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Looking Inland, to the World

In 1953, a Kenyan poet and publisher named William Frank wrote a short book titled *Habari na desturi za WaRibe*, or "History and Customs of the Ribe" (Ribe being one of the nine Mijikenda subgroups).[1] The book was part of an East African Literature Bureau book series that aimed to describe the histories and cultures of different East African communities for Swahili readers. Perhaps mindful of this audience, Frank began a chapter focused on village leadership with a comparison to a well-known East African polity: the Buganda Kingdom. Much like Buganda had a king—who was called the Kabaka—the Ribe had their own methods of governance, according to Frank. In contrast to Buganda's monarchy, however, Ribe's political decisions were shared among multiple people—councils of respected and knowledgeable men from different villages. The councils were not open to anyone. As Frank explained, elder men achieved their rank due to their knowledge and wealth. To join they needed ample cattle, goats, and palm wine for ritual ceremonies and sacrifices, as well as large productive farm plots to support people during famines. Textiles and medicinal sacks marked their status. As members of the councils, they held authority to litigate domestic disputes and land cases using specialized medicines. Rather than meeting within their own villages, the men congregated in forest groves, which offered an ideal setting for their esoteric activities.[2]

While the previous chapter focused on social and subsistence adaptations in coastal East African society during a down period in oceanic commerce, this chapter traces the multiple social possibilities that existed during the period that followed. The Swahili story is a familiar one. Between the eighth and fifteenth centuries, people living in coastal towns adopted Islam and built relationships with visiting merchants. They also began altering their built landscape, using blocks of

living coral cut from underwater reefs to build homes and mosques. Before long, intricately carved archways marked the entrances to the main mosques of larger towns. Merchant houses featured sculpted niches on their interior walls for displaying foreign ceramics and glassware.[3] Builders applied to the exterior of stone buildings a limestone plaster coating that reflected the sun when viewed from the ocean, making towns visible to approaching ships.[4] The built landscape of port cities like Mombasa, in other words, offers a physical testament to East Africa's significant interface with the Indian Ocean world in the centuries following their ancestors' experiments with grain cultivation.

Similarly, the forest groves where elder men congregated for political and healing activities provide an entry into profound transformations and cross-societal exchanges in Mombasa's interior. By comparing Ribe's village-level strategies to Buganda's royal politics, Frank recognized that smaller-scale networks and social pursuits had commonalities with hierarchical states and urban centers.[5] Villages were once seen to represent the historical roots from which coastal towns emerged and then departed once they began building relationships in a rapidly globalizing Indian Ocean. As the authors of one well-known book on Swahili society put it, opportunities for oceanic trade transformed coastal, Swahili-speaking villages into "urban and mercantile" centers, and, in the process, those opportunities "separated culturally" people living in coastal settlements from those in villages in the nearby rural hinterlands.[6] The past two decades of archaeological research on the coast have overturned this older view, showing that coastal urban centers emerged through varied processes, all the while maintaining enduring ties with adjacent rural settlements and interior regions.[7] This work alerts us to the importance of understanding the histories of coastal towns through their engagements with inland communities, and vice versa. But before scaling outward to explore Mijikenda speakers' interactions with the Indian Ocean world—as I will do in chapters 3 through 5—it is necessary to first look inward, to the deep social histories of settlements in Mombasa's interior.

As the chapter will show, Mijikenda speakers possessed the same capabilities for forming larger communities as their Swahili-speaking neighbors after proto-Sabaki began diverging into separate languages. Rather than fully orienting their worlds toward the religious and social norms of urban ports, they established smaller settlements and gradually cultivated strong ties with neighboring inland groups. They borrowed medicines, adopted new means to propitiate ancestral spirits, and incorporated novel spaces into the contours of their villages and the surrounding forests. In the process, they continually generated associations with other villages and with neighboring, non-Mijikenda-speaking communities. Mijikenda speakers' social and ritual pursuits put them in constant contact with other inland societies, supporting and running parallel to expansions in oceanic trading networks. Islamic or Islamicate practices provided the cultural residue for expanding trading connections between Indian Ocean port cities during the

second millennium.[8] In Mombasa's immediate interior, a quite different constellation of social ideas and ritual exchanges supported Mijikenda speakers' ability to participate in this growing world of transregional connections.

PORT CITIES AND OTHER POSSIBILITIES

Before shifting to look at developments among communities in Mombasa's interior, it is necessary to first take a wider view of changes in coastal East Africa between the late first millennium and early second millennium. This was a period rife with many social possibilities for those living in early settlements along East Africa's littoral and immediate interior. As the last chapter documented, ambitious lineage heads could marshal their followers' skills and knowledge to scale up their activities in areas like craft production, subsistence, and trade. Meanwhile, mutual assistance practices offered the members of lineages a means to recruit and incorporate newcomers, helping the most successful villages to grow. In other cases, some individuals may have split off from their community, joining a new settlement or perhaps starting their own village with a smaller number of dependents. To trace these developments and place Mijikenda and Swahili settlements within a common framework, I will briefly consider some linguistic and archaeological evidence that shows (1) how first-millennium coastal East Africans conceptualized their settlements, and (2) processes of growth and fragmentation within these settlements from the late first millennium onward.

The many different possibilities existing for late first-millennium settlements are encapsulated in the term Sabaki speakers used to refer to towns and villages, *muji. Speaking of coastal "towns" today using English, one's imagination might immediately jump to urban port cities. However, past societies on the East African coast spoke of a spectrum of settlements, from the smallest hamlet to the largest towns, using the same word.[9] After proto-Sabaki diverged into daughter languages, their linguistic descendants continued to use reflexes of *muji to describe cities and villages alike. For example, in Swahili, a *mji* (or *mui*) can refer to everything from major urban centers, such as Mombasa or Nairobi, to small coastal hamlets. Mijikenda speakers, similarly, use a cognate form of the inherited word *mudzi* to describe a family homestead, a village, or a large city. The same holds true in other Sabaki languages where reflexes of *muji are applied to all settlements regardless of their size, location, or significance.[10]

Sabaki speakers categorized the spaces they occupied in expansive rather than restrictive terms. Like their distant linguistic ancestors, they articulated *muji by adding the nominal prefix mu- to the stem, indexing the word in a noun class that included various "entities with vitality," including human collectives like villages. Human collectives "are not in themselves human, but [are] endowed with certain human characteristics," namely, the ability to grow and reproduce.[11] In some Sabaki languages, reflexes of *muji also refer to a placenta, a secondary meaning

tied to the practice of burying the placenta in a family's settlement area in a town or village.[12] Through this metaphor, they actualized the blurry boundaries between the people and the physical spaces of settlements, directly connecting human reproduction to the village itself. As human collectives, villages didn't follow a single evolutionary trajectory, naturally expanding over time into cities. Villages could fuse and grow, but they could also split or even die.

