

The Inland Underpinnings of Indian Ocean Commerce

During the second millennium, Mijikenda-speaking groups pressed into new regions of the coastal uplands, establishing settlements over a variety of environments and absorbing new people and new ritual ideas into their social worlds. Their emphasis on a smaller-scale village organization and knowledge exchanges with other inland societies overlapped with their growing role as traders in some of East Africa's most valued exports, as the previous chapter noted. Villages in Mombasa's immediate interior increasingly began to represent a gateway between the worlds of the coast and interior, mediating the flow of ivory and gum copal into the port city. As a gateway society, Mijikenda speakers' aspirations and initiatives prominently shaped Mombasa's connections to the world.¹

This chapter takes an inland perspective to understanding Mombasa's emergence as a major Indian Ocean trading port. It reconstructs the inland interactive sphere supporting the town's maritime trading connections from the early second millennium to the start of the nineteenth century. No detailed descriptions of inland trading routes exist for periods prior to the mid-nineteenth century. But societies in Africa's interior contributed substantially to maritime trade, something archaeologists working in eastern and southern Africa have increasingly emphasized over the past two decades. As this work shows, intra-African circulations in products like salt, clay pots, metals, domestic animals, and wild animal products pulled oceanic trade goods into interior regions. The material interests and ritual economies of people living in smaller-scale societies and participating in multidirectional trading networks were critical to the emergence of transregional trade between Africa and other parts of the Indian Ocean.² Evidence from comparative historical linguistics, meanwhile, can illuminate the social ideas and motivations of those contributing to the interior exchange networks documented

by archaeologists. Members of distant speech communities frequently innovated novel techniques to support long-distance trading activities. But their involvement in long-distance trade was not always motivated by straightforward commercial aspirations, as Yaari Felber-Seligman and Kathryn de Luna have shown for eastern and southern Africa, respectively.³

I add to this existing work by homing in on one port city's relationship with one adjacent inland community, taking a scaled-down view of the ideas, practices, and networks motivating trade circulations in Mombasa. As the above scholarship demonstrates, it was never a foregone outcome that interior trade goods would reach coastal ports. Treating inland participation in Indian Ocean commerce as something that was contingent opens questions about why Mijikenda speakers chose to engage with emerging maritime trading networks at all. In the narrative that follows, I highlight the iterative nature of trade in Mombasa's interior, showing how Mijikenda speakers responded to changes in their own villages and across the broader coastal and interior regions. Over centuries, they adapted and innovated novel methods for conducting long-distance trade, building on the relationships and ritual networks detailed in the last chapter.

To reconstruct the inland underpinnings of Mombasa's oceanic connections requires a multidisciplinary source base. The chapter is roughly divided into thirds, with each part anchored in a particular evidentiary base critical for understanding inland contributions to Indian Ocean trade. I begin with the published archaeological materials before moving to written records concerning Mombasa's role as a distribution center for ivory, gum copal, and imported cotton textiles. In the final third of the chapter, I bring these materials together through an analysis of linguistic evidence to show how inland communities generated knowledge to support the trading circulations attested in the archaeological and written records.

Ultimately, the chapter shows that Mijikenda speakers influenced Mombasa's enduring role as a major port city because they pursued a variety of means for participating in trade, both coastal and inland. Inland villages were not drawn into transregional trade as a hinterland dependency of the neighboring port.⁴ Instead, Mijikenda speakers' considerable influence on oceanic trade hinged on innovations, networks, and material ambitions that diverged from the Islamicate practices commonly understood as the driving force of connections between different regions of the Indian Ocean.

ECOLOGIES OF INTERIOR TRADE: FROM WILD BACKWATER TO INLAND MOSAICS

Over the course of the second millennium, Mijikenda speakers built expansive connections with each other and with other inland communities, as the previous chapter detailed. They swapped ritual ideas, borrowed new medicines, and established contacts with other inland societies. The ecological diversity of Mombasa's

interior encouraged these sorts of collaborations. To begin tracing the growth of inland trading networks and cross-societal collaborations, it is helpful to take an ecological viewpoint, beginning in the forested ridges immediately inland from the coast. If one were to visit the Mombasa region during the early first millennium, they would find that interactions between different sociolinguistic groups occupying the region were quite limited. When ironworking and farming communities first settled in southeast Kenya, the region was already occupied by lithic-using Late Stone Age (LSA) communities who primarily subsisted by hunting and collecting wild resources.⁵ Ironworking and farming communities occupied similar environments to LSA hunting and gathering specialists. In some cases, they lived in settlements within walking distance of one another. However, during the early to mid-first millennium, these groups interacted with each other infrequently.⁶

The scope and scale of cross-societal interactions began to change after the midpoint of the millennium. Excavations at LSA sites have recovered ceramics that, based on their style, were either produced by—or were produced to mimic the ceramics of—neighboring farming communities. Chemical analysis of these ceramics indicates that LSA communities consumed cultivated crops, including sorghum, pearl millet, and finger millet, which they likely obtained through exchanges with their farming neighbors.⁷ Most of these early exchanges would have been small in scale, taking place primarily between neighboring settlements. Having steadily developed their expertise cultivating sorghum and millet in the preceding centuries, post-Sabaki communities would have been well positioned to use their agricultural surpluses to obtain resources like wild honey and beeswax, skins, and other animal products from their neighbors.⁸

Participants in these inland exchange networks also began developing connections with reemerging oceanic trade during the same late first-millennium time frame. Archaeological records show that both LSA settlements and their ironworking neighbors could access maritime trade goods like cowries, shell beads, and imported glass. Some farming settlements also procured Sassanian and Chinese ceramics, although this imported pottery was quite rare.⁹ By the end of the first millennium, early Swahili speakers began living on Mombasa Island. Within a few centuries, their descendants erected houses and mosques using coral stone architectural styles, marking the town as a characteristic Swahili port city.¹⁰ These expanding scales of coastal trade gradually generated new opportunities for interactions farther into East Africa's interior as well. By the end of the first millennium, the inland roots of oceanic commerce slowly took shape, first with small exchanges in foodstuffs, beads, and pottery along Mombasa's forested uplands, and soon extending outward into other environments.

