

# Unmoored from the Ocean

Fifty million years ago, the tectonic plate that constitutes the Indian subcontinent collided with the Eurasian landmass. Over tens of millennia, the convergence of these two pieces of land pushed up the surrounding earth vertically, forming the Himalayan Mountains and Tibetan Plateau. These ancient subterranean events may seem worlds away from port cities like Mombasa, which only began to flourish millennia later. Yet their histories are intimately linked by the Indian Ocean's monsoon winds—an environmental force brought into being by these distant geological events.<sup>1</sup> The monsoon winds are powered by interactions between the mountain plateau and the ocean. In the northern hemisphere's summer months, the plateau heats up, drawing moist air from the ocean toward the Asian landmass. In the winter months, the high plateau cools the air above it, creating a high-pressure zone that pushes air above the Tibetan Plateau and out toward the ocean.<sup>2</sup> This seasonal push and pull generates alternating wind patterns that have, for millennia, facilitated transregional seaborne travel in the Indian Ocean. Between November and January, the winds allow ships to follow predictable wind patterns and currents to travel from South Asia to Arabia and East Africa. From April to August, the winds reverse, facilitating return trips and connecting communities in coastal East Africa to a vast network of port cities.

For at least two millennia, the seasonal reversal of the Indian Ocean's monsoon trade winds has enabled coastal East African communities to develop commercial ties with merchants from across the wider macro-region. But as a historical force, the monsoon is not timeless or unchanging. While ancient tectonic collisions created the Indian Ocean's famed trade winds, a cooler and drier climate regime during the middle centuries of the first millennium weakened the southwest

(or Asian) monsoon and disrupted maritime trading networks that previously connected large expanses of Afro-Eurasia.<sup>3</sup> At the start of the first millennium, the East African coast was part of commercial networks linking the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup> However, when Sabaki-speaking groups (the linguistic ancestors to Swahili and Mijikenda speakers) established settlements on the coast during the mid-first millennium, they did not encounter the Indian Ocean as maritime-oriented traders.

This chapter narrates history of Sabaki society from the vantage point of a farm field, a short distance inland from the coast. My emphasis on coastal East African societies' rural roots has many precedents in the literature. In the 1980s and 1990s, historians, archaeologists, and linguists began to dislodge older colonial scholarship that cast Swahili culture as a Middle Eastern import. Keeping local evolutions at the center of the story, this work detailed how small-scale fishing and farming villages founded in the first millennium grew into flourishing urban centers through centuries of contact with foreign merchants.<sup>5</sup> While this scholarship represented a watershed for emphasizing the African roots of Swahili society, it treated the region's pre-Swahili past mainly as a point of departure for understanding the later emergence of oceanic trading networks. More recent archaeological work has started to dislodge the teleological narratives, showing the complex trajectories of coastal villages from the late first millennium onward.<sup>6</sup> This chapter builds on this newer scholarship by tracing East Africa's varied engagements with oceanic worlds and pushing this narrative back in time to the centuries prior to the emergence of Swahili society. For the region's early Bantu-speaking settlers, this was not a period characterized by blossoming oceanic trade, but instead by climatic and commercial uncertainties.

By focusing on social and economic activities during a down period in oceanic interactions, this chapter illuminates the generative possibilities of disconnecting from global networks. As I will show, during the early to mid-first millennium, coastal East Africans renovated their subsistence economy, assembling knowledge for cultivation strategies based around cereals. These innovations facilitated settlement across a greater variety of ecologies, including the littoral, while also enabling coastal East Africans to experiment with their social form. By the end of the millennium, as maritime trading networks reemerged in full force, coastal East Africans had cultivated the necessary ideological and subsistence roots to live closer to the coast and build larger and denser settlements. These subsistence innovations also made it possible for Sabaki speakers and their descendants to participate in expanding scales of trade, in both the oceanic sphere and in East Africa's interior. Following the considerable social and economic innovations during this moment of discontinuity alerts us to a world of multiple possibilities, where the ultimate

emergence of Islamic, maritime-oriented urban towns along the East African coast was only one potential outcome.

#### THE *PERIPLUS* AND THE “PRE-SWAHILI” COAST

No source better represents East Africa’s early interactions with maritime trading networks than the first-century Greco-Roman merchant’s guide, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*. The text, and the trading world it depicts, offer useful starting points for this chapter because it describes thriving oceanic connections that were fleeting rather than timeless. Written by an anonymous Greek speaker living in Alexandria around the middle of the first century, the *Periplus* reports on port cities stretching from the Red Sea to the coast of eastern Africa, southern Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and South Asia. As a merchant’s guide, it offers details on everything from the products that could be sold and procured at each port to its receptiveness to hosting foreign merchants.<sup>7</sup> The East African coast—called Azania in the *Periplus*—takes up a small yet notable fraction of the guide. According to the text’s author, the Azania coast started to the south of the port city of Opônê, located at Ras Hafun, in modern Somalia.<sup>8</sup> After Opônê, mariners encountered a sparsely populated coastline, featuring natural harbors that acted as stopping points for ships, but there were no prominent settlements besides Menuthias, a wooded island occupied by fisherfolk.<sup>9</sup> Shortly after Menuthias, merchants reached Rhapta, “the very last port of trade on the coast of Azania.”<sup>10</sup>

As the primary Azanian trading town, Rhapta occupies an important place for understandings of East Africa’s earliest connections to the Indian Ocean. According to the *Periplus*, the people of Rhapta participated in seasonal trade with visiting merchants, exchanging locally procured items like ivory and tortoise shell for imported spears, axes, and glassware. The seasonal nature of Indian Ocean trade meant that the merchants who plied their wares along the Azanian coast had to spend months at a time in the town, probably arriving in November or December and departing no earlier than April or May. The text makes clear that foreign merchants were well integrated into the social life of Rhapta. They commonly married into local families and spoke Azanian languages. Furthermore, the seasonal visitors cemented their “good will” among locals with gifts of “wine and grain,” which stood apart from common trade goods. Apart from trade, visiting merchants also collected taxes on behalf of the governor of Mapharitis, in southern Yemen, indicating East Africa’s political links with Arabia. However, according to the text, the Azanians remained in control of their own political affairs.<sup>11</sup>

With its overseas ties and multicultural households, Rhapta represents the characteristic global port town. But despite all the ways that the town conjures a familiar Indian Ocean milieu, much of the place’s history remains elusive. Beyond the *Periplus*, only one other historical text mentions Rhapta: Ptolemy’s *Geography*, which was written around 150 CE.<sup>12</sup> Ptolemy described Rhapta as a “metropolis,” a

label that he used for only five other towns in the entire Indian Ocean region, placing Rhapta in company with Meroe and Aksum (NE Africa); Saphar and Saubatha (Arabia); and Minnagar (South Asia).<sup>13</sup> Even with Rhapta's status as a metropolis, archaeologists have yet to identify its location from material records. Based on geographic details offered in the *Periplus*, most believe that Rhapta was located along the central coast of Tanzania.<sup>14</sup> However, the earliest archaeological evidence for foreign imported goods (ceramics and glassware) in this region all date to around the fifth or sixth century.<sup>15</sup> After *Geography*, the next known textual reference to the East African coast is from the sixth-century text *Christian Topography*, written by the Alexandrian merchant Cosmas Indicopleustes. In contrast to earlier references to the "metropolis" of Rhapta, *Christian Topography* contains only a passing reference to the East African coast, suggesting that Mediterranean interest in the region had waned significantly by the mid-first millennium.<sup>16</sup>