Sabaki speakers' expansive concepts of towns and villages contrast with much of the earliest archaeological research on coastal villages, which treated them as "stepping stones" to Swahili urbanism.[13] This was due in part to documented changes on the Swahili coast and the Comoros Islands starting from the late first millennium. Around the middle of the first millennium, most Sabaki settlements remained small in scale. But within a few centuries of their dispersal, Sabaki speakers' descendants began building larger settlements than their predecessors. For instance, during the late first millennium, early migrants to the Comoros established at least one large settlement on each of the four volcanic islands that form the archipelago. In the early second millennium, these settlements began to grow, doubling or even tripling in size between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Small villages and hamlets clustered around larger towns, forming ever-denser population centers with main towns featuring coral stone mosques as their focal points.[14] Major Swahili towns like Kilwa experienced similar pathways to growth, expanding from small villages to large urban centers between the ninth and thirteenth centuries.[15]

At some coastal Swahili sites, scholars have identified continuities in their spatial organization as they grew from small villages to urban towns. The classic example is Shanga, a town on the Lamu archipelago in northern Kenya where archaeologists have identified the Swahili coast's oldest known mosque, built in the late eighth century. Even though Shanga was never a major trading port along the lines of Kilwa or Mombasa, it provides an important model for understanding local evolutions in Swahili towns. Mark Horton, the archaeologist who led excavations at Shanga, describes its organization as consisting of smaller settlement areas for separate clans grouped around a central enclosure shaped as a rectangle. Eventually, seven subsettlements surrounded the town center, each with its own gateway to access the central space. The central enclosure—originally demarcated by a timber fence, before it was replaced by coral stone during the tenth century—contained a well, a burial area, and a mosque, indicating that it likely served as a focus for different social, ritual, and commercial activities. Shanga's occupants rebuilt the central mosque many times in the town's history to accommodate a growing number of worshippers. Each rebuilt mosque overlayed earlier structures, with coral stone replacing mud and thatch, ultimately manifesting in the construction of a characteristic congregational mosque around 1000 CE.[16]

Research at Shanga played a critical role in helping scholars understand how Swahili towns emerged from local village roots. However, it also placed the story

of coastal society in something of a box, where villages represented "nascent versions of later towns built atop them."[17] More recent archaeological work has shifted this viewpoint, showing that coastal villages featured dynamic and complex settlement histories that cannot be reduced to a single story of growth. Adria LaViolette and Jeffrey Fleisher's work on Tumbe, a settlement on Pemba Island in what is now Tanzania, is especially instructive in this regard. During the eighth century, Tumbe developed into a large, dispersed trading village that was integrated into maritime trading networks. Finds at Tumbe reveal voluminous imported goods like glass beads and foreign ceramics. The site's occupants also produced shell beads for export to other areas along the coast. But notably, archaeologists found no evidence of hierarchies across Tumbe's settlement history. Instead, a wide variety of people—from farmers to craft manufacturers—had access to long-distance trade goods. Maritime trade was fully integrated into a robust domestic economy.[18]

Tumbe is the type of settlement that is supposed to develop into a major urban port. The town was set along a six-hundred-meter stretch of coastline and located on an island that had been a site for Indian Ocean trade since the time of the *Periplus*.[19] At an estimated twenty to thirty hectares in size, Tumbe may have been the largest settlement on the East African coast during the late first millennium. Furthermore, its occupants were already engaged in maritime trade by the eighth and ninth centuries.[20] However, during the mid-tenth century, they abandoned the site entirely and dispersed into the neighboring countryside. The area was left entirely unsettled until a new urban center, called Chwaka, was founded on this abandoned stretch of coastline in the mid-eleventh century, about two hundred meters south of Tumbe. Scholars theorize that Chwaka was founded as a religious center rather than a trading port. People lived close together in densely packed earth and thatch houses. They invested in religious architecture, building four coral stone mosques across the site's history, with the earliest dating to the settlement's founding. As Chwaka's religious architecture became more elaborate, people gradually abandoned the dispersed rural villages that their ancestors had established after Tumbe's abandonment and relocated to the growing town.[21] Ultimately, what we see at Tumbe and Chwaka is not continuity, with a small village growing into a large port city, but rather, we see much more complex processes and fluctuations.

This chapter is primarily concerned with Mijikenda-speaking communities, but it is worth engaging with recent scholarship on urbanism in the Swahili coast because it moves us away from any normative understanding of growth and social evolutions during the post-Sabaki period. Evidence from Pemba and other coastal sites has enabled archaeologists to begin rethinking the development of coastal urban centers "as part of an episodic and halting trajectory of development" rather than a single leap from village to mercantile port city.[22] Looking at the concepts and practices that Sabaki speakers developed prior to the sixth century, one might consider Swahili urbanism a natural evolutionary trajectory from these earlier "roots." In such a schema, inland villages look like historical relics

from which Swahili speakers departed after they founded settlements along the littoral, converted to Islam, and became engaged in maritime commerce. But, as coastal archaeologists have emphasized, there was not any standard pathway to urban growth.[23] This reality opens questions about the choices people made for social and material changes to happen: Did people decide to abandon a large, connected town like Tumbe because they saw smaller hamlets as a better option—at least for a time? Mijikenda speakers shared many cultural and linguistic similarities with Swahili speakers in towns like Mombasa. Did they maintain distinctions from the town because doing so suited alternative social ambitions?

Two inland sites located a short distance away from Mombasa called Chombo and Mteza offer entry points for answering these questions. The southern part of Mombasa Island is separated from its mainland by Kilindini Harbor, today the site of the city's main shipping hub. At the harbor's narrowest points, the island and mainland sit only five hundred meters apart before the waterway opens into a large estuarian creek called Port Reitz, which flanks a rolling upland dissected by small rivers and creeks. During the late first millennium, ironworking farmers founded Chombo and Mteza along these fertile ridges, just a short distance inland from Port Reitz. Oral traditions about the two sites link them to a deeper settlement history of the Digo Mijikenda-speaking groups that live in the area. According to oral histories, Chombo was first settled by a Digo matriclan that broke away from a larger settlement called Kaya Kwale. The group at Chombo later split again, with some members moving farther north to establish Mteza.[24] Material evidence from each site places their occupations as roughly contemporaneous, with calibrated radiocarbon date ranges between the late eighth and late tenth centuries.[25] Chombo consisted of three closely linked smaller sites, the largest being 2.2 hectares and the smallest 1.2 hectares. Because archaeologists believe the three sites were settled contemporaneously, they may have been occupied by separate lineages of a larger marriage alliance or clan. Mteza demonstrates a similar organizational schema, consisting of "five closely spaced settlement sites which are located together in an area which has been broadly labeled 'Kaya Mwanyundo' by local Digo elders."[26] Like Chombo, Mteza consisted of a cluster of smaller villages, each between 1.8 and 0.9 hectares, all sitting atop a steep incline overlooking a river valley that ended at Port Reitz Creek, just two kilometers away.

With their proximity to the ocean, the people living at both sites participated in the maritime economy. Archaeologists have recovered imported goods from the two sites, including Indo-Pacific glass beads, cowrie shells, and Chinese Yue stoneware. Copal fragments, rock crystal, and a cylinder-shaped carved ivory box demonstrate their access to some of East Africa's most important exports. In addition to oceanic trade, Chombo and Mteza's economic activities were characteristic of their Sabaki roots. They fished and gathered freshwater and marine resources, hunted small wild game, and kept some domestic animals. At Chombo, occupants smelted iron and produced iron tools for hunting and farming. Lithics recovered

from the site also indicate that its occupants either used stone tools or interacted regularly with neighboring lithic-using groups across the site's history.[27]

No detailed written descriptions exist for inland villages until the nineteenth century, a thousand years after Chombo and Mteza's calibrated date ranges. But the archaeological evidence allows us to think through their connections to other communities, and the ways that they distinguished themselves from contemporaneous Swahili-speaking settlements, like the earliest settlers on nearby Mombasa. We might imagine that people so close to the ocean, with established links to the maritime economy, would have desired to take part in emerging Indian Ocean cosmopolitan schema. However, there's no evidence that Mombasa's neighboring countryside was ever depopulated by people flocking to the town to participate in its mercantile culture. Furthermore, the closely linked settlements at Chombo and Mteza did not gradually form into larger towns. Instead, archaeological evidence indicates that the descendants of those living in these two settlements were far more likely to have lived in villages that were smaller and more dispersed than their predecessors.