For people in Mombasa, all regions beyond the immediate coast were an unknown and hostile territory. Swahili speakers referred to inland regions away from coastal towns as the *nyika*, a word meaning “wilderness.” This *nyika* wilderness encompassed everything from nearby settlements in the coastal uplands

to imagined locales in East Africa's far interior. Swahili speakers even referred to Mijikenda communities—and sometimes other inland groups—by the pejorative name Wanyika, or “wilderness dwellers.”¹¹ Yet the ecologically diverse regions in Mombasa's interior were anything but wild backwaters.

Moving inland from the ocean's edge, the landscape gently rises from the low coastal plain to an upland region which reaches as close as eight kilometers to the littoral.¹² While East Africa's offshore islands and low coastal plain are dominated by dry forest, coral rag, and mangrove thicket, the coastal uplands feature a far greater diversity of vegetation. The eastern part of the inland ridge—where Sabaki speakers planted some of their earliest settlements—includes dry forest, lowland moist savanna, Miombo woodland, and lowland rainforest. Rainfall varies greatly by microclimates, with some locations experiencing high average rainfall, peaking during the two rainy seasons from October to November and April to May. Rivers and streams dissect the landscape, some of which feed into the two large coastal creek estuaries that encircle Mombasa. Other inland creeks connect the low-lying ridges to nearby coastal towns like Mtwapa and Kilifi, granting easy access to these urban centers from the coastal upland. The environment becomes progressively more arid only slightly farther inland. The western flanks of the coastal range give way to a much drier high coastal plain that fringes a large arid zone known as the Tsavo region, or simply the *nyika*.¹³

This arid region formed a key part of Mombasa's inland trading connections. Lying approximately one hundred to two hundred kilometers inland, the Tsavo region has historically been home to some of East Africa's largest elephant populations and today includes Kenya's largest national park.¹⁴ For centuries prior, the Tsavo region constituted a major zone for exchanges in goods like ivory, rock crystal, and iron.¹⁵ Hunters in this region began supplying ivory to coastal markets on a large scale around the twelfth century CE.¹⁶ Ivory procurement overlapped with expanding productive activities and local trade in agricultural goods, domestic animals, wild resources, and iron.

The Tsavo region's economy operated as a mosaic as Chapurukha Kusimba, Sibel Kusimba, and David Wright have argued. Mosaics refer to “a group of societies that inhabit a region together and that practice different economies and religions, speaking diverse languages, but related through clientship, alliances, knowledge sharing, and rituals.”¹⁷ Like an artwork mosaic that combines smaller fragments of material to create a unified whole, trading mosaics formed through collaborations among distinct pieces, illuminating interactions between societies with different economic specializations, occupying diverse environments, and of different scales.¹⁸ The mosaic framing alerts us to the fact that trading interactions between coast and interior did not follow a supply-and-demand model driven by the interests and agency of oceanic merchants. Instead, an array of societies, material interests, and trading strategies undergirded the town's transregional connections. In other words, trade thrived in Mombasa's interior precisely because



MAP 4. Mombasa's interior. Map created by John Wyatt Greenlee, Surprised Eel Mapping.

connections to coastal networks were not the only drivers for the production and circulation of interior goods.

The arid interior region developed through its relationship with bordering environments. In addition to the coastal uplands to the east, Tsavo's southern frontiers were marked by three large mountain massifs that make up the Taita Hills. Towering several thousand feet above the dry plain, Taita and neighboring montane forests are often described as archipelagos of highland "islands" for their role as nodal points for cross-societal exchanges in an otherwise arid landscape.¹⁹ The easternmost massif, Kasigau, was located about three days from Mombasa,

making it one of the first stopovers for overland travelers.²⁰ Within a relatively condensed region, a person could move from the coastal uplands' diverse microclimates into Mombasa, or travel west and quickly reach the Tsavo plains. Moving across this arid zone, that same person would find many rock outcroppings and pastoral camps before reaching the highland mountain massifs of the Taita Hills. In the highlands, they would enter a very different ecology featuring perennial streams, rich iron ore deposits, and high agricultural productivity. The diverse resources of these closely proximate ecologies promoted trade based around circular exchanges and intergroup collaborations rather than being dominated by any one product or place.

PRODUCTION AND EXCHANGE IN MOMBASA'S INTERIOR: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Archaeological evidence from the Tsavo plains and adjacent highland regions demonstrates the collaborative and integrated nature of trade in Mombasa's interior. Between the late first and mid-second millennium, societies living in this region scaled up their productive potential in multiple areas, including ironmaking, craft production, agriculture, animal husbandry, and ivory procurement. For example, around Mount Kasigau, the easternmost massif of the Taita Hills, archaeologists have located two significant ironworking centers, Rukanga and Kirongwe. Smelting furnaces, slag heaps, tuyere fragments, and abundant finished and unfinished iron products attest to substantial iron smelting and smithing activities at the two sites from about the ninth century.²¹ Kasigau's residents also invested in other areas of output, such as agriculture. They built hillside terraces that captured water from the streams that dissected the massif's forested slopes. The irrigation techniques allowed farm fields and fruit orchards to thrive at lower elevations despite minimal rainfall. By growing foods at lower elevations, farmers could trade their agricultural wares more easily with neighboring pastoralists and other occupants of the adjacent plains.²²

During the same period that Kasigau developed as an iron production center, a variety of site types flourished on the neighboring plains, creating many opportunities for exchanges between different groups. These sites included rock shelters, which served as seasonal residences for hunting specialists; open-air settlements; and pastoralist camps featuring livestock pens constructed from dry stonework. Many rock outcroppings dotting the Tsavo region show evidence of grinding hollows—cup-sized depressions weathered into rocks—indicating the occupants processed foods on-site, including crops procured from settlements in the adjacent highlands. Archaeologists theorize that some of the more prominent open-air sites were regional markets where communities from the hills and plains met to exchange fresh fruits and grains for milk products, honey, animal skins, ostrich shells, and rock crystal.²³

Signatures of oceanic trade are not absent from these inland settlements. At every single site excavated in Tsavo, the Taita Hills, and adjacent regions like Mombasa's uplands, archaeologists have recovered glass beads, most originating from South Asia.²⁴ Glass beads were an ideal long-distance trade good. They were easy to transport, hard to break, and easy to adapt into local or even individual styles.²⁵ As a result, beads flourished as trade goods in East Africa's interior from the first millennium until well into the nineteenth century, circulating alongside local crafts, animal products, and foodstuffs.