Scholars have a long-standing interest in connecting the traders of Rhapta to the merchants who lived in future Swahili towns. It is tempting to see Rhapta as a precursor to the cosmopolitan port cities that orient our understanding of the East African coast today. However, Rhapta's current state of archaeological invisibility makes it hard to draw direct linkages. Moreover, the sociolinguistic identities of these first-century coastal traders remain unclear. The region's earliest occupants were Late Stone Age groups who fished, hunted small game, and foraged for shellfish along the coast and immediate offshore islands.<sup>17</sup> In the last centuries BCE, Southern Cushitic-speaking agropastoralists also began occupying parts of the coastal region and neighboring hinterlands.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, the earliest evidence of Bantu-speaking settlements within the coastal region dates to the very beginning of the first millennium. Most of these sites are located twenty kilometers or more inland from the coast.<sup>19</sup> While Swahili speakers' Northeast Coast ancestors may have occupied the hinter-coastal region by the time of the *Periplus*, they were relative newcomers. Rhapta appears to have already been a well-established trading hub by the first century, making the pre-Swahili and *Periplus* connections fraught, even apart from the archaeological uncertainties.

To put these sources in a larger context, societies on the coast of East Africa were part of developments that brought together the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds in the early first millennium CE. During this time, the western Indian Ocean experienced relatively stable temperatures and rainfall. Predictable alterations in the monsoon winds aided the growth of the long-distance maritime trade networks described in the *Periplus* while also supporting statecraft in multiple regions connected to the Indian Ocean rim, contributing to the Gupta, Funan, and Sassanian polities.<sup>20</sup> However, there was a major downturn in these Afro-Eurasian exchange networks around the middle of the first millennium, partly due to dramatic changes in the climate. The northern hemisphere experienced a prolonged period of aridity starting around the sixth century, sometimes referred to as the Late Antique Little Ice Age.<sup>21</sup> Paleoenvironmental records from India and

southern Arabia similarly point to environmental fluctuations during this time, including a “severe weakening” of the southwest monsoon, which started around the fifth and sixth centuries and lasted until the ninth.<sup>22</sup> These changes in the climate overlapped with bubonic plague outbreaks and the fragmentation of several major states in both the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean.<sup>23</sup>

Coastal East Africans’ interface with global exchange networks was unquestionably affected by both the extensive commercial interconnectivity of the early centuries CE and its subsequent decline. As a result, the earliest historical texts on coastal East Africa refer to a thriving market center at Rhapta. But by mid-millennium, the region received only a passing mention by Cosmas. Rhapta itself quite literally disappeared from the map. Today, scholars can only speculate about the location of the once great market town. By the tenth century, when the Baghdadi geographer al-Masudi supplied the next similarly detailed description of coastal East African society, an entirely new set of towns acted as the staging ground for maritime trade in the region.<sup>24</sup>

While the merchants of the bustling metropolis of Rhapta offer us the earliest view of maritime commercial activity in coastal East Africa, they occupied a fleeting world. The *Periplus*, and other high points of maritime connectivity, such as the arrival of Islam and the growth of Swahili ports, offer important vantage points into coastal East Africa’s global past.<sup>25</sup> As recent archaeological research has emphasized, however, developments in subsistence, including the translocation of crops and animals in the Indian Ocean, were also a critical component of maritime connectivity.<sup>26</sup> To understand coastal East Africa’s urbanization and participation in long-distance trade, it is necessary to first look to steady modifications of subsistence techniques and technologies in prior centuries, processes that historian Jan Vansina famously referred to as the “slow revolution” in agriculture.<sup>27</sup> The next section traces the formative phases of this gradual revolution in subsistence. Over the course of the first millennium, coastal East African societies assembled knowledge of their environment and adapted their food production technologies to suit their local needs. In their experiments with different subsistence techniques, early coastal Bantu groups helped to set the stage for the emergence of port cities along the Swahili coast. But not because they were especially well oriented toward the ocean.

#### A “SLOW REVOLUTION” IN FIRST-MILLENNIUM COASTAL EAST AFRICA

Northeast Coast speakers’ arrival to East Africa’s hinter-coastal region around the start of the first millennium CE would have entailed ongoing renovations to their subsistence practices as they adapted to different environments. During the more recent past, seasonal fluctuations in rainfall oriented the agricultural labors of communities living along the northern part of East Africa’s littoral.<sup>28</sup> Cultivators

spent the drier months of January and February burning brush and breaking up ground in preparation for planting. They planted crops in March, just prior to the arrival of the long rains that last from April to May. After spending the rainy months tending to and protecting their fields, they undertook the major harvest in August, followed by a period for threshing and winnowing to transform the yields into edible foods. Harvesting and processing bled into a short and intense rainy season in October and November.<sup>29</sup> By the end of the short rains, alterations in the seasonal trade winds facilitated travels for merchants from India and the Arabian Peninsula to coastal towns stretching from Mogadishu to Kilwa.

The apparent synergies between agricultural cycles and economic activities were the result of generation upon generation of knowledge accrual and innovations. Coastal East Africa's first Bantu-speaking settlers would not have experienced the Indian Ocean as maritime traders and travelers but as observers of a changing climate and ecology as they settled in closer proximity to the littoral. In the process, they assembled knowledge of local vegetation, soils, and rainfall patterns, establishing their settlements based around a variety of calculations: Where could they effectively grow food? Could they easily procure wild resources nearby? What possibilities existed for exchanges with neighboring communities? When they encountered limitations—perhaps recognizing that certain staple foods grew more effectively than others within these ecological niches—successful communities adapted by adopting or inventing new cultivation techniques and technologies.