Archaeological surveys from southeast Kenya provide a clear picture of these larger trends in settlement size. During the early second millennium, a wide variety of settlement types flourished in southeast Kenya's interior. Some of this region's early villages did grow into multicomponent towns. For instance, a site called Mtsengo, located thirty-five kilometers inland from Mombasa and founded in the late first millennium, reached 7.56 hectares by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, making it comparable to contemporaneous medium-sized littoral settlements. Several other sites located along Mombasa's inland ridge grew to a size equivalent to smaller coastal towns, roughly four to five hectares, during a similar time frame. However, most settlements were not large towns. Instead, the average site in southeast Kenya's interior—the core of the Mijikenda settlement region—shrank from 1.26 hectares prior to 1000 CE to 0.59 hectares for sites founded between roughly 1000 and 1650 CE.[28] In other words, sites that were founded after 1000 CE were, on average, less than half the size of those that were founded during the first millennium. After the mid-seventeenth century, the settlement hierarchies discernable in earlier periods—which featured many smaller villages but also some large towns like Mtsengo—broke down further. By the latter half of the second millennium, homestead-based villages were the dominant settlement model across southeast Kenya's immediate interior.[29]

The archaeological surveys show that as Mombasa developed as a major port city, most people living immediately inland from the island would have lived in small, rural hamlets. Population densities increased over time across the inland region. However, when populations grew, most people responded by forming more small settlements rather than growing their hamlets into super villages or towns. This emphasis on smaller-scale villages had a major impact on settlement patterns in Mombasa's immediate interior. During the first millennium, settlements in this

region clustered on the forested ridges of the coastal upland. But over time, people expanded their settlement areas beyond the fertile ridges inland from Mombasa into the high coastal plain to the west and north, and the low coastal plain to the south.[30] Processes of splitting and expansion put people in contact with new communities and forced them to adapt their foodways and social strategies to new environments. Shrinking and dispersal, in other words, facilitated both internal changes and external connections.

INCORPORATION, COLLABORATION, AND DISPERSAL IN MIJIKENDA ORAL TRADITIONS

Oral traditions attest to the importance of cross-societal alliances for longer-term processes of community formation in coastal East Africa. As Sabaki-speaking groups planted settlements throughout the East African coast during the first millennium, they collaborated with people from other speech communities, often absorbing strangers into their settlements. The previous chapter detailed some linguistic innovations that supported these incorporative practices. Oral accounts about the origins of towns like Mombasa and of neighboring Mijikenda settlements similarly emphasize interactions with outsiders, reflecting what historian Daren Ray calls a "cosmopolitan ethic."[31] The traditions offer a window into coastal East African intellectuals' own perspectives on various settlement processes and interactions, including the inland shift toward smaller-scale villages, as reflected in the archaeological records detailed above.

Oral traditions about the founding of Mombasa and other Swahili-speaking towns are replete with stories of collaborations with newcomers and foreigners. This is especially true of one well-known narrative, called the "Shirazi tradition." In this tradition, migrants from Shiraz (in Persia) are said to have traveled to East Africa, where they met people living along the coast and offshore islands and began trading with them. The migrants introduced East Africans to Islam and married local women. Their children became the Swahili.[32] In Mombasa, a local epic explains that a queen mother named Mwana Mkisi established the island's first permanent settlement at Kongowea, located on the northern part of the island.[33] Later, a migrant named Shehe Mvita (or Sheikh Mvita) traveled to Mombasa from Persia and established the town's first Islamic lineage, becoming remembered as its founding father in local chronicles.[34] Mombasa continued to grow in the centuries that followed through local migrations. People from other northern Swahili towns flocked to the city and established their own *miji* (or "towns") on the island and on its immediate mainland. Eventually, Mombasa's population consisted of twelve *miji*. The leading elders of each town together represented a political council overseeing the island's affairs with their collective *miji* forming the urban polity of Mombasa—sometimes also called Mvita after the town's founding sheikh.[35] Thus, Mombasa grew into a large town, according to oral traditions, by absorbing

migrants who collectively contributed to the religious and political life of the port city.

Mijikenda speakers' oral traditions also emphasize collaborations between migrants and in situ groups. In contrast to the oral accounts of Swahili towns, which explained their origins through an Islamic-oceanic interactive sphere, Mijikenda traditions suggest local understandings of the past rooted in processes of interaction and conflict involving other groups from East Africa's interior.[36] Most traditions begin with them fleeing Shungwaya, their mythical northern homeland, following a dispute with Oromo speakers, often having to do with the kidnapping or murder of an Oromo child for an initiation ritual called *mung'aro*.[37] Aspects of the historical traditions vary over time and space or depending on the individual teller. But the most common narrative is that Mijikenda groups fled from Shungwaya and traveled south, stopping to form shorter-term settlements while en route. Eventually, they established their *kayas*—fortified settlements built atop forest glades along Mombasa's inland ridge—sometimes relying on the aid of hunter-foragers who acted as guides. At each *kaya*, the settlers buried a charm called a *fingo*, which protected their settlement.[38]

The period following the migration—which some historians refer to as the "*kaya* phase"—was a thriving era, according to most traditions. During this time, the nine Mijikenda groups lived in their respective *kayas*, each of which was divided into separate areas for clans or family groups. Each clan had their own clearing, called the *lwanda*, where they met to discuss important matters. Another clearing, called the *moro*, was reserved for the leading elders who met to deliberate on judicial matters and esoteric concerns. The *kaya* phase is said to have lasted into the nineteenth century, when the institutions of the *kayas* began to break down and people started moving out of the forests to establish their own homesteads. After the *kayas* ceased to be primary residences, they were recast as burial grounds and meeting places for initiations or other rituals.[39]

The generic narrative structure of the oral traditions divides the past into three phases: pre-*kaya, kaya*, and post-*kaya*. In this schema, the middle era—or *kaya* phase—represents the peak of Mijikenda "traditional" institutions.[40] At first glance, the narrative structure is at odds with the settlement geography discussed in the previous section. This archaeological evidence shows that people living in southeast Kenya constantly founded new settlements and expanded into new ecologies, especially during the mid-second millennium, precisely when the *kaya* phase is supposed to have begun. Yet traditions regarding the sequencing of these sites demonstrate the reliability of oral historians' knowledge of past settlement processes. According to an analysis by archaeologist Richard Helm, the sites associated with pre-*kaya* and *kaya* traditions are among the oldest in southeast Kenya's coastal hinterlands, with most being founded in the first millennium. Meanwhile, the historical sites that oral histories link to splintering *kayas* were, in general, smaller, located over more diffuse ecologies, and were founded during the last four

or five centuries.[41] In other words, oral traditions about splintering *kayas* seem to correlate with the documented proliferation of smaller, homestead-based settlements over the course of the second millennium. These processes accelerated during the seventeenth century, representing the post-*kaya* phase in oral traditions.[42]

While *kaya* traditions and archaeological records indicate longer-term processes of shrinking and dispersal, oral narratives also highlight the role of forest groves as spaces for assembly and cross-societal connections. Oral historians' accounts speak to this most directly in narratives that center foreigners and their knowledge in the making of Mijikenda clans. Consider, for example, the following narrative that Thomas Spear recorded in a conversation with an elder named Kathungi Ndenge about the founding of the *kayas*:

> Some of the smaller clans were formed by foreigners, people from Digo, Taita, and even Laa. We have all kinds of people in Giriama. . . . The Giriama often brought foreign *waganga* [healers] to Giriama; a Taita for his special knowledge, a Digo for rainmaking, and a Pemba for his *uganga* [medicine]. These people settled in Giriama; they married and had families; and each of these became their own sub-clan.[43]

In Ndenge's rendering, settlements succeeded by constantly adopting newcomers and their skills and medicinal knowledge, including hunter-foragers (Laa), other Mijikenda (Digo), Swahili (Pemba), and more distantly related Bantu-speaking communities (Taita). As a result of the skills that people brought with them, some were able to eventually bypass the marginal status ascribed to outsiders and start their own clans.