Other inland iron production centers flourished around the same time as Kasigau, supplying finished iron products for local use, as well as iron bloom for maritime trade. These included Mtsengo, an early to mid-second-millennium settlement located about thirty-five kilometers northwest of Mombasa, and Gonja, a site in northeastern Tanzania's South Pare Mountains.²⁶ Like Kasigau, Gonja was located at an ecological borderland, situated 150 kilometers inland from the coast on the eastern edge of a forested mountain massif flanking an arid steppe hundreds of meters below.²⁷ Large quantities of iron slag, tuyere fragments, and smelting furnace remains show that significant on-site ironworking took place in specialized activity areas. But despite extensive evidence of large-scale iron smelting, archaeologists recovered very few finished iron products from Gonja, indicating that its occupants mainly produced iron for trade.²⁸

According to Arabic geographical accounts, both Mombasa and Malindi exported iron for trade during the same period that sites like Kasigau, Gonja, and Mtsengo flourished as iron production centers. In the twelfth century, Muhammad al-Idrisi reported that iron made up Malindi's "largest profits." More than a century later, a geographer from Damascus named Abu al-Fida—whose work built on earlier geographies like al-Idrisi's—wrote that the mountains inland from the coast of modern Kenya featured ample iron mines.²⁹ East Africa's main oceanic trading partners produced their own iron. However, merchants in Arabia and South Asia may have preferred East Africa's comparatively cheap and high-quality iron bloom and steel.³⁰ There is evidence of ironworking technology on the Kenya coast during this time, but very little evidence of iron smelting. This dearth of smelting evidence suggests that iron production in coastal towns was probably only sufficient to support local needs at the household level. Most iron exported from East Africa, therefore, must have originated in contemporaneous inland production centers. Before reaching coastal entrepôt, it would have moved across multidirectional trading mosaics alongside goods that included crops, animals, and skins.³¹

While the Arabic geographic accounts provide tantalizing indications of the role of inland production centers in provisioning iron for maritime trade, metal products also circulated for local uses. Metalworkers produced finished iron hoes and weaponry, including arrowheads and spear points for elephant hunters. Based on the quality and sophistication of iron arrowheads recovered from

Rukanga and Kirongwe, scholars theorize that Tsavo's elephant-hunting specialists were a critical market for the metalworkers at these sites.³² Arrows and iron offer an entry into thinking about exchanges between different societies in the region. For instance, during the more recent past, hunters from this region used potent poisons that they attached to the tips of their arrows when hunting larger animals like elephants. According to oral traditions, they obtained this poison by trade from Mijikenda-speaking partners.³³ Arrow poison was already a well-established tool for warfare by the start of the sixteenth century, when Portuguese records attest to archers from the mainland wielding poison-tipped arrows to defend Mombasa against seaborne attacks. According to one account, Mijikenda communities produced this poison by boiling the fruit of oil palm trees, yielding a substance potent enough that it could "cause immediate death."³⁴ These sources point to Mijikenda speakers' long-standing expertise at producing arrow poison, dating back centuries, which also helped support Tsavo's place as a major ivory procurement region.

In some cases, the exchanges attested in archaeological records took place through hand-to-hand transactions between individuals with established relationships. But people in Mombasa's interior also congregated in common locations like markets, where people who spoke different languages and practiced unique specializations met to exchange their wares. The dry lowlands feature many isolated rock outcroppings, some of which were used as meeting grounds by at least the start of the second millennium.³⁵ East Africa's first markets occurred in "buffer zones" between different language groups and resource specialists, something that is apparent in the diffusion of market terms among neighboring linguistic groups.³⁶ Linguists have documented the proliferation of words referring to "markets" in different East African languages between the late first and early second millennium. For instance, daughter languages in the Seuta and Ruvu subgroups of Northeast Coast Bantu shared a late first-millennium areal term for markets that they derived from an inherited root word that meant "to buy."³⁷ Similarly, speakers of Thagicu and Chaga languages in East Africa's highlands employed several words borrowed from nearby Nilotic languages to describe markets.³⁸

Communities living between Mombasa, the Taita Hills, and Pare Mountains were also a part of this regional trend, using a shared term—pronounced *chete* in Mijikenda dialects—to refer to markets and market days.³⁹ Variations of the term *chete* are shared in geographically adjacent languages leading inland from Mombasa and neighboring Mijikenda-speaking settlements, into Tsavo's drylands and the montane highlands of the Taita Hills and Pare Mountains. The distribution of the word thus precisely maps onto the production and exchange networks detailed in this section. Compellingly, *chete* may be a loanword from a Southern Cushitic language where the word originally meant "cattle transaction" or "market."⁴⁰ The word likely entered Mijikenda dialects via interactions with communities in the neighboring Taita Hills and Tsavo region, which were home to several different

Southern Cushitic-speaking groups during the early to mid-second millennium.⁴¹ With this evidence in mind, we can envision common ideas about markets spreading among different groups living in Mombasa's interior as they traded foodstuffs, iron, beads, and other goods identified in the region's archaeological records. In some cases, these trading connections would have intersected with more esoteric exchanges in medicines and ritual ideas, as the previous chapter detailed.

From the late fifteenth century, Mombasa's connections to oceanic trade are increasingly legible in documentary records. These written sources highlight the town's preeminent position in the Indian Ocean ivory trade and its role as a clearinghouse for Gujarati textiles. It is important to remember that trade in these ocean-crossing goods was never divorced from contemporaneous circulations of foodstuffs, animal products, iron, arrow poisons, and medicines.⁴² Cross-societal meeting grounds at isolated rock outcroppings and healing groves in the bush were spatial settings for collaborations that directly and indirectly influenced the circulation of goods and ideas. Mombasa's interior was not a supply land or rural dependency. Instead, trade goods moved to Mombasa Island and reached other faraway port cities due to material practices of communities in the town's interior, which intersected with the interests of, but were not determined solely by, oceanic merchants.