To understand the dynamic nature of the agricultural economy in coastal East Africa's early history, it is helpful to take a long-term view of Bantu speakers' food procurement practices. The earliest Bantu-speaking groups based their cultivation strategies around root crops that were well suited for the equatorial forests where Bantu languages were first spoken.<sup>30</sup> After 1000 BCE, speakers of Bantu languages (who spoke a protolanguage called *Mashariki*) began populating drier savanna regions of eastern Africa where they learned about new crops, including sorghum and millet varieties, from speakers of Sudanic and Sahelian languages.<sup>31</sup> However, shifting their cultivation strategies from tubers to grains was not as simple as replacing one crop with another. Adopting new foods entailed a transformation in food production practices, from the tools and techniques used to manage agricultural grounds, to methods for preparing their harvests for cooking and consumption. Planting root vegetables, as their linguistic ancestors had in the equatorial forests, was not very labor intensive. It involved "minimal clearing of land, cutting larger vegetation . . . but leaving stumps in place" and planting by making "small incisions in the soil" using the blade of a planting axe.<sup>32</sup> Cereal cultivation, by contrast, demanded significantly more exertion: clearing land, burning vegetation to destroy invasive weeds, and breaking up earth to prepare it for planting. Such methods demanded not only new tools, techniques, and field types but also an ability to mobilize labor to clear, plant, and maintain those fields. As a result of the unique challenges of

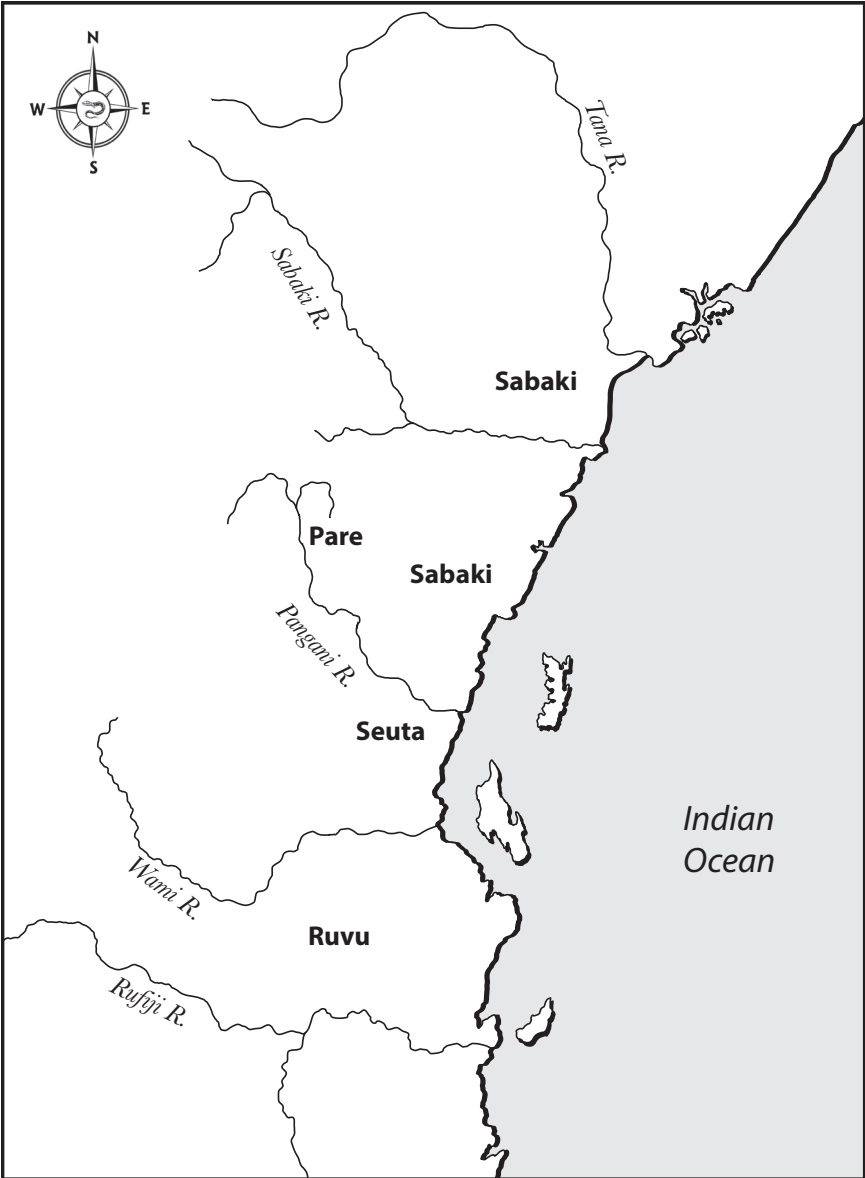
grain cultivation, root crops retained primacy in Mashariki speakers' subsistence practices until late in the last millennium BCE.<sup>33</sup>

As Northeast Coast speakers began to occupy regions nearer to the littoral, they adopted ecological and subsistence knowledge from in situ communities.<sup>34</sup> For instance, Northeast Coast speakers' interactions with speakers of a Southern Cushitic language produced a new word for sorghum, \*mutama, which replaced an older term, \*-pú, which their Mashariki ancestors had adopted from Central Sudanic languages.<sup>35</sup> Their willingness to borrow a new term indicates that as communities moved away from their Mashariki homelands, sorghum became less important as a crop. Perhaps the most interesting addition to Northeast Coast speakers' knowledge base was their adoption of a new word to refer to the short rainy season, \*-būli, which was also a Southern Cushitic loanword.<sup>36</sup> This loaning may have been linked to the changing seasonality of rainfall as Northeast Coast speakers settled in northern central Tanzania's coastal hinterlands.<sup>37</sup>

After a short proto-period, probably lasting no more than a few centuries, the proto-Northeast Coast community began to diverge into four daughter languages: Sabaki, Pare, Ruvu, and Seuta. For Sabaki speakers, this divergence likely began as their nascent speech community slowly pushed northward into the coastal hinterlands of southeastern Kenya, possibly in search of more productive lands for cultivation.<sup>38</sup> Paleoecological records indicate that much of East Africa experienced a drier climate during the first half of the first millennium, with "severe and widespread drought" over the first two centuries.<sup>39</sup> The drier climate would have driven communities to favor settlements in ecological niches that granted access to a wide variety of resources.

Southeast Kenya's moist coastal forests were resilient to climate extremes, making them an appealing environment for ironworking settlers and hunting and foraging groups alike. Paleoecological records dating back fourteen thousand years indicate that the forested coastal uplands experienced a relatively stable climate, with "increasing rainfall and forest expansion" starting about two thousand years ago.<sup>40</sup> The region's climate records contrast to increasing aridity in other parts of East Africa during the same time.<sup>41</sup> Archaeological evidence from southeast Kenya shows that the earliest farming communities in this region concentrated their settlements in "the moist, fertile forest margins of the eastern coastal uplands."<sup>42</sup> Nearby freshwater streams and forests would have provided the occupants of these sites with access to wild resources for hunting and foraging and timber for building and making charcoal to fuel iron furnaces.<sup>43</sup> Predictable rainfall and the availability of abundant forest resources would have also offered new opportunities to experiment with subsistence techniques like farming.