Ndenge's perspective on the importance of collaborations with different groups is hardly an isolated example.[44] In other traditions, autochthonous hunter-foragers—usually called the Langulo or Laa—led the different Mijikenda groups to the protected forest groves where they established their *kayas*. In the process of these interactions, some were incorporated into extant clans or even cast as founders of specific clans and subclans, both called *mbari*.[45] Other clans are said to be founded by members of different Mijikenda groups, and others still purport that their founders were from different parts of Kenya's interior, like the Taita Hills or Mount Kilimanjaro regions.[46] Many clans had their own specialized medicines. Some of these medicines helped them along the migration route from Shungwaya, protecting them and leading them to their *kayas*. Once they settled down in their forested homesteads, different groups possessed specialties like rainmaking, preventing disease, or casting out harmful spirits.[47]

Notions of clanship offered coastal East Africans an ideological framework for cross-societal collaborations. The social organization practices commonly glossed in English as "clans" were flexible and inclusive, as historians of early Africa have observed. Rather than representing people sharing biological descent, clans constituted "networks of knowledge" that members could use to procure material goods, mobilize people, or to gain access to healing associations or medicines.[48]

In Sabaki society, according to Ray, clans were tasked with addressing pressing social and ecological issues such as rainmaking during droughts, resolving disputes, and assembling protective medicines. A village couldn't wait out a drought or a disease outbreak. They needed access to medicines and other forms of specialized knowledge quickly. Access to a network bounded by social ideologies of clanship provided settlements with a framework for obtaining and mobilizing knowledge to mitigate these challenges. While the clans' inclusive nature encouraged collaborations, it also created potential conflicts if specialists in one clan or settlement tried to guard or monopolize their knowledge.[49]

Oral traditions on the "*kaya* phase" attest to processes of assembly and incorporation that are resonant with the social ideas discussed in chapter 1. But as the archaeological evidence demonstrates, over the second millennium, communities in Mombasa's interior built more smaller settlements rather than continuing to recruit outsiders to simply help their villages to grow.[50] Mijikenda historical traditions provide insights into processes reflected in the archaeological surveys. These accounts are replete with stories of clans splitting to form new settlements following disputes, population pressures, or natural disasters like famine. Sometimes family quarrels prompted people to move elsewhere and found new villages.[51] Accusations that a person used harmful magic (*utsai*) or engaged in other antisocial behaviors could also result in them being expelled from one settlement and starting their own, or joining a different settlement.[52] More mundane developments like population pressures and overcrowding could also result in a settlement splitting apart.[53]

In delving into these traditional histories, I am not claiming that they represent the past exactly as it was. Instead, the oral traditions describe "events and processes of dispute and conflict" as people gradually established villages in new environments over the course of the second millennium, accelerating especially around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[54] As Ray explains, Mijikenda oral historians "assembled stories that their audiences could accept as true."[55] Clearly, assembly and fissure were resonant and enduring features in local visions of the past. Both processes necessitated collaboration.

Mombasa's interior features highly varied microclimates, meaning settlements within a small radius could be affected very differently by a drought or famine. During the more recent past, people often moved from one region of the interior to another to seek relief from droughts and food shortages.[56] Mobility during adverse circumstances overlapped with more regular subsistence practices like swidden agriculture, which required that people move their farm plots every few years. Over time, this would have caused a gradual expansion in Mijikenda speakers' settlement geography as people moved into new areas in search of available forestland for cultivation. As communities pressed westward off the fertile coastal ridges and into the drier upland plains, cultivatable land became sparser and planted fields were often less capable of supporting large populations. Knowledge

of the local soils, weather patterns, and forest products would have been especially valuable for migrants as they settled in regions with less predictable rainfall. At the same time, ecological pressures would have made it harder to recruit, incorporate, and retain newcomers. This meant that the members of extant settlements needed to constantly innovate or adopt new social and ritual strategies to thrive.

Mijikenda speakers' gradual emphasis on smaller settlements created opportunities to build connections with closely related speech communities and other inland groups. Settlements collaborated with one another regularly, adopting and innovating new knowledge, and incorporating new people and groups into their networks. The oral traditions of people founding *kayas*, incorporating strangers, and exchanging medicines and skills attest to an enlarging interactive sphere in Mombasa's immediate interior during past centuries. Furthermore, the traditions underscore the contingent qualities of collectives like a village, a *kaya*, or a clan. Settlements worked because people had options. To ensure that their village endured, a homestead head (or *mwenye*) needed to be able to maintain the social well-being and prosperity of their dependents.[57] The remainder of the chapter traces how they did so. As Mijikenda speakers started to emphasize homestead-based settlements, they developed healing associations and innovated and adopted various types of forest clearings around their settlements. These ritual spaces and healing groups operated as a crossroads for interactions among their villages and with other inland communities.

ASSEMBLING KNOWLEDGE, ANIMATING THE INLAND LANDSCAPE

Forest shrines and meeting places proliferated as Mijikenda speakers settled down along the ridges inland from Mombasa. They conducted healing rituals and administered judicial oaths in forested clearings on the outskirts of their villages. They left offerings in shrines built in tree stumps and caves to appease natural spirits. Medicines and charms buried around the borders of homes and farm fields ensured healthy yields and social reproduction. Within their homesteads, they erected commemorative wooden posts that represented recently departed ancestors.[58] Mijikenda speakers' array of shrines and meeting spaces reflect enduring concerns with appeasing natural and ancestral spirits, maintaining balance between medicines that could heal and harm, and finding spaces to congregate and build relationships that cut across individual homesteads. To demarcate ritual spaces for different healing activities, they drew from inherited practices while also readily adopting new ideas from other societies in Mombasa's interior, as the linguistic evidence analyzed below will show. Over centuries, Mijikenda speakers developed spaces for healing and ritual critical to their settlements' well-being through knowledge exchanges with other inland societies. Like the oral traditions, this evidence reveals inland villages as adaptive and connected spaces.

Before shifting to linguistic evidence, I need to add a quick note on methodology. As in the last chapter, I use historical linguistic methodologies in the following discussion. However, since I focus on Mijikenda—which is a dialect chain—my approach differs slightly. Words that Mijikenda speakers inherited from their Sabaki ancestors provide a picture of the ritual and intellectual contours of early Mijikenda society. However, linguistic and ethnographic records also contain many words that were not inherited from proto-Sabaki. These words speak to innovations and adaptations that Mijikenda-speaking groups made to meet their own goals. Because Mijikenda dialects exhibit limited lexical and phonological differences, I cannot place most post-Sabaki changes precisely in time. Nevertheless, studying the derivation and distributions of words for different forested spaces, meeting grounds, and ritual markers illuminates a longer-term picture of socio-ritual transformations in this region between the early second millennium and the nineteenth century.

Spatial-ritual practices that Mijikenda speakers inherited from their linguistic ancestors offer a good starting point for considering these transformations over the longue durée. One example is the common practice, mentioned earlier, of burying protective charms called *fingo*. In oral traditions, the founding narrative for each of the main *kayas* includes stories about the original occupants burying *fingo* in the central and most sacred place of their palisaded villages. The term *fingo*, meaning "fetish" or "charm," dates back thousands of years to the earliest Bantu-speaking communities in equatorial Africa.[59] Comparative ethnographic evidence indicates that Northeast Coast speakers buried these protective charms—often in medicinal pots—since at least the start of the first millennium. Since modern Mijikenda dialects retained this word and associated practices, we can conclude that the earliest Mijikenda-speaking communities employed similar protective measures, burying *fingo* pots under the main pathways leading into their villages, the doorways of homes, and along the boundaries of agricultural fields.[60] Thus, oral traditions speak to an assemblage of medicinal practices that existed for many centuries prior to the proto-Mijikenda period.