MORE THAN A LIST OF TRADE GOODS: FINDING INLAND CONNECTIONS IN TEXTUAL RECORDS

On April 7, 1498, a Portuguese fleet traveling northbound along East Africa's coastline became the first European vessels to reach Mombasa. Rather than immediately entering the harbor, Vasco da Gama's ships anchored at a distance from the town, where they waited until they were met by smaller boats from the island. The next day, the Portuguese sent two men to the island to meet Mombasa's leader, who offered them a sampling of spices and other goods as gifts. Da Gama remained suspicious of Mombasa's intentions, however, and just a few days later, he pulled up anchor and sailed north to Malindi, a rival town.⁴³ Portuguese ships returned to Mombasa in 1505 and sacked the city, both in support of their budding alliance with Malindi and as retaliation for the town's perceived antagonism to da Gama's party seven years earlier. Mombasa would go on to have a conflict-ridden relationship with the Portuguese over the next two centuries (a story detailed in the next chapter). In many ways, da Gama's experiences in Mombasa portended these tensions. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to view Mombasa's first encounter with European mariners only through the lens of conflict. The town's initial interactions with Vasco da Gama's ships also highlight its central place at an intersection of maritime and interior trading networks during the late fifteenth century.

When da Gama's ships dropped anchor outside of Mombasa in 1498, the representatives from the island who came out in small boats to greet him were part of

a long history of protection and patronage that undergirded merchant activity in the Indian Ocean.⁴⁴ After Ibn Battuta arrived in Mogadishu in 1331, for instance, his dhow was similarly met by small boats, including one representing the sultan. It was customary, according to Battuta, for the sultan's representative to determine all the details of the ship, including where it came from, its owner, captain, and cargo. Local merchants also sent young men bearing small gifts to visitors, hoping to establish guest-host relationships that could yield profitable trading opportunities.⁴⁵ The representatives from Mombasa in 1498 would have met da Gama's ships with similar motivations. Indeed, a day after their arrival, Mombasa's leader sent gifts of fruit and sheep, "together with a ring, as a pledge of safety, letting [da Gama] know that in case of his entering the port he would be supplied with all he stood in need of."⁴⁶ The supplies from the city included not just provisions, but also, in a show of the town's commercial strength, "all the spices and merchandise of India" as well as locally procured goods like ivory and ambergris. This sampling of trade goods came with a promise that greater quantities of each ware could be furnished for the foreign fleet.⁴⁷ Clearly, Mombasa was a town with connections.

The late fifteenth-century encounter between da Gama's ships and Mombasa provides a jumping-off point for considering the role of Mombasa's interior in shaping these transregional connections. Although communities on the mainland did not figure into the initial Portuguese impressions of the town, references to common trade goods—both exports and imports—in early Portuguese sources make East Africa's interior legible in ways that were seldom the case in earlier records. The ivory sent to da Gama's ships offers the most obvious example, but other sources from the first decades the Portuguese came to coastal cities like Mombasa and Malindi also signal the region's role in providing inland goods like beeswax, resins, and foodstuffs. Most importantly, Portuguese records describe voluminous traffic in cotton cloth, the most important imported good in East Africa's interior. By following this documentary trail of trade goods, it is possible to discern how inland procurement strategies and material practices shaped trading patterns in the Indian Ocean. This section tracks written descriptions of two export goods—ivory and gum copal—to demonstrate the centrality of people in Mombasa's interior to the town's prominence.

Written records on Mombasa and other Swahili towns are sparse before the late fifteenth century, but the existing evidence makes it clear that coastal East African towns were major distribution points for the global ivory trade. The first-century Greco-Roman text the *Periplus* indicates that East Africans had supplied ivory to Indian Ocean markets since the beginning of the current era.⁴⁸ By the late tenth century, East African ivory appeared in European markets with increasing frequency.⁴⁹ Around this same time, East Africa became the major supply region for Asian markets. In the tenth century, al-Masudi reported that the East African coast was the primary supply region for ivory exported to China and India via Oman.⁵⁰ This was primarily due to the superior quality of East African elephants'

ivory compared to those from Asia. As explained in a thirteenth-century Chinese merchant's guide, East African tusks were "straight and of a clear white color" with "delicate streaks," while Asian elephants had "small tusks of a reddish tint."⁵¹ So, while ivory bangles had long been popular adornments among South Asian women, the locally available ivory was inferior for artisanal purposes.⁵² As a result, the Swahili coast became the world's most important ivory-exporting region by the second millennium.

The best data on East African ivory exports prior to the nineteenth century concerns the southern Swahili coast, especially Portuguese-controlled ports in Mozambique. But sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries indicate that northern towns like Mombasa, Malindi, and Pate were all significant centers for the ivory trade.⁵³ In 1516, Duarte Barbosa reported that Mombasa's occupants traded extensively with communities on the mainland and that they provided the city with an abundance of ivory and valued products like wax and honey.⁵⁴ A century later, an English trader similarly noted that the "coast of Mellinda"—a descriptor that Europeans used to refer to the coastal region encompassing both Mombasa and Malindi—brokered large quantities of ivory that they obtained from adjacent inland communities.⁵⁵ Other European visitors similarly note the great quantities of ivory available at northern Swahili towns like Mombasa and Pate that were then traded across the Indian Ocean. As one commentator noted, much of this ivory, after being procured from East Africa's interior, was "shipped from Mombasa to India and to Ormuz"—or Hormuz, in the Persian Gulf.⁵⁶

Mombasa remained a preeminent port for the ivory trade well into the eighteenth century, placing the town at the center of power struggles between different oceanic empires. In 1720, the Scottish sea captain Alexander Hamilton reported that when Oman ousted the Portuguese from Mombasa twenty-two years prior, they found stowed away in the town's fort "a Booty of about two hundred Tons of Teeth, which was worth in India, one hundred twenty-five thousand Pound Sterling."⁵⁷ A Portuguese report from around the same time noted that a single ship could return from Mombasa "with more than 300 barrels of ivory."⁵⁸ The large elephants in Mombasa's interior were said to produce tusks that were "more precious than gold and diamonds" in Asia, making it a lucrative port of trade for all merchants in the Indian Ocean.⁵⁹