While they pushed north out of the Northeast Coast homeland, Sabaki speakers widened their vocabulary for describing the work of clearing land and preparing fields for planting.<sup>44</sup> Their inherited vocabulary for cultivation was already extensive, including many retained techniques for preparing land: "cultivating with a



MAP 2. Approximate areas of Northeast Coast subgroups: proto-Sabaki, proto-Pare, proto-Seuta, and proto-Ruvu. Map created by John Wyatt Greenlee, Surprised Eel Mapping.



hoe" (\*-lim-), "flinging up earth" (\*-fukul-), and "uprooting" (\*-ng'ol-). They pursued these labors using most of the same tools as their linguistic ancestors, including digging sticks, machetes, axes, and iron hoes.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, Sabaki speakers created at least two new words to refer to the work of clearing and maintaining land: \*-omol-, meaning "to dig out" or "break up," and \*-palil-, meaning "to clean, weed."<sup>46</sup> This vocabulary demonstrates that Sabaki speakers developed an increasingly complex technological repertoire to describe intensive labors like breaking up earth or digging up the roots of a tree, both actions that would have achieved a newfound importance when planting cereals. Sabaki speakers generated \*-palil- by adding a verbal extension to a root meaning "to scrape," which gave the verb a sense of scraping *into* a field or plot, hence cleaning and weeding. In modern daughter languages, reflexes of \*-palil- and other derived vocabulary cover a full spectrum of agricultural skills—including hoeing the surface of a field; clearing weeds and forest land; and piling roots and weeds into heaps—demonstrating the verb's wide and varied usage for subsequent generations of cultivators.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to developing new terms to describe labors like clearing land, Sabaki speakers began drawing distinctions between the different agricultural spaces in their settlements. They called uncultivated spaces that had been cleared for planting \*Wucelu, a term that their Northeast Coast ancestors developed from a root meaning to "clean" or "sift."<sup>48</sup> Like their distant linguistic ancestors, Sabaki speakers planted some of their crops within garden plots that they called \*mugunda.<sup>49</sup> However, they also designated other fields using a new word, \*nkonde, which meant "cultivated field."<sup>50</sup> Since they practiced swidden agriculture (clearing and burning forests) their fields required lengthy fallow periods. During the more recent past, coastal farmers planted larger rain-fed fields for several seasons before allowing them to rest for fallow periods lasting up to fifteen years.<sup>51</sup> The lengthy restorative periods meant that farmers were continually in search of virgin forestland away from their settlements. This novel distinction between \*nkonde and \*mugunda may have stemmed from mundane cycles of clearing, planting, and resting their fields, during which Sabaki speakers began to differentiate the agricultural spaces located outside of their settlements from the smaller plots within the confines of a village.<sup>52</sup>

Like imported beads or ceramic vessels, planted fields were sources of value. During the Northeast Coast period, for instance, farmers began erecting huts or raised platforms called \*-lingo, where they waited out the rainy months while their crops matured, guarding their fields against birds or animals.<sup>53</sup> After harvesting, farmers transported their bounty to raised storage huts in their villages where they stored husked grains. Notably, Sabaki speakers innovated a new name for their granaries during this time, \*lucaga, which they used synonymously with the inherited term \*lutala (or \*kitala).<sup>54</sup> This expanding vocabulary for grain huts may indicate a technological diversification of storage methods as cereals like sorghum and millet became more central to subsistence activities. Ultimately, coastal

East Africans' creation of new structures to guard their fields and store their surpluses offers clear evidence of their investments in agriculture during the early first millennium.

Turning stalks of sorghum or millet into food required a repertoire of intensive processing techniques: threshing to remove the stalks, pounding and grinding broken grains, and winnowing away waste products to yield flour suitable for cooking. Sabaki speakers retained technological knowledge and tools from their linguistic ancestors to suit these tasks, such as winnowing baskets and mortars and pestles.<sup>55</sup> Yet they continued to develop new words to augment their inherited processing techniques and technologies. For instance, Sabaki speakers created a new word to describe a winnowing tray, \*lucelo, which they derived from the same root as terms for cleared fields (\*Wucelu) and cleaned grain (\*mucele).<sup>56</sup> Since winnowing was not a new method, the innovation may indicate novel semantic links Sabaki speakers made between agricultural spaces, processing techniques, and their products.

While we cannot know precisely how extensive grain cultivation was during this period or how it compared to previous eras, the linguistic evidence suggests that Sabaki speakers were processing grain products on a scale that was significantly greater than their linguistic ancestors. In addition to tools for grain processing, they innovated several words that referred to waste products generated through winnowing and threshing: \*Wishwa and \*luWambe, both of which referred to "chaff," and \*ncungu, which referred to waste heaps.<sup>57</sup> The derivations of these terms reveal some of the semantic creativity undergirding grain processing labors. Sabaki speakers produced \*ncungu from an older root meaning to "winnow," suggestive of how the slow amassing of hardened husks on the ground through tasks like winnowing helped to conjure new vocabulary for waste heaps. They produced the second term, \*luWambe, from a root meaning "to stretch." During the more recent past, reflexes of \*luWambe referred to the pungent dust produced when threshing and grinding stalks of sorghum and millet.<sup>58</sup> The term's etymology enables us to envision a threshing hut in the first millennium, when Sabaki speakers began to note the ethereal qualities of waste products that "stretched" through the air while they turned their harvests into a cookable flour. Indeed, the intensification of cereal agriculture didn't just introduce new foods. When assembling the skills needed to make grain cultivation work, coastal East Africans interacted with new visual, tactile, and olfactory sensations, some of which left a mark in the words they used to describe products as banal as chaff.

Sabaki speakers' lexical innovations covered activities encompassing nearly every part of the annual rhythms of agriculture, providing an in-progress view of their efforts to expand their subsistence base vis-à-vis cereals. The cycle began when farmers cleared land, felling trees and breaking apart earth to make the most nutrient-rich soils accessible for planting. During the rainy months, they maintained their cultivated fields, weeding and guarding their crops from

predators. After harvesting their yields, they transported the harvest to grain stores and began the process of transforming their monthslong labors into edible foods. The Northeast Coast and Sabaki lexicon help to conjure the sights and sounds of a slow revolution underway: iron hoes chopping into the earth and dirt flinging in the air as fields emerged in virgin forest.

Sabaki speakers, like Bantu speakers elsewhere in Africa, combined farming with other subsistence strategies, including hunting and trapping game, herding domestic animals, and gathering wild resources.<sup>59</sup> Archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological records offer material perspectives of the mixed resource economy during the mid-to-late first millennium. The cultivation of the three major African cereals (finger millet, pearl millet, and sorghum) was underway at Early Iron Age sites in multiple regions of East Africa by the middle of the first millennium. Charred seed remains show that these crops were well established in both the coastal hinterlands and on East Africa's offshore islands by the seventh and eighth centuries at the latest.<sup>60</sup> Farmers supplemented cereals with pulse crops such as cow pea (\*lukunde), which they intermixed with grains to add fertility to the soil.<sup>61</sup> Faunal records indicate that Sabaki speakers supplemented their diets with locally available wild resources, including small land mammals like duiker, suni, bushbuck, and reedbuck.<sup>62</sup> They also collected freshwater mollusks and exploited some marine resources, especially shellfish.<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, these wild resources provided a regular supply of supplementary food sources, offering flexibility to people moving into new ecologies and amassing knowledge of local soils and rainfall patterns, all while mastering new agricultural techniques.