Other agents animated spaces beyond the settled contours of their villages. For instance, coastal Bantu-speaking groups have constructed shrines in small huts and caves where they presented offerings to spirits (*mizịmu) to promote the health and well-being of their settlements since at least the start of the first millennium. These practices endured among early Mijikenda speakers who understood *mizimu* to refer to both the spirits and the shrines. During the more recent past, natural spaces around their villages, such as caves and rock outcroppings, hollowed tree trunks, and forest groves, were all common abodes for *mizimu*. Medicinal experts pacified the spirits by offering foods, textiles, and charms, the latter of which they prepared from forest products and human objects like hair and nail clippings.[61]

Although *mizimu* spirits retained a significant role in some Mijikenda-speaking settlements, they continued adapting their understanding of the invisible forces

that resided in wild spaces outside of their settlements. For instance, in Digo and Duruma—the two southernmost Mijikenda dialects—people replaced *muzimu* with a similar space called *muzuka*. This was an inherited term that meant "apparition" in proto-Sabaki (*muzyuka) and often carried associations with malevolent spirits. However, in southern Mijikenda dialects, *muzuka* referred to an abode for the spirits, which they located in natural spaces around their settlements, making it effectively synonymous in meaning and practice to a *muzimu*.[62] While I cannot say precisely when or why they replaced one spirit-shrine with another, this innovation highlights an important trend among communities in Mombasa's immediate interior: a regular willingness to adapt their ritual landscape to meet their needs.

In addition to the shrines, Mijikenda speakers used memorial posts for recently departed ancestors, called *koma*, to ensure their villages' well-being as they regularly moved and rebuilt their settlements.[63] During the recent past, the markers for the *koma* were located within the settlement area itself, which had the effect of repatriating the spirit of the deceased to the homestead.[64] People constructed the posts (also called *koma*) from tree branches, tying colorful cloth strips around the branch to dress the ancestral spirit and mark their gender identity.[65] Not every ancestor received a memorial shrine. They only erected a *koma* if a living person became afflicted by the spirit of a recently deceased ancestor. Building a memorial post provided a physical context for appeasing the ancestor with offerings of food or palm wine. If they moved settlements, they would leave their *koma* in place, meaning the ancestor's spirit would fold into the newly unsettled landscape as forest regrowth overtook the abandoned village.[66] Practices associated with these small wooden posts therefore fit well alongside the available archaeological evidence and oral histories, which suggests regular processes of mobility and fissures between settlements in the region.

Furthermore, these wooden memorial posts show how village rituals connected Mijikenda settlements to more expansive cross-societal interactions and borrowings. The word *koma* is attested across a much larger linguistic geography, including in other Sabaki languages (Pokomo and Swahili); some adjacent Northeast Coast languages; and some neighboring but more distantly related Bantu languages. Because the term is attested across a contiguous linguistic area, it is likely the product of what linguists refer to as an areal spread, referring to a word that spreads among speakers of geographically adjacent languages. Its phonetic shape in these languages indicates that the term, probably with the form *nkoma, diffused very early across this region, possibly as early as the proto-Sabaki period.[67] While reflexes of *nkoma generally connoted the spirit of a deceased ancestor across a contiguous corridor of languages, different linguistic groups adapted the term to their own needs. In Upper Pokomo–speaking communities in northern Kenya, for instance, *nkoma* took the form of impersonal nature spirits that people pacified with offerings before planting and for rainmaking rituals. Dawida

speakers—who lived immediately west of the core Mijikenda settlement region—constructed shrines called *ngoma* (which is cognate with *koma*) containing the exhumed skulls of the ancestors of their lineage.[68]

To maintain relationships with their *koma*, Mijikenda speakers made offerings at the memorial markers, a practice they called *kuhasa* or *kuhatsa*. Much like *koma*, the verb *-hasa* has a history that draws attention to Mijikenda speakers' interactions with neighboring inland societies. The term's original source is the Chaga-Taita root word **-tac-*, which meant "to offer, sacrifice."[69] Mijikenda speakers likely adopted this word from Dawida speakers living directly to their west in the Taita Hills, which has long been an important exchange corridor, especially since the early second millennium.[70] In Mijikenda dialects, the loanword *-hasa* replaced their inherited proto-Sabaki term for making a sacrifice (**-tambik-*), perhaps indicating that the borrowing marked a novel way of thinking about rituals associated with ancestor veneration. In the Taita Hills, performances of *kutasa* rituals involved spitting libations and specialized utterances to call on the ancestors for blessings.[71] Mijikenda communities adopted similar practices, spitting and casting fluids like palm wine, to honor *koma* and to initiate healing ceremonies in other ritual settings.[72]

Mijikenda speakers made significant investments in ritual spaces in and around their settlements, drawing from many practices that were recognized and shared among language groups and societies across a wider region. In the settled contours of their villages, memorial posts brought balance to the homesteads while buried charms protected homes and crops from harmful magic. Outside of villages, nature spirits hovered around forest groves and caves. In addition to these spaces, ethnographic and oral sources—which I will discuss below—describe various forested meeting spaces and clearings in the bush as key foci of social and ritual activities. For many Bantu-speaking societies, the bush carries powerful associations as the appropriate spatial context for mediations with nonhuman agents, rituals for healing and reproduction, and productive activities like ironworking. These activities distinguished forests and bushland from the settled spaces of the villages, manifesting in what scholars describe as an ancient "village/bush dichotomy."[73] In early Mijikenda society, people continually assembled knowledge to reproduce and reinterpret ancient associations between the bush, healing, and social reproduction of homesteads.

By comparing Mijikenda speakers' inherited vocabulary for the bush with words that they innovated and borrowed, it quickly becomes clear that they greatly expanded the lexicon they used to name meeting spaces and forested clearings from the late first millennium onward. The earliest Mijikenda speakers inherited words that referred to forested spaces, such as the ancient Bantu terms *nyika* and *tsaka*, which they interpreted as "wilderness" and "forest," respectively.[74] However, it is unclear whether their Sabaki ancestors possessed any words referring to cleared activity areas within the bush. One potential candidate is found in the Digo and Duruma term *chiphalo*, which referred to a place for practicing medicines and

TABLE 1 Meeting Places in Mijikenda Dialects

Term in Mijikenda	Meanings	Distribution	Status
moro	Assembly of elders, meeting place in *kaya*	All Mijikenda; also, Pokomo, Mwiini	Loanword from Eastern Cushitic "cattle fold"
rungu, kurungu	Meeting place for elders; shrine for keeping healing pots and drums, located in bush	All Mijikenda; in Digo and Duruma, a shrine for healing pots associated with matrilineal ancestors	Likely derived from Mashariki term associated with "wilderness"
chiphalo	Dancing area, healing grounds located in clearing in bush	Digo, Duruma; also, Gogo, Thagicu languages	Inheritance (or relic areal diffusion?)
p'ala	Healer's workplace, meeting place for secret societies, located in clearing in bush	Giryama	Related to *chiphalo* either as a morphological innovation or relic form
ndala	Healer's workplace, place for recovery after initiations, located in clearing in bush	All Mijikenda except Giryama; also, Bondei to south	Areal innovation with Bondei? (Seuta language adjacent to Digo)
kinyaka, chinyaka	Dancing area located in clearing in bush close to village	All Mijikenda except Digo and Duruma	Loanword from Kamba
rome, dhome	Shaded sitting area for elder men, place for storytelling	All Mijikenda	Loanword from Thagicu (Kamba or Segeju)

performing dances. This term has a scattered distribution in the Kaskazi branch of Mashariki Bantu languages, indicating it may date back over two thousand years.[75] Mijikenda speakers also inherited the Sabaki term *luWanda. In proto-Sabaki this term described an open area, but the Mijikenda form, *lwanda*, connoted a clearing or meeting house for clans of a *kaya* in oral traditions.[76] After Mijikenda emerged as a distinct language, its speakers expanded the number and variety of places for meeting, socializing, and practicing rituals in the forests around their villages, as Table 1 illustrates.