While European records highlight Mombasa's role as a major export region for the global ivory trade during the sixteenth century and later, its preeminence registers more ambiguously in earlier documentary records, such as the thirteenth-century Chinese trade guide, *Zhu Fan Zhi* (or *Records of Various Foreign Peoples*). The two-volume book was written by Zhao Rukua, the superintendent of maritime trade at Quanzhou, China's most prosperous port city. Typical of early guidebooks, the two volumes give an overview of all the peoples and places known to Chinese merchants (in volume one) as well as details on goods that the Chinese imported from overseas, including information on the production,

quality, and place of origin for each commodity (in volume two).⁶⁰ Specific details on the East African coast are sparse across the two books, limited to short descriptions of Zanzibar, Madagascar, and the coast of Somalia, plus entries on common East African trade goods, such as ivory and ambergris. Zhao never traveled outside of China and, as a result, he incorrectly attributed the origins of many of these goods, including East African ivory. He presumed ivory reaching Quanzhou originated from Arabia since it was sourced from merchants from Mirbat, a town located on the southwestern coast of Oman.⁶¹

Elephants had long been extinct on the Arabian Peninsula by the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, Zhao Rukua's trading guide included a detailed account of "Arabian" elephant hunting techniques. Compellingly, this description matches—with precision—the elephant hunting techniques of the Waata hunting specialists who occupied the Tsavo region. As described earlier, these hunters pursued elephants using bows with iron tipped arrows, to which they applied a poison made from boiling the bark of the *Acokanthera schimperi* tree. They aimed for the elephant's underbelly so that the arrow would transport the poison into the animal's intestines, and then they followed their target until it collapsed. If hit properly, even a large fleeing elephant would die from the arrow poison within a few hundred yards of being shot. The hunters would then congregate around the carcass while eating and drying the meat, typically removing the tusks and burying them in nearby bush for safekeeping. Eventually, they would exchange their cache of ivory with neighboring Mijikenda communities who supplied them with arrow poison and livestock. Their Mijikenda partners then traded the elephant tusks with merchants in Mombasa.⁶²

The historical reconstruction of elephant hunting in Mombasa's interior bears remarkable similarity to the details in *Zhu Fan Zhi*:

Elephant hunters make use of bows of extraordinary strength and poisoned arrows. When hit by an arrow the elephant runs away, but before he has gone a li or two, or a little more, the arrow poison acts and the animal falls down dead. The hunters follow him, remove the tusks from the carcass and bury them in the ground. When ten tusks or more have been collected, they are brought to the [Arabs] who ship them to [Southeast Asia] for barter.⁶³

Although it is impossible to say with certainty that Zhao's description of elephant hunting was based on communities living in Mombasa's interior, it is certainly the most logical explanation. Elephant hunting was a common activity in other parts of eastern and southern Africa, but spears and pit traps were more common techniques in such places.⁶⁴ In Zhao's account, even the distance that an elephant could go before succumbing to the poison—one or two *li*, about a quarter to a half a mile—is identical to descriptions in historical records on the efficacy of arrow poisons used in Mombasa's interior. Furthermore, the timing of the account would have overlapped with the scaling-up of iron production in Mombasa's interior,

including the production of sophisticated iron arrowheads around the Kasigau massif, which archaeologists believe were used for elephant hunting.⁶⁵ Without realizing it, the author of this eight-hundred-year-old Chinese guidebook told a story about one of the Indian Ocean's most valued trade goods that centered procurement practices in Mombasa's interior.

As gateway societies between Mombasa and the interior, Mijikenda speakers were ideally positioned to broker trade that linked the port city and elephant hunters in the Tsavo plains. Oral traditions are littered with accounts of Mijikenda communities obtaining ivory from hunting specialists to whom they supplied domestic animals, foodstuffs, and arrow poison.⁶⁶ Written records from the seventeenth century similarly indicate that ivory procured from elephant-rich environments inland ultimately reached coastal markets through the hands of Mijikenda traders. By purchasing ivory before it reached Mombasa, Mijikenda merchants reportedly "gained fourfold" when trading for cloth in the city.⁶⁷ Inland ivory traders strictly controlled the flow of ivory from the interior, sometimes meeting coastal merchants at the estuarian creeks adjacent to Mombasa, where their wares were loaded onto small boats for transport to the town's harbor.⁶⁸

Mijikenda speakers' central role as trade brokers between Mombasa and the interior continued into the early nineteenth century. British records from the 1820s note that inland groups regularly supplied Mombasa with "ivory, gum copal, honey, bees-wax, and cattle: in exchange for which they get cloths, beads, and wire—the two latter articles they carry to the tribes inland."⁶⁹ They either brought the ivory to Mombasa themselves or sold it to coastal merchants at an annual market held every August at Kwa Jomvu, a town located about eight kilometers inland from the island.⁷⁰ Acting as Mombasa's gateway to interior products, they tightly controlled all aspects of commerce with the town, even refusing to allow traders from other inland regions to pass through their territories to trade directly with Mombasa's merchants well into the nineteenth century.⁷¹

In addition to ivory, Mijikenda speakers monopolized Mombasa's access to the region's second-most important export good: gum copal. Copal is a resin produced by the *Hymenaea verrucosa* tree, which was burned as incense and used for caulking ships. By the nineteenth century, East African copal was used as a varnish for wooden furniture manufactured in workshops as far away as New England.⁷² Copal can be tapped from trees, but the highest quality resin was produced from fossilized deposits buried in the area around living copal trees.⁷³ The *Hymenaea verrucosa* tree grows only in East Africa's coastal forests, meaning that "copal trees were rare directly on the coastal plain and disappeared west of the coastal hinterland."⁷⁴ As a result, even as global demand for the resin reached its peak during the nineteenth century manufacturing boom, copal extraction remained a cottage industry controlled by societies in the coast's immediate mainland.

While ivory is a far more famous global trade good, East African copal has been used locally and traded across oceanic networks for at least a millennium.