#### TRACKING MATERIAL CHANGES FROM THE SIXTH CENTURY ONWARD

Scaling out from the perspective of a cleared swidden, we can now briefly consider how coastal East Africans' new subsistence knowledge supported larger changes in the region. We know that the Sabaki world was relatively unmoored from the Indian Ocean activities described in the *Periplus*, but why do the developments in arenas like subsistence during this moment of discontinuity in global trading circuits matter to this bigger picture? For one, the resources that coastal East Africans caught and collected provide vital supplementary food sources as they settled new areas and assembled knowledge of soils and rainfall patterns. In such contexts, intensive agriculture and the work of hunting and trapping were mutually supportive. Traps placed along the margins of agricultural fields protected crops while also providing easy access to a regular food source.<sup>64</sup> By supplementing their diets with other wild products, including freshwater and marine fish and shellfish, as well as gathered resources like wild fruits, grasses, and honey, Sabaki speakers would have been able to experiment more extensively with cereal agriculture. Over time, their mastery of more drought-resistant crops, such as sorghum and

millet, enabled coastal groups to establish settlements across a wider range of environments, including the sandy, coral rag soils characteristic of many of the coast's offshore islands.

The formative phases of agriculture ultimately helped to support a range of economic and societal transformations that reverberated far beyond the realm of subsistence. Archaeological records show, for instance, that from about the sixth and seventh centuries, there was a significant increase in the number of ironworking and farming settlements founded on the low coastal plain and immediate offshore islands, both environments poorly suited for cultivation based on root crops.<sup>65</sup> In the centuries that followed, post-Sabaki language groups established new settlements far and wide along the littoral, from southern Somalia to southern Mozambique and stretching off the continental mainland as far as the Comoros Islands. Paleoenvironmental records indicate that after a drier climate phase during the first few centuries CE, much of tropical East Africa shifted to a wetter climate for the remainder of the first millennium.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, this movement into new ecological niches overlapped with a general shift to more favorable climate conditions for agriculture, production, and trade.

The region's interactions with reemerging Indian Ocean networks are increasingly legible in material records over the second half of the millennium. Archaeobotanical records indicate Asian crops like rice and coconut reached the Zanzibar Archipelago by the sixth or seventh century.<sup>67</sup> Faunal records also attest to chickens and black rats—both species introduced through maritime translocations—at settlements on the littoral and in the adjacent hinterlands around the same time.<sup>68</sup> During the seventh and eighth centuries, the occupants of settlements across the littoral region also began obtaining increasing quantities of foreign ceramics and glassware, with most of these imported goods originating in the Persian Gulf.<sup>69</sup>

While the trade goods and biological evidence provide early signatures of coastal East Africa's reemerging connections with the Indian Ocean during the late first millennium, ceramic styles known as the Early Tana Tradition (ETT) attest to concurrent interactions in the region's interior. The ETT refers to a style of pottery produced between the seventh and tenth centuries by potters living in settlements that spanned the littoral as far south as Mozambique, outward into the Indian Ocean to the Comoros Islands, and inland to many sites in the coastal hinterlands. ETT ceramics have a distinctive triangular incised pattern—featured most prominently on necked jars—but with substantial stylistic diversity across the range of settlements that produced this pottery.<sup>70</sup> Despite this stylistic diversity, scholars have shown that variations in the ETT's decorative motifs existed along a continuum. As Jeffrey Fleisher and Stephanie Wynne-Jones have argued, this evidence is indicative of a “vast interaction sphere in which communities were most in contact with those nearest to them, while cognizant of a larger sphere that included them all.”<sup>71</sup> ETT ceramics were not traded across settlements in this region. Rather, the style demonstrates shared material practices that connected

“widely dispersed but culturally compatible communities over several centuries.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, even as imported material goods became more common among the occupants of some littoral sites, the regional ceramics illustrate enduring material connections between the coast and settlements in the interior.

Material records document an array of changes in the East African coast from the sixth century onward. From this brief survey of these materials, we obtain a clear picture of the ways that the foundational phases of the slow revolution supported subsequent transformations in settlement geographies and scale, and in production and exchange across the wider region. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the social circumstances that undergirded these shifts. As coastal East Africans cultivated cereals with increasing expertise, they also cultivated new methods for assembling larger groups of people. These methods made possible subtle changes in settlement form and complexity in the centuries prior to the emergence of Swahili port cities.

#### CULTIVATING “WEALTH IN PEOPLE” IN FIRST-MILLENNIUM EAST AFRICA

The changes in scale and production that are evident in material records from the sixth and seventh centuries were an outgrowth of formative developments in subsistence in prior centuries. But for material changes to happen in the first place, coastal leaders needed to be able to bring people together effectively. Historians and anthropologists have long used the concept of “wealth in people” to understand how rights over people formed the basis of accumulation strategies in pre-colonial Africa. The concept is based on the observation that political leaders and corporate groups regularly sought to translate things into people to meet their needs for labor or social reproduction.<sup>73</sup> Yet past societies’ interest in assembling groups of people was not simply a matter of accumulating followers, it was also a matter of composing communities of people possessing “wealth” in skills and knowledge, as subsequent revisions of the concept illustrate.<sup>74</sup> With the right knowledge and skills among their following, leaders could exploit new ecologies, engage in an array of production and subsistence activities, and build relationships with other settlements.

Using the concept of wealth in people, we can imagine the gradual emergence of large, productive communities on the East African coast by the late first millennium as the result of generation-by-generation accruals of knowledge, skills, and followers over the preceding centuries. The archaeological records described above make apparent the success of some coastal communities at constituting wealth in the form of imported pots, beads, and foodstuffs by the second half of the millennium. Yet “boundaries between social and material concepts of poverty and wealth were porous,” as Rhiannon Stephens has shown in a *longue durée* conceptual history of wealth and poverty in eastern Uganda.<sup>75</sup> In Sabaki society, the

development of new subsistence strategies, as well as their material engagements with oceanic trade, overlapped with other experiments in social composition and redistribution practices. The remainder of the chapter turns to these social developments to trace the conceptual underpinnings supporting settlement growth and increasing scales of trade by the second half of the first millennium.

