peripheries."