Archaeologists have recovered copal fragments from several late first-millennium sites on the East African coast where the resin was burned as incense.⁷⁵ Within a few centuries, East African copal was exported to southern Arabia, where it was bought and sold among local aromatic resins like frankincense and myrrh.⁷⁶ By the early modern period, copal was one of the coast's most important trade goods. Early Portuguese records mention Mombasa and Malindi trading an abundance of this tar-like product.⁷⁷ In 1591, the English ship the *Edward Bonaventure* visited Zanzibar and left with a thousand pounds of copal, which merchants aboard the ship described as a "gray and white gumme like unto frankincense, as clamme as turnpentine, which in melting growth as black as pitch."⁷⁸ Over the next few centuries, European ships continued to procure the product to use as a sealant and wood varnish.⁷⁹ By the mid-nineteenth century, Zanzibar alone exported more than a million pounds of hardened resin each year, most of which originated in either Mijikenda- or Zaramo-speaking communities and reached the island via local networks.⁸⁰

The copal trade ultimately connected East Africa's coastal forests to manufacturing networks that stretched from East African port cities to northern Atlantic furniture-making centers like Salem, Massachusetts. Societies in East Africa's "copal belt"—Mijikenda in southeast Kenya and Zaramo in northeastern Tanzania—held a near monopoly over the good's circulation. In Swahili, copal is called *msandarusi*. They borrowed this term from Arabic speakers who called it *sindarus* or *sandarus*, a word that referred to a variety of fossilized resins.⁸¹ Notably, both Mijikenda and Zaramo speakers retained their own unique terms to refer to the resin despite its ubiquity as a global trade good. Among Zaramo speakers, copal is called *mnangu*.⁸² Mijikenda speakers, meanwhile, called copal *m'mongolo*, a word that they also used for glass, attesting to the visual and tactile similarities between glass and the hardened resin.⁸³ It is not clear whether there was a word for *Hymenaea verrucosa*—the tree or its products—among the proto-Northeast Coast communities who were the first Bantu speakers to occupy East Africa's coastal forests.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the limited distribution of the Mijikenda and Zaramo words for copal underscores the highly local nature of the resin's procurement prior to being exported to Swahili towns, then to other Indian Ocean locales, and, ultimately, to factories as far away as North America.

Tracing the histories of ivory and gum copal from procurement to export highlights the critical position of Mijikenda-speaking communities in mediating Mombasa's relationship with the interior. It is not especially novel to suggest that East Africa's interior contributed to maritime trade. However, reading textual records with archaeological evidence detailed in the previous section in mind makes it possible to move beyond a generalized picture of inland trade and highlight the specific networks and communities that ensured the continued buzz of maritime trade into and out of Mombasa. For generations, Arabian dhows and Portuguese carracks leaving the port city abounded with ivory, destined to circulate

as far away as eastern China. Inland procurement networks were the motor behind these global flows. While it is important to highlight these contributions, inland communities were more than suppliers for external markets. They also pursued their own material desires.⁸⁵ The next section explores Mijikenda speakers' interests in oceanic trade, focusing on Mombasa's most important inland trade good: cotton textiles.

INLAND MATERIAL DESIRES: CONNECTING INDIAN FACTORIES TO RITUALS ON MOMBASA'S MAINLAND

Excavations in Mombasa's immediate interior have recovered maritime trade goods, including Indo-Pacific glass beads and imported glazed ceramics in contexts stretching back to the late first millennium.⁸⁶ But cotton textiles were unquestionably the most desired and most critical imported trade good for the Mijikenda speakers interacting with merchants in the port city. Cotton cloth has a long history as a trade good in coastal East Africa, and it is helpful to take a broader view before shifting to its place in Mijikenda settlements. During the early second millennium, there was a thriving textile production industry in coastal towns like Shanga, Kilwa, and Mogadishu. However, local weaving industries declined as imported South Asian textiles became more readily available.⁸⁷ By the thirteenth century, Gujarati merchants supplied cloth directly to communities on Zanzibar, visiting annually with a variety of dyed cotton textiles.⁸⁸ Trade between Gujarat—in northwest India—and coastal East Africa continued in the centuries that followed. When Portuguese mariners reached the East African coast, they found ships from Cambay—a port city in Gujarat and the preindustrial world's leading center for cloth textile production—anchored at Mombasa and Malindi.⁸⁹ Consumer demand for cloth in East Africa, and for ivory in South Asia, fueled these connections.

Cloth had many important uses in coastal East African society. Ports in Indian Ocean Africa were, according to Pedro Machado, “cloth currency zones,” where Gujarati textiles became “a primary measure of value for which ivory, slaves, and other commodities were exchanged.”⁹⁰ Cloth acted as a status marker, and access to imported textiles could transform coastal settlements from humble villages into flourishing urban towns.⁹¹ This is best demonstrated in historical chronicles of Kilwa that recount how the town's founder purchased the island and established its renown as an Islamic port city by providing an infidel king with a bounty of colorful cloth in quantities so great that they “encircled the island.” Kilwa's founder ruled for the next forty years, earning the nickname *nguo nyingi*, or “many clothes,” for his ability to supply the town's residents with cotton cloth.⁹²

Due to the high social and commercial value of imported textiles, port cities levied large fees on visiting merchants that were paid in cloth. In 1506, a Portuguese clerk reported that if a merchant arrived at Mombasa with one thousand

pieces of cloth, Mombasa's *mfalme*, or "king," would take half of the total. After paying this tax, the merchant was then free to sell the remaining cloth in the city.⁹³ The earliest Portuguese accounts suggest that Gujarati merchants favored port cities with the most direct access to interior trade goods. As a result of its ability to procure ivory and other inland goods, Mombasa emerged as a major regional depot for cloth, brokering trade between South Asian and East African port cities. The town's merchants tightly monopolized the textile trade. During the sixteenth century, traders from other towns like Zanzibar had to travel to Mombasa to purchase cotton textiles.⁹⁴

While Mombasa leveraged control of Gujarati cloth to assert trading dominance along the northern Swahili coast, they were able to do so due to their strong ties with the adjacent mainland. A hefty portion of the town's textiles were set aside for trade and tribute for neighboring inland communities. A spending report from Fort Jesus, the Portuguese fort at Mombasa, shows that in the 1630s, a tenth of their yearly expenditures went to supplying cloth to communities on the mainland.⁹⁵ As Portuguese observers saw it, Mijikenda communities cared for little else but textiles, and because of their tremendous influence on the city, they were "given cloths whenever they demand[ed] them."⁹⁶ These payments served two main purposes. First, coastal merchants used cotton textiles to obtain trade goods like ivory, resins, and food provisions from the mainland. Second, different constituencies in Mombasa used imported cloth as tributes that they sent to their inland neighbors to maintain peaceful relations (both topics covered in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5).