To understand how early coastal communities developed the ideological repertoire to support major changes in their societies, it is first necessary to outline the different strategies they used to organize the members of their settlements. At the start of the first millennium, Northeast Coast speakers organized their communities using at least three different types of descent groups: *\*lukolo* ("clan"), *\*mulyongo* ("lineage"), and *\*nyumba* ("house").<sup>76</sup> The *\*lukolo* was the widest grouping, consisting of multiple lineages, or *\*mulyongo*, each of which were made up of people who reckoned their descent through a common ancestor. This linear conceptualization of the members of a *\*mulyongo* is apparent in the word's derivation from a root that referred to a "line (of objects)," giving it the metaphorical sense of a "line of forebears that leads back to the founding ancestor."<sup>77</sup> Lineages formed alliances with one another through marriages between the member of one *\*mulyongo* with another. After two lineages established a marriage alliance, they would view themselves as being members of the same clan, or *\*lukolo*, which included "their affines and the descendants they shared."<sup>78</sup>

As different societies occupied new environments, they frequently discarded or reworked their strategies of social organization to suit their shifting needs. For instance, among speakers of the Kaskazi branch of Mashariki Bantu (which was spoken during the late centuries BCE), clans and lineages grouped members with either their mother's or father's kin, with *\*-kòlò* referring to a mother's "matriclan" and *\*-lòngò* articulating a "patrilineage."<sup>79</sup> While Northeast Coast speakers likely retained these older meanings, their Sabaki-speaking descendants discarded these concrete associations with matrilineal or patrilineal groupings. Sabaki speakers did retain a separate matrilineal grouping with a third type of descent group, the *\*nyumba*, or "house," which consisted of a woman, her children, and her other dependents. Within most villages, the head of the lineage would have had multiple wives, each with their own *\*nyumba*.<sup>80</sup> This matrilineal grouping provided a way to delineate between different kin and different generations within a settlement. To establish her own house, a woman did not need to be associated with recognized lineages or clans. Therefore, *\*nyumba* also offered an important means for incorporating newcomer women into the organizational structure of extant villages.<sup>81</sup> By marrying into a village, a woman could establish her own house and retain a degree of control over her children and any other dependents who became members of her household.<sup>82</sup>

The multiple strategies for reckoning descent provided leaders with a degree of strategic flexibility, enabling them to adapt their settlements' social organization to changing circumstances.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps the most significant area of transformation for

Northeast Coast speakers was their reconfiguration of ideas about political leadership. In Mashariki society, there were at least four different words that connoted notions of “chiefship.”<sup>84</sup> But by the start of the first millennium, Northeast Coast speakers had discarded almost all these titles, choosing to emphasize the authority of a figure known as the \*-éné, meaning “lineage head.” Christopher Ehret attributes the shifting language of political leadership among different linguistic groups in eastern Africa to the practical reality of people needing to rework ideas about authority as they diverged and began to occupy new environments during the last millennium BCE. Amid periodic changes in scale and ecology, it would have been difficult to transport all inherited leadership institutions into new locations, especially in cases where settlements were relatively small.<sup>85</sup> Tellingly, the leadership titles that North Coast speakers discarded in favor of \*-éné described individuals capable of creating conditions of abundance and cultivating honor for their settlement.<sup>86</sup> Instead, Northeast Coast speakers favored more lineage-based authorities who oversaw the small groups of extended kin that constituted their villages, perhaps indicating that influential members of their communities struggled to achieve recognitions characterizing their forebears’ settlements.

In different Bantu languages in eastern and southern Africa, the term \*-éné referred to an “owner,” but within some regions of eastern and southern Africa it had secondary associations to chiefly authority.<sup>87</sup> The title captured, therefore, the extent that local leaders acted as the “owners” or overseers of the various dependents who constituted their lineage group. But during the Northeast Coast period, speakers reimagined the role of lineage heads as individuals who exerted “ownership” over both followers and land, evident in \*-éné’s connotation of both “lineage head” and “land-owning lineage.”<sup>88</sup> Daren Ray has theorized that this innovation stemmed from ecological challenges during the early first millennium. Recall that root crops and vegetables were still the crux of Northeast Coast speakers’ cultivation practices. But in the dry hinter-coastal region of central and northern Tanzania—where they established their early village settlements—the land that was best suited for this type of cultivation was relatively scarce. Due to the high value of productive lands, lineage leaders would have wanted to ensure that premium settlement locations remained under the control of their descendants.<sup>89</sup> As a result, they expanded their rights as “owners” to include both the people within their settlement as well as land the members of their lineage occupied and cultivated.

If the role of the \*-éné around the start of the first millennium was as an overseer of limited productive lands, then changes in subsistence activities over subsequent centuries would have had the potential to gradually transform the settlements they managed. As we’ve seen, during the first millennium, coastal East Africans experimented more intensively with cereals, making hardier, more drought-resistant crops such as sorghum and millet a centerpiece of their diets. By the middle of the first millennium, eastern Africa’s climate shifted out of an arid phase, which, when combined with successful adaptations in food procurement, would have enabled



people to occupy a more diverse range of ecologies. Amid these shifts, some communities would have been able to slowly expand in size. After several generations, the leaders of the most successful villages would have become responsible for larger and more diverse lineages as their rights over land and people were passed from one generation to the next.

On a theoretical level, by the mid-first millennium, coastal East Africans had at hand many of the tools necessary to facilitate transformations in the scale of their communities. Using flexible lineal strategies, they could incorporate new members and build strong alliances across their territory. And with new subsistence practices and leadership ideologies, they could support larger and more enduring settlements. The history of the proto-Sabaki term \*mutala, meaning “quarter of a village,” helps to bring some changes in scale into focus on a conceptual level. \*Mutala is derived from an older root word that meant “village” or “settlement area” in Mashariki Bantu languages.<sup>90</sup> By the start of the current era, Northeast Coast Bantu communities used the same word to describe “areas within a village where men who had more than one wife maintained homesteads.”<sup>91</sup> This signals to how lineage heads deployed a “mother-derived grouping” (such as \*nyumba) to expand their number of dependent kin within a single village settlement.<sup>92</sup> Over generations, as the members of these kin groupings “established adjacent households” and “accepted new residents,” they would have been able to gradually increase the scale of their villages.<sup>93</sup>

This shift in scale is apparent in Sabaki speakers’ articulation of \*mutala as a “quarter of a village,” which extended their ancestors’ understanding of a large household and applied it to the distinct areas of villages where such households were established. In subsequent centuries, speakers of Swahili dialects built on these inherited concepts, using the root to describe “neighborhoods” or “wards” of a town (*mitaa* in Modern Standard Swahili), a shift that resonates with the growing urban density of littoral settlements during the second millennium. But notably, other Sabaki languages treated this inherited meaning quite differently. Mijikenda speakers reinterpreted \*mutala, which they pronounced *muhalala*, as a cleared courtyard at the center of a homestead, fitting a larger shift toward homestead-based settlements in Mombasa’s interior during the second millennium (a story detailed in the next chapter). Pokomo and Elwana speakers, meanwhile, dropped the word from their vocabulary altogether.<sup>94</sup>

These semantic shifts—from “village,” to “village quarter,” to “neighborhood,” or, in the case of Mijikenda dialects, “courtyard”—demonstrate how coastal East Africans adapted older ideas about space to accommodate changes in their settlements. Over generations, groups of households made up of extended kin eventually came to connote distinct quarters or neighborhoods within a village. Archaeologist Mark Horton conjectured that the Sabaki period may have marked a shift in settlement design whereby larger villages were arranged in clusters of houses—with each cluster occupied by the members of a lineage group—which encircled



a communal central courtyard or enclosure.<sup>95</sup> The available archaeological evidence does not provide a clear enough picture of mid-first millennium settlement designs to further test this theory. Nevertheless, following the history of \*mutala invites us to imagine distant conceptual experiments with scale and form in first-millennium communities, even in the absence of material data clearly documenting these changes.