A brief overview of the development of Mijikenda dialects is necessary to contextualize this table.[77] During the late first millennium, communities speaking an early form of Mijikenda lived on the fertile ridges inland from Mombasa. Within a few centuries—likely during the early second millennium—differences began forming between the speech of people living at the northern and southern ends of this speech community.[78] Eventually, distinctions in the speech of people living in different areas became pronounced enough to be considered distinctive dialects,

MAP 3. Mijikenda dialects: Digo, Duruma, Rabai, Central Mijikenda, and Giryama (Central Mijikenda includes Chonyi, Jibana, Kambe, Kauma, and Ribe). Map created by John Wyatt Greenlee, Surprised Eel Mapping.

today, consisting of Digo, Duruma, Rabai, Central Mijikenda, and Giryama.[79] Of these, Digo—the southernmost dialect—is the most distinct, both in terms of its lexicon and its grammar.[80] The other dialects, meanwhile, feature fewer lexical differences in terms of their core vocabulary. This indicates that they probably only began to differentiate from one another over the last few centuries.[81] Even after differences in their speech started to develop, people living in all parts of the Mijikenda speech community continued to interact with one another, exchanging words and ideas in the process.[82]

The diversity of words for forested and ritual meeting places in different dialects since proto-Mijikenda reflects the innovative nature of this social-spatial arena. By comparing these words—and the practices associated with them—we can conjecture about larger processes of adaptation, replacement, and borrowing over generations. For instance, in northern Mijikenda dialects, people replaced the term *chiphalo* with a similar space called *chinyaka*, a word they borrowed from Kamba.[83] Giryama speakers, meanwhile, interpreted *chiphalo* with a different noun prefix and suffix, articulating the word *p'ala*, which described a cleared area in the bush for administering medicines, holding feasts, and carving memorial posts.[84] A similar space called *ndala*—which was a healer's workplace, a meeting place, and a recovery ground following initiations—spread among other Mijikenda dialects.[85] All these spaces were distinct from another type of forest shrine called the *rungu*. At the southern edges of the dialect chain, Digo and Duruma speakers built their *rungu* just outside of their villages, using the forest shrines to store medicinal pots (*vifudu*) associated with matrilineal ancestors.[86] In other dialects, the *rungu* was a meeting place in the bush where the members of male healing societies stored special drums—called *mwanza*—that were played when administering judicial medicines.[87]

The derivations of *rungu* and *chiphalo/p'ala* offer a window into the concepts underpinning early Mijikenda speakers' understanding of forested ritual spaces. *Chiphalo* and *p'ala*, for instance, are derived from the root *-pád-, meaning "scrape, scratch." Proto-Sabaki speakers created an array of verbs that described clearing land for agriculture from this stem. Its semantic links to land clearing indicate that although the spaces were in the bush, people considered it a maintained wilderness.[88] *Rungu*, meanwhile, is likely derived from a root that is thousands of years old that means "plain; open space; desert; loneliness."[89] Across eastern Africa, words derived from this root carried associations with potent wilderness spirits. When attested with a different noun prefix in Great Lakes Bantu languages, it referred to "a dispersed territorial spiritual force which assists hunters."[90] A reflex of the same term described a "'potentially malevolent spirit' that moved within unsettled, neglected wilderness areas" among proto-Ruvu speakers in central-eastern Tanzania. Rhonda Gonzales has argued that both the Great Lakes and Ruvu meanings have their origins in the proto-Kaskazi word *mulungu, which described a type of spirit that inhabited unsettled areas and required supplication in the bush.[91]

In *rungu*, Mijikenda speakers brought together ancient ideas about spiritual potency and wilderness into a single spatial context.

Members of inland settlements maintained specialized activity areas for healing activities while restricting access to certain knowledgeable individuals. The female *chifudu* members who kept medicine pots in the *rungu* and the members of male secret societies who carved memorial posts and prepared medicinal oaths in the *p'ala* both pursued wellness for their communities. However, the secretive and restricted nature of their activities also made it possible for practitioners to use healing knowledge to achieve their own individual ambitions, as the next section will detail.

Ultimately, the proliferation of overlapping—and sometimes synonymous—meanings for forested healing grounds, shrines, and other meeting places highlights Mijikenda speakers' unique investments in the ancient village/bush dichotomy. They reworked their understanding of the spaces around their villages by altering the meanings of older words, creating entirely new words, and by adopting words and knowledge from other linguistic communities. Amid these transformations, Mijikenda speakers began conceptualizing forested meeting spaces as the main contexts for political and ritual life, ideas that endured well into the twentieth century in stories about the *kayas*.[92] As their oral traditions suggest, people pursued medicinal knowledge by seeking out experts from other communities. By looking outward for knowledge to solve their most pressing problems, village leaders created links between dispersed homesteads and continually generated associations with other inland groups.

INNOVATING MEDICINES, MAKING CONNECTIONS

The remainder of the chapter situates the meeting spaces that proliferated in Mijikenda society and overlapping physical/spatial changes in inland villages within a broader history of healing and political authority. Forested clearings and ritual meeting grounds were the main spatial contexts for political work in inland villages. The first published Mijikenda language dictionary, for example, defined a *mudzi* (or village) as meaning a "place of abode" and the "people of a place" but also as the elders representing the people, such as when men from different villages assembled under large baobabs.[93] The village itself, as the entry alludes, could be metaphorically understood as existing under the shade of a large tree where elder men congregated to deliberate on important matters. In the absence of a state or larger polity, forest clearings and medicines linked villages in Mombasa's interior.

In arguing that healing and ritual knowledge undergirded growing connections in Mombasa's interior, I build on a wealth of scholarship on public healing in precolonial Africa. Public healing refers to "socially composed" ritual practices that healed collective ailments.[94] Public healers addressed droughts, famines, and disease outbreaks. They also sought to resolve moral afflictions such as those caused

by neglected ancestral spirits; conflicts within a settlement, kin-group, or even an entire state or region; or a leader failing to engage in proper patronage.[95] Public healing activities could forge connections between disparate groups, helping to form new political identities or expand the reach of economic networks. In the Lower Congo, for instance, anthropologist John Janzen has shown that judges and merchants were healers in Lemba, a cult of affliction that acted as an integrative mechanism across a large, politically decentralized region. Lemba was especially critical to the region's participation in international trade between the seventeen and nineteenth centuries as the Lower Congo became a part of the Atlantic world nexus. Lemba practitioners used its medicines to regulate markets, build marriage alliances between clans, and heal afflictions that occurred when merchants accumulated wealth.[96] Ultimately, Janzen's work shows how public healing activities acted as a governing framework across dispersed and disparate communities while also fostering participation in trade. Thus, the Lemba example is instructive for understanding how healing ideas and practices created a connective tissue between villages in Mombasa's interior.