Textiles are useful for thinking through the ways that Mijikenda speakers engaged with but also diverged from the material practices of the Indian Ocean. Indian textiles were traded widely across the premodern Indian Ocean. Fragments of textiles produced in Gujarat between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries have been found in Fustat—or Old Cairo—likely having reached Egypt after passing through markets in Aden. Similar finds exist in parts of eastern Indonesia for the same period.⁹⁷ In East Africa, the oldest surviving textile fragment—a piece of indigo-dyed cloth from India found at Mtambwe Mkuu on Pemba—is even older, dating to the eleventh century.⁹⁸ By the early sixteenth century, Portuguese mariners reported that Mombasa traded "quantities of cotton cloth from Cambay" and that the entirety of the "coast dress[ed] in these cloths and has no other."⁹⁹ These textiles were valued on the East African coast and far beyond because of their quality and beauty. Indian textile producers colored their cottons with dyes that could yield a rich palette of reds, yellows, and blues, using block prints to create intricate design patterns. When these textiles began reaching Europe, they famously overrode the inferior and comparatively bland wools and linens that characterized local fashion.¹⁰⁰ The many references to Mijikenda speakers obtaining these cloths connect them to this larger world of material exchanges, which included merchants from northwest

India, consumers in places like Cairo, Timor, and the Maluku Islands, as well as cotton growers and weavers living in villages in India.

From one perspective, the connections between Mijikenda communities, Mombasa, and other Indian Ocean locales may look inevitable.¹⁰¹ Indian textiles were desired commodities across the eastern hemisphere so, of course, Mijikenda speakers, like many others, sought out opportunities to obtain them. But this macroview of the circulation of cloth is best understood when anchored in local circumstances.¹⁰² Despite the commonality of cloth—as well as things like glass beads and metal bangles—as trade goods and adornments, foreign merchants and local elites did not control the meanings people attached to these items.¹⁰³ By studying local valuations of imported textiles in Mombasa’s rural mainland, we see that the city’s connections to Indian Ocean networks formed in part because Mijikenda communities turned an imported commodity into a locally meaningful object.

To trace the values that the members of Mijikenda communities attached to imported cloth, it is necessary to turn from written texts to evidence from language. Coastal East Africans had a complex vocabulary to describe different types of cloth.¹⁰⁴ They inherited at least one word for cloth from their Sabaki ancestors: *nguWo, which meant “clothing” in proto-Sabaki.¹⁰⁵ Another term with significant antiquity in the region is the Swahili word *kitambi*, which is cognate with a Mijikenda word, *chitsambi* (or *kitsambi*) and Lower Pokomo *kitsambi*. All are derived from a Northeast Coast term for “loincloth” (*-cambo), which was itself derived from the ancient Bantu root *-camb-, meaning to wash one’s private areas. In Sabaki languages, speakers added a new noun suffix, marking it as an agent noun and thus distinguishing the cloth from earlier loincloths. The available evidence suggests that this word and its association with textiles likely originated as an early areal term on the Kenya coast, where it was first pronounced *kicambi.¹⁰⁶

From these humble beginnings, the term’s meaning evolved over time, with *kitambi* eventually describing cloth textiles traded along the coast. When the Portuguese briefly regained control of Mombasa from Oman in 1728, they found a huge inventory of “quitambes” in the port’s main fort, although most were old and of poor quality.¹⁰⁷ The Portuguese perception of the “quitambes” reflects the term’s general meaning as a cloth commodity in Swahili towns. In Mombasa Swahili dialects, for instance, *kitambi* described a long piece of colorful cloth, about five or six arms’ length, a meaning that stressed *kitambi* as a unit of measure and a commodity. Over time, the word spread to other parts of the Swahili coast—likely due to Mombasa’s role as a cloth distribution center—ultimately becoming a catchall for a wide range of imported textiles.

Mijikenda speakers also reworked the term’s meaning from its earliest associations with grass loincloths. However, their own form of the word, *chitsambi*, represented much more than a basic commodity. In the simplest terms, *chitsambi* referred to dyed cotton textiles. Historical records show that Mijikenda speakers considered *vitsambi* (pl.) to have a variety of protective qualities. People wore these textiles during pregnancy, initiation rituals, or if they were afflicted by malevolent

spirits.¹⁰⁸ Influential elders marked their status by wearing cloths of specific colors. Access to cloth facilitated membership in the specialized healing groups considered in the previous chapter. In Giriyama communities, for instance, people used cotton cloth to join *viraho* groups like the *habasi*, *phaya*, and *kinyenze*, with the initiation fees peaking at seventeen lengths of cloth for the *habasi*.¹⁰⁹

Imported textiles also played an important role in rituals surrounding ancestors. At death, the bodies of elders were dressed in black cloth and “tied at the waist with red and white sashes.”¹¹⁰ People hung strips of cloth at natural shrines (*mizimu*) and wrapped them around wooden memorial posts (*koma* and *vigango*) that represented departed ancestors. When they tied the colorful cloths around the neck and waist of the wooden posts, they symbolically “dressed” their ancestors and attested to their enduring importance to the lives of their descendants.¹¹¹ Through these ritual practices, they “domesticated” the imported goods to suit their own needs and aspirations.¹¹² Considering the different use values of *vitsambi* alongside larger transformations in ritual life detailed in chapter 2, it shows that Mijikenda speakers’ participation in the Indian Ocean was connected to processes and interactions that had little to do with the common signatures of this global interactive sphere. Their reasons for securing access to imported textiles included gendered notions of wealth, household reproduction and rituals associated with healing groups, and ideas about proper ancestor veneration, some of which they adopted through interactions with other inland societies.