#### THE LANGUAGE OF SOCIAL RECIPROCITY, DEBT, AND MARGINALITY

As villages grew, they needed to be delineated into new units: spaces for men with multiple wives and houses; quarters for descent groups; and, eventually, neighborhoods consisting of extended kin. Changes in scale did not happen automatically, however. By envisioning changes in the scale and form of first millennium settlements, we are also alerted to the multiple tensions that would have existed as lineage heads endeavored to expand their influence. To grow their communities, lineage heads had to accumulate land, food resources, and dependents. At the same time, they relied on the knowledge and skills of their constituents to support their aspirations for accumulation. Because of the flexibility of incorporation strategies, people could leave one settlement and join another. But doing so carried risks since newcomers were often ascribed a marginal status when they joined new communities.<sup>96</sup> As a result, successful leaders had to develop the means to attract, incorporate, and retain members.<sup>97</sup>

Sabaki speakers' efforts to assemble people is apparent in the vocabulary that they innovated or adapted to describe different redistributive practices. Two words referring to different types of collection, \*-cum- and \*-cang-, allow us to envision the tensions between the accumulative aspirations of lineage heads and the potential fluidity of their following. The first term, \*-cum-, is derived from a very old root in Bantu languages that meant to "buy food, collect." Into the early first millennium, Northeast Coast speakers retained the root's older meaning, which "carried pragmatic connotations of agricultural collection."<sup>98</sup> Sabaki speakers later expanded its meaning by creating a new secondary gloss, using \*-cum- to speak of both "collecting" and "trading" for profit. Reflexes of \*-cum- from different Sabaki daughter languages demonstrate associations between collection and commerce that expanded from the mid-first millennium onward. In Mijikenda, for instance, reflexes of the root refer to gathering or collecting as well as trading and doing business; in Pokomo it described keeping money; and in Comorian and Swahili, reflexes refer to collecting and making profits through industrial activities or trade.<sup>99</sup> Some of these glosses reflect modern categories—e.g., making money. But when viewed alongside the verb's etymology, the glosses hint to a much older conceptual apparatus that linked activities like collecting foods with trade and accumulation.

While Sabaki speakers expanded one notion of collecting to encompass trade, another concept, expressed by the root \*-cang-, communicated the redistributive possibilities of assembling resources. The Sabaki verb \*-cang-, meaning “to collect,” is derived from an ancient Bantu root that meant to “meet, find, mix, assemble.”<sup>100</sup> Among Northeast Coast speakers, the verb carried the secondary connotation of “contributing,” a meaning that demonstrates that the earliest settlers on the coast retained older associations with sociability—meeting, mixing, assembling—within their concept of “collection.” From at least the proto-Sabaki period, speakers attested the verb using the applicative verb extension (pronounced \*-cangil-), which gave the term an added emphasis of collecting contributions *for, to, or on behalf of* another person or group. The derivational and morphological clues reveal the immense social work that Sabaki speakers imagined when they spoke of “collecting” and “contributing.” For instance, speakers of different Sabaki daughter languages associate reflexes of \*-cangil- with things like charity, pooling together resources, and welcoming visitors. Although this diversity of meanings makes it difficult to pin down a single proto-Sabaki interpretation for the root, together they demonstrate ancient and widespread associations between collecting, reciprocity, and social composition.

For Sabaki speakers, contributing to other members of their community did not simply entail the transfer of collected items from one person to another. Instead, they articulated collection and distributing contributions as actions that bound together—or perhaps more appropriately, mixed and assembled—the individuals partaking in these acts. The ideologies of giving articulated by \*-cangil- stand in striking contrast to older practices, such as those expressed in the Sabaki terms \*-tuuzy-, meaning “give as gift,” and the derived noun \*ntuuzo, or “gift.”<sup>101</sup> Both of these inherited terms are derived from a root meaning “put down (a load).” They articulated, therefore, a mode of giving that was, etymologically speaking, unidirectional, such as placing down gifts as tributes or offering rewards. Thus, Sabaki speakers understood actions like \*-cangil- to have a very different social affect than forms of redistribution associated with the verb \*-tuuzy-. By the mid-first millennium, when coastal communities spoke of making contributions, they directly implicated the reciprocal power of giving and the capacity of the contributions themselves to bring people together.

The linguistic evidence illuminates how people sought to articulate the power of redistribution to assemble people, despite an absence of written or archaeological records attesting to these practices.<sup>102</sup> One Sabaki institution, called the \*kikola, shows how speakers developed new methods for facilitating reciprocity and mutual assistance.<sup>103</sup> During the first millennium, \*kikola probably referred to an arrangement where members of a settlement shared food resources or labor during times of need. In Mijikenda communities, the *chikola*, or *kikola*, took the form of a collective work party, while in the Comoros Islands, a *shikoa* referred to a community savings arrangement to which members made contributions, creating

a larger safety net for the group that people could pull from when needed.<sup>104</sup> For Swahili speakers, meanwhile, the *kikoa* referred to meals eaten as a collective, with each participant in the group meal contributing what they could.<sup>105</sup> In each case, people shared food, labor, and other resources with the understanding that this assistance would be later reciprocated in some form by other participants.

Acts of social reciprocity would have provided ideological tools to both foster connections between people and to improvise new social arrangements and economic practices. For instance, the social safety net offered by arrangements like the \**kikola* could have enabled people to experiment with new cultivation techniques. Redistributive practices would have also helped lineage leaders expand the number of people in their following by attracting newcomers or preventing members of their settlement from leaving and joining a different lineage. Leaders benefited from the array of resources that newcomers brought into their settlements, whether it was their knowledge of medicines, skills in activities like ironworking or agriculture, or their reproductive capacities.

Newcomers themselves were frequently incorporated unequally, however. As David Schoenbrun explains, the “idea that newcomers could expect lower social standing than others in a community is a long-standing commonplace in ideologies of hierarchy” across much of eastern Africa.<sup>106</sup> The marginal status of new members of a community manifested in the proto-Sabaki term \**muja*, or “newcomer.” The term is widely distributed in Bantu languages in eastern, southern, and equatorial Africa with meanings that indicate a \**muja* was broadly conceived as a “dependent, servant, slave, or refugee.”<sup>107</sup> In Sabaki or early Swahili, speakers compounded \**muja* with the term \*-*kazi*, or “wife,” to create the meaning \**mujakazi*, a person who historical records describe as a “female slave.”<sup>108</sup> \**Mujakazi*’s etymological sense of “newcomer wife” indicates how newcomer women were incorporated into extant communities through marriage, thus resonating with the flexible lineage strategies that coastal groups employed during the first millennium. By marrying female newcomers, lineage heads could establish new houses and grow the number of dependents under their stewardship.