A brief background on Mijikenda speakers' medicinal ideas is necessary to examine the interplay between healing and governance in small-scale villages in southeast Kenya. Mijikenda speakers called medicine *uganga*, an ancient term that dates back thousands of years to the earliest Bantu speakers.[97] In coastal East Africa, *uganga* encompassed a huge range of ritual activities. As Ray explains, *uganga* included "techniques of iron working, rain making, clearing paths, negotiating peace, leading a war party, carving grave markers, moving sacred drums, composing songs, and communicating with ancestors."[98] Since not all individuals or groups possessed equal knowledge for these tasks, medicinal experts needed to collaborate frequently, as oral traditions demonstrate. Experts closely guarded their knowledge to ensure that they could benefit from collaborations with other clans and settlements.[99]

Mijikenda speakers inherited many of the words and practices associated with different types of *uganga* from their Sabaki ancestors. During the proto-Sabaki period, healers called *Waganga were the main proprietors of medicines that they used to address problems of individual health as well as larger social ailments.[100] They also helped to remedy the actions of people who used harmful magic, called *WucaWi, for destructive or antisocial purposes.[101] When practitioners wielded *utsai* (the Mijikenda form of the word *WucaWi) they could damage an individual's health or their possessions, such as crops or cattle. Especially powerful *utsai* could also affect an entire family or a cluster of neighboring settlements.[102] Calamities like drought, disease, and famine all potentially signaled that someone had used harmful medicines for antisocial purposes. Healers curated a variety of protective medicines to combat *utsai*. But the lines between healing and harming were fragile. Public perception of a healer's motivations and intent influenced whether the medicine was designated as *uganga*, a medicine that healed, or *utsai*,

a medicine that caused harm. If healers failed to properly address misfortunes or violated established community norms, they risked being accused of practicing *utsai* themselves.[103]

Due to the porous boundaries between medicines that healed and medicines that caused harm, village leaders needed to be able to root out the cause of any misfortune to maintain social balance. One of the main methods for doing so was by having healers administer "oaths" that were used to determine the cause of moral transgressions or calamities. Sabaki speakers inherited two different terms that referred to oathing practices from their linguistic ancestors, *mwavị and *kilapo. Mijikenda speakers retained only *kilapo, however, which they articulated as *kiraho, chiraho*, or *chirapho* in different dialects. These terms derived from the proto-Bantu root word -dàp-, meaning "to swear."[104] Fitting the word's derivation, the practice itself typically took the form of what anthropological literature refers to as a "poison ordeal." In an ordeal, the accused individual would stand trial against their accusers by offering testimony and "swearing" an oath in support of its truthfulness. After their testimony, the *aganga* (Mijikenda form of *Waganga) administered an oath that typically took the form of poison or an object like a hot axe or needle.[105] In the mid-nineteenth century, for instance, missionary Charles New reported that Central Mijikenda groups used at least four different types of judicial oaths, including the *kiraho cha tsoka*, or "ordeal of the axe," which was administered by "applying a red-hot axe four times to the palm of the hand of the suspected person."[106] Oaths were only effective if the person was guilty of the transgression of which they were accused. The hot axe of a *kiraho cha tsoka* could not burn an innocent person's hands.

While Mijikenda speakers inherited these practices from their Sabaki ancestors, they continued to adapt *virapho* (pl.) practices, ultimately using groups associated with different medicines to foster connections across dispersed homesteads. In addition to curating judicial oaths, Sabaki speakers possessed *virapho* that could protect from misfortune—rather than simply rooting out its cause after the fact.[107] This practice continued among Mijikenda speakers who developed a huge range of *virapho* for guarding their fields, homes, and individual bodies. For instance, people used preventative *virapho* to protect their homes and fields against thieves by casting a spell on someone who entered a field without permission. One common *chirapho* was the *habasi*, a medicine made from a painted baobab shell that caused bleeding or dysentery when a person violated the area it protected. If someone believed a family member or rival was afflicting them with *utsai*, they could also obtain *virapho* to bury around their home or to wear as amulets to proactively prevent or reverse the impact of harmful medicines.[108]

The number and variety of *virapho* proliferated in Mijikenda society over many centuries. When medicines were deemed ineffective, they were discarded, and new ones gained prominence. Over time, those possessing knowledge of the most powerful oaths organized into specialist groups associated with specific medicines.

This ensured the durability of certain *virapho* and promoted these knowledgeable specialists as the proper mediators of healing within their communities.[109] In some cases, the groups were open to anyone capable of paying the membership fees, while others required that an individual already be a recognized member of local elders' councils. These councils featured different ornamentation and specialized ritual objects, including drums, medicine pots, and objects associated with their medicines and oaths. For example, protective medicines such as the *chirapho cha kobe* and the *chirapho cha dzaya* utilized a tortoise shell (*kobe*) and potsherd (*dzaya*), respectively.[110] Ultimately, five different *virapho* specialist groups became widely attested across Mijikenda dialect communities: *chinyenze, gophu, phaya, habasi*, and *chifudu*.[111]

Each of these groups met in forest clearings where they performed rituals that ensured the well-being of their communities and provided members opportunities to cultivate social distinctions. For instance, the *phaya* society curated a powerful oath called the *fisi*, or "hyena oath." This was a "proscriptive oath" that was sworn by members before events like warfare to attest to their collective commitment to the cause at hand. Violations of the oath caused a person to howl like a dying hyena. Drums and shouts during the swearing ceremony were said to mimic the sounds of that animal.[112] The accounts of nineteenth-century missionaries indicate that the sounds of secret meetings penetrated nearby homesteads. Most notorious were the sounds of the *mwanza*, a friction drum played when administering *virapho*. According to New, the sound of the *mwanza* resembled "the rumbling of distant thunder . . . the roaring of a lion, and now what may be imagined of the moaning of some demon in agony." When played in the dead of the night, the "bellowings of this drum, rolling through the forests, up the valleys, echoing and re-echoing among the hills, accompanied by the howls and shrieks" alerted people to the practitioners' esoteric activities.[113] For the nonmembers of these groups, the noises reverberating from the forested clearings and into the settled contours of villages would have signaled activities that were socially valuable yet unknowable. Respected, but also feared.

The medicinal groups assumed a key role in social reproduction and protecting individual homesteads. The *chifudu* group, which was the only group whose membership was restricted to women, provides a useful illustration. The *chifudu* is the most widely practiced medicinal group and the only one attested among speakers of Digo—the southernmost Mijikenda dialect—in historical and ethnographic records.[114] *Chifudu* practitioners specialized in fertility medicines and met at forested shrines (*rungu*) immediately outside of their villages. The name *chifudu* is derived from an ancient Bantu term meaning "tortoise," which also referred to the empty shell of a coconut in Mijikenda and some Swahili dialects.[115] In Mijikenda, the term also referred to the *vifudu* containers, typically gourds or small clay pots, each of which was named after a female ancestor. These pots lived in small huts in the bush where members met to mix medicines and practice *chifudu*

dances, during which they made "hooing" sounds into their pot openings while performing. *Vifudu* members also performed at life cycle events such as weddings and funerals—both occasions that carried heightened risks for moral transgression that could lead to social or ecological calamities.[116] *Vifudu* members' pots and forest shrines thus enabled them to play an active role in ensuring the health and well-being of their villages.