Sabaki speakers drew from older metaphorical associations about the marginal status of newcomers to express ideas about less-fully incorporated members of their settlements. They distinguished newcomers from other marginal individuals, called \**mukiwa*, which designated a “poor” or “abandoned” person.<sup>109</sup> This term is attested in a number of Bantu languages in East Africa in addition to Sabaki, including other languages descended from Northeast Coast as well as many languages in the Chaga-Taita and Thagicu language families. \**Mukiwa*’s block distribution and phonetic shape in different languages spoken between the East African coast and highlands of the Eastern Arc Mountains and Central Kenya indicate that it is an areal term that diffused across this larger region by the early first millennium.

The term's derivation and associated meanings offer insights into the conceptual underpinnings of this type of marginality. For instance, \*mukiWa appears to be derived from a passive form of the root *-kíd-*, meaning "pass over, surpass," giving the term a sense of a person who is "passed over" or "surpassed." Related adjectives and nouns derived from the term suggest that being poor in the sense connoted by \*mukiWa meant being bereft or kinless.<sup>110</sup> Thus, a \*mukiWa, in contrast to marginal newcomers, was perhaps a person who lacked links to an extant community—someone who had fled from their home or who had been abandoned or cast off.

If \*mukiWa is indeed an areal term—meaning a word that spread across a contiguous block of languages—dating to the early centuries of the first millennium, then it hints at some fascinating possibilities for understanding cross-societal concepts of marginality during this period. In the first half of the millennium, as I've outlined, communities adapted to new ecologies, mastered new crops, and managed the vagaries of rainfall. As lineage heads made new investments in land, they also needed to build the necessary knowledge base and skills to pursue an array of tasks: assembling tools; clearing and tending fields; harvesting and processing foods; identifying and exploiting wild resources; and fostering relationships across settlements for trade and social reproduction. A settlement's successes or failures had the potential to generate rivalries between lineage heads competing for followers, as well as novel obligations for local leaders and the members of their communities. Amid these changes, those without social attachments would have endeavored to find new positions for themselves among the most successful extant communities, even if that meant accepting subordinate roles. Becoming a subordinate newcomer was no doubt preferable in nearly any circumstance to being one who was abandoned or "passed over." Strategies of social reciprocity would have been invaluable for attracting and incorporating different sorts of people who themselves accrued social debts by accepting their benefactors' patronage.

Sabaki speakers' attestation of words connoting marginality or outsidership help us to imagine the uncertainties people felt as they endeavored to incorporate new individuals into their settlements. Considering these apparent tensions, one of the more striking innovations dating to this period is the term \*-Wil-, which meant "to owe." To create this meaning, Sabaki speakers added an applicative extension to the verb "to be" that gave \*-Wil- the literal meaning of "to be to," "to be for," or "to be with" another person.<sup>111</sup> This innovation illustrates how members of mid-first millennium coastal communities thought of "owing" a person not simply as debt, but instead as a sense of attachment or obligation. While other aspects of Sabaki speakers' lexicon for redistribution—evident in terms like \*-cang(il)- and \*kikola—speak to the role of sharing or contributing resources for attracting or "assembling" people, \*-Wil- enables us to think through the social obligations that undergirded these relationships. The term's etymological sense

of “being to” another person suggests that redistributive practices generated new types of relationships between a provider and the individual who was *bound to* that person vis-à-vis their debt.<sup>112</sup>

While Sabaki-era communities remained small in scale, the linguistic evidence indicates that they had a number of ways to differentiate among the statuses of people within and along the margins of their communities. Concurrently, they developed novel means to attract, retain, and incorporate people into their settlements. Mutual assistance practices could have supported settlements’ growth. At the same time, Sabaki speakers’ expanding vocabulary for things like debt and contributions would have alerted people to new social distinctions between providers and dependents, insiders, and more marginal members. People would have grappled with the implications of sharing or hoarding resources, or of accepting the contributions offered to them and the potential obligations they carried. These concerns would have only become more pronounced as lineage heads managed larger groups of people, as distinctions between larger and smaller settlements became more noticeable, and as cross-societal trading activities picked up in the centuries that followed.

During the second half of the millennium, Sabaki speakers’ linguistic descendants established settlements far and wide across coastal East Africa. By the eighth century, their settlement zone stretched along the littoral from northern Kenya to southern Mozambique, inland into the immediate coastal hinterlands, and far off the continental mainland on the island archipelago of the Comoros. As we’ll see in the next chapter, in all of these areas the earliest Sabaki-descended groups formed settlements that were larger than those occupied by their ancestors just a few centuries earlier. While the subsistence roots set by their Northeast Coast and Sabaki ancestors enabled them to develop settlements across a wide range of ecologies, their ancestors’ repertoire of social practices and ideas provided critical foundations for changes in complexity and production across the region.

. . .

From the vantage point of a cosmopolitan port, the emergence of Swahili towns may appear to result from the resurgence of Indian Ocean commercial networks during the late first millennium. This chapter has asked: What if we viewed the region’s past instead from the perspective of a farm field? Or from the outskirts of a village where a newcomer weighed the pros and cons of accepting a lineage head’s patronage, knowing the types of obligations that it may carry? During the early first millennium, coastal East African linguistic groups adapted to an environment influenced by the Indian Ocean monsoon. However, their relationship to the maritime arena was not one of seamless interaction. The earliest ironworking and farming communities on the coast were small in scale and relatively disconnected from the maritime commercial arena. But their experiments with subsistence prompted developments that ultimately transformed their settlements in a variety

of ways. As they mastered new farming techniques, Sabaki speakers began planting their villages across a greater range of microclimates, including establishing permanent settlements on the littoral. Lineage heads who previously managed scarce productive lands achieved new pathways to accrue wealth in lands and influence. In the process, coastal communities experimented with their ideas about reciprocity, obligation, and marginality, all of which provided them with a repertoire of strategies for attracting and integrating new members. Despite their dearth of interactions with the Indian Ocean, Sabaki speakers' innovations forged important subsistence and ideological roots that would significantly shape the world to come.

If we recognize that Sabaki speakers' creative actions set the stage for subsequent transformations across the Swahili coast, then we must also consider why some other Sabaki-descended groups pursued such drastically different paths. Mijikenda communities shared with their Swahili neighbors a social and economic repertoire to support larger, more complex settlements. And like their Swahili siblings, they established many of their earliest settlements with easy access to the Indian Ocean. From the late first millennium, Swahili speakers began building connections within reemerging Indian Ocean networks. As the next chapter will show, Mijikenda speakers did too. However, their participation with this transregional arena took on an entirely different form, being characterized not by urbanism or Islam, but by growing social and ritual ties with other inland communities.