Membership in the healing groups gave initiated experts the means to influence their communities and assemble wealth in an acceptable manner by controlling medicines considered essential to the social health of their settlement. One example of this is the *gophu* (or *gohu*), a group known for their lavish feasts and for curing a disease that resulted from sexual transgressions, known as *vitio*.[117] *Vitio* encompassed disease symptoms like vomiting, diarrhea, and even death that struck when someone had sexual intercourse with the wrong person or at the wrong time prior to performing the proper cleansing rituals.[118] Transition points like the founding of new villages and initiations (as well as marriages and funerals, as mentioned) carried an especially heightened risk for *vitio*.[119] According to oral traditions, *vitio* outbreaks caused some *kaya* settlements to split, making clans and individuals possessing medicines to cure the disease highly valued members of a community.[120] Female *vifudu* members represented one half of this equation, using their pots and dances to protect the clans with which they were associated, especially for matters related to reproduction. *Gophu* members' ability to cure *vitio* created a complementary male realm of reproductive rituals and ensured that initiates in this group retained a significant influence over the health and well-being of their villages.[121]

Gophu and *vifudu* members' skills at protecting and preserving homesteads would have been especially valued amid processes of splitting and settlement diffusion, reflected in archaeology and oral traditions. Notably, Mijikenda speakers adopted some initiation practices associated with the *gophu* around the same time they began emphasizing smaller settlements. It is unclear when the *gophu* society originated, although the name of the group—pronounced *gophu* in southern Mijikenda and *gohu* in northern dialects—follows regular sound correspondences, indicating that the group's name has some antiquity in Mijikenda society. Compellingly, several of the words associated with *gophu* practices—including terms for their initiation feast and a verb referring to receiving initiation honors—are loanwords from speakers of another inland language called Segeju (or Daiso), with whom Mijikenda shared considerable interrelations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During these interactions, Mijikenda speakers borrowed many loanwords related to trade, animal husbandry, and medicines—some of which I will discuss in chapters 3 and 4.[122] The loanwords thus indicate that Mijikenda speakers adopted at least some of the practices for initiations into this specialized healing group precisely when archaeological records begin to reflect a clear shift toward smaller, more dispersed homestead-based settlements.

Due to the *gophu*'s critical role in homestead reproduction, initiated members were memorialized in their villages with carved posts called *vigango*. In comparison to the *koma* posts that represented recently departed ancestors, *vigango* were taller—typically between three and eight feet tall—and featured more intricate designs such as incised triangular patterns on the "body" and rounded or square "heads" with faces.[123] People erected them, as they did *koma*, in their homesteads, dressing the posts with textile strips and venerating them with foods and palm wine. When people established new villages, they were allowed to transport their *vigango* one time. But more often, the posts were left behind like *koma*.[124] Based on these similarities, *vigango* practices appear to have developed out of those associated with the *koma*. However, the new word also signals the distinctive ways that people envisioned the role of the *vigango* posts within their settlements. The word *vigango* is derived from the same root as *uganga*, with an etymological meaning of an object or instrument that is the result of healing. The etymology speaks directly to the role of *gophu* members in protecting homesteads from diseases like *vitio*. The purpose of erecting *vigango* was not to simply memorialize influential elders. Instead, they ensured that homesteads remained protected from harmful diseases during the transition period following their death.

The historical and ethnographic literature gives a sense of what these healing dynamics looked like during the past few centuries. In the more recent past, joining a specialist group like the *gophu* offered ways for people to cultivate distinctions and exert influence over their homesteads, even after their death. But these honors were restricted to those with the ability to pay initiation fees. The hefty fees for the two most influential groups, the *gophu* and the *phaya*, restricted membership to the wealthiest men. In the early twentieth century, for instance, fees for joining the *phaya* were "fourteen lengths of cotton or fourteen rupees; ten calabashes of beer; one large and bearded goat; seven cooking pots of mealie meal; four measures of castor oil seeds; one new axe."[125] Joining one—or even multiple—*virapho* groups made it possible for one to amass wealth while avoiding accusations associated with excess accumulation.[126] The twinning of wealth and gendered forms of healing expertise offered meaningful pathways to accrue power and influence.[127] Moreover, by joining these groups, members could nurture relationships across dispersed settlement geographies. As people spread out into homestead-based settlements, forested clearings in the bush in between settlements acted as nodes of connection and contact between the leading members of different villages, including elder men, as well as female healers and their medicinal pots.

The earliest available documentary records and oral accounts show that some people who participated in *virapho* groups had overlapping roles. For instance, oral traditions indicate that the *phaya* operated as a special body within a local council of elders.[128] The councils, which were made up of elder men from adjacent settlements, were responsible for adjudicating disputes. However, if a person was unhappy with the councils' rulings, they could turn to the expertise of *virapho*

specialists. According to the colonial administrator Arthur Champion, after standing before the councils, an individual could inform "the elders that their judgement does not meet with his approval and that he would like to take an oath before them." By invoking this right to a *chirapho* ordeal, the individual could force elders to "summon a medicine man of the class competent to administer the oath in their presence."[129] Ultimately, the elder men that made up the council maintained the legitimacy of their judicial decisions through collaborations with medicinal experts who were also frequently members of the councils themselves.

Mijikenda speakers' emphasis on these healing groups influenced both their political arrangements and accumulative activities. Secret societies like *virapho* groups, as archaeologist Susan Keech McIntosh has observed, acted as a socially sanctioned "arena . . . for the elaboration of individualistic displays of prestige and wealth." In many parts of Africa, participation in such groups enabled members "to channel wealth and ambition in such a way as to impede political consolidation," offering pathways to accrue prestige and influence without requiring they achieve a formal office or position within an established political hierarchy.[130] In Mombasa's immediate interior, specialist healing associations, forest clearings, and protective medicines and oaths similarly stood at the center of social and political life.[131] Participation in these healing associations offered people—primarily men—pathways for translating their wealth into activities where they could accrue knowledge and influence. Their accumulative aspirations also supported the broader social prosperity of their villages. They used specialized knowledge for essential tasks like ensuring social reproduction, appeasing spirits, protecting farm fields and homes, and identifying the cause of misfortunes caused by *utsai*. Critically, they pursued these activities as they also began participating extensively in transregional trade, operating as the gateway between Mombasa and places farther in the interior, as the next chapter will explore in depth.

Through a longue durée lens, we can discern some larger trends among the details covered in the second half of this chapter, even if the available evidence makes it hard to develop a precise chronology for many of these changes. To recap, during the second millennium, communities inland from Mombasa increasingly emphasized homestead-based settlements. They protected their villages by burying medicines around their homes and farm fields and pacifying spirits in natural shrines. Over centuries, they diversified the ritual contours of their homesteads by building multiple types of memorial posts for deceased ancestors and designating forested areas in the bush for practicing *uganga*. When challenges arose, they resolved natural calamities, disputes, and any potential harm caused by *utsai* by consulting medicinal experts within and outside of their communities. In the process, they emphasized one important type of medicine called *viraho*, or *virapho*, which, like their ancestors, they used to adjudicate disputes and assemble protective medicines. Eventually, specialist groups made up of people who could afford the fees necessary to join their ranks became the main guardians of the most

powerful oaths and protective medicines. They congregated in special meeting places outside of the settled areas of their villages, varieties of which proliferated in Mombasa's interior.

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While Mombasa emerged as a major Islamic port city, its inland neighbors showed little apparent interest in the ideas and practices that constituted the connective tissue of Indian Ocean societies. Instead, they innovated and adapted new ritual ideas, spaces, and practices, building on inherited frameworks of *uganga* and *virapho* to create social worlds that suited their own needs. The changes detailed in this chapter occurred as Mijikenda speakers pressed into new ecologies, entered new spheres of contact, and began emphasizing homestead-based villages rather than larger multicomponent towns. Forest clearings, specialized medicines, and healing groups undergirded connections between dispersed villages, influential elders, and, in some cases, entirely disparate communities. In the process of borrowing ritual ideas and practices from other inland groups, Mijikenda speakers generated relationships with communities with whom they also traded to obtain some of East Africa's most lucrative export goods. As the next chapter will show, by pursuing ambitions that put them out of harmony with the Indian Ocean's core cultural norms, people living in a small region in Mombasa's interior began to influence much larger spheres of interaction.