How should practices like tying cloth to a grave post, or the protective adornments worn during pregnancy, fit into narratives of transregional oceanic trade? They often don’t.¹¹³ But we only need to look to the many historical sources that describe Mijikenda speakers procuring cloth from merchants in Mombasa to discern the critical interplay between inland rituals and the rhythms of oceanic trade. Through their material practices, people living inland from Mombasa transformed a commoditized cloth into an object with immense local value. For Mijikenda speakers, imported goods were not meant to evoke cultural ties with people living in other cosmopolitan centers and far-flung ports.¹¹⁴ Instead, they used the textiles within local contexts like healing rituals in forest glades, household reproduction, and ancestor veneration practices. In doing so, they imbued the textiles with their own meanings, ultimately envisioning the imported goods as objects that could protect and support the well-being of their communities.

THE LANGUAGE OF LONG-DISTANCE TRADE

As the archaeological and textual evidence shows, coastal-interior trading connections in Mombasa did not happen simply because the Indian Ocean monsoon facilitated easy travel between the East African coast and port cities in western India and southern Arabia. Nor was it just a story of supply and demand. Exchange networks in Mombasa’s interior provided the town with a ready supply of goods like ivory, beeswax, and gums, which inland traders were happy to exchange for textiles, beads,

and wire.¹¹⁵ This trade happened as people in the town's interior ascribed new meanings to imported textiles, exchanged ritual ideas and medicines, and animated the forests surrounding their villages with shrines and meeting grounds. In short, Mombasa's emergence as a hub of commercial activity, and the continued flow of goods into and out of the port city, were connected processes and interactions falling far outside the most familiar participation rubrics of Indian Ocean trade.

The remainder of this chapter uses linguistic evidence, oral traditions, and ethnographic sources to explore the social knowledge that undergirded inland trading practices. I focus in particular on adaptations that Mijikenda speakers and their interlocutors made to partake in trade over expanding scales centuries prior to the advent of Arab-Swahili caravans. Trading practices in Mombasa's interior were iterative by nature. To ensure access to textiles and other important inland goods, Mijikenda speakers and their partners had to adapt and refine their trading practices to suit shifting circumstances. During the first half of the second millennium, inland goods moved along established exchange mosaics in Mombasa's interior. But starting during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, inland communities initiated a new type of commerce: long-distance trading parties.

Blood Pacts and the Roots of Cross-Cultural Commerce

The best evidence for changing approaches to inland commerce across the second millennium comes from the words that Mijikenda speakers used to describe their commercial activities. Early Mijikenda speakers mostly employed an economic vocabulary that was retained from proto-Sabaki. This vocabulary indicates that around the start of the second millennium, they conceptualized most of their trading activities along similar lines to their linguistic ancestors. For instance, early Mijikenda speakers' vocabulary included inherited words for "buying" (*-gula*) and "selling" (*-guza*), both of which were derived from the same ancient Bantu root meaning "to buy"—with the term *-guza*, or selling, literally meaning "causing to buy." They also retained terms that referred to borrowing and lending practices, including *-azima*, which could mean either to "borrow" or "lend," and the verb *-aphasa* (or *-ahasa*), which they used to describe obtaining goods on credit.¹¹⁶ In addition to these trading terms, they retained the Sabaki verb *-cum- (which they pronounced *-tsuma*) and continued to use it to describe trading for the purpose of making profits.¹¹⁷

Much of this inherited commercial vocabulary underscores the importance of interpersonal relationships to trade, captured in the ancient semantic links people made between buying and selling, and lending and borrowing. Notably, however, early Mijikenda speakers lacked words for describing many key aspects of trade during later periods in coastal history such as titles for professional traders and words related to long-distance caravans.

One early strategy for building partnerships across sociolinguistic lines in the absence of long-distance caravans was forming relationships through blood pacts.

In historical accounts, blood pacts helped to establish social relationships between two men, often in the context of trade. The men making a pact would slaughter a chicken or goat. They would then cut themselves and smear their own blood on two pieces of meat taken from the slaughtered animal, in many accounts the heart or the liver. Finally, they would exchange the two pieces of meat and consume that which was covered in the blood of their partner.¹¹⁸ The pact served two ends. First, it established a trader's social identity as a known individual within the community where they made the pact. Second, by forming a pact a person initiated a contract that ensured their safety and well-being as they traveled in that territory.¹¹⁹

The practice of forming blood pacts is called *kurya tsoga* in Mijikenda languages, a phrase that literally meant “to eat the scar” or “eat the pact.” The term *tsoga* is derived from the word *-coga—meaning “blood pact” in a connected chain of Northeast Coast daughter languages—which itself is from a Northeast Coast root word meaning to “cut” or “incise.”¹²⁰ While the verbal form of the word dates to at least the early first millennium, the derived noun may be of more recent vintage. Cognate forms of *-coga are found with the meaning “blood pact” in three subbranches of Northeast Coast Bantu: Sabaki (Mijikenda); Seuta (all); and Ruvu (Kagulu). These meanings appear in a contiguous distribution beginning immediately inland from Mombasa and the Mrima coast and extending into the montane forest regions of northern and central Tanzania. Therefore, *-coga may be the result of an areal spread that, because it diffused early enough, was interpreted with a regular phonetic shape across these closely related languages.¹²¹

The wide distribution of the reflexes of *-coga illuminates how a bloc of adjacent Northeast Coast daughter languages drew from shared ancestral ideas about cutting and incision to conceptualize a special type of partnership. Blood pacts among these distantly related speech communities likely date back more than a millennium, possibly having originated among the proto-Seuta speech community that began to diverge into separate daughter languages around 1000 CE.¹²² In this case, the term and practice in Mijikenda would be the result of long-standing interactions with Seuta-speaking communities to their south.¹²³ However, they used *kurya tsoga* to establish relationships with a much wider array of societies than just Northeast Coast daughter languages.

Mijikenda oral traditions recount men forming blood pacts across an expansive geographic network. Sometimes they formed pacts within their own clans and with neighboring communities. But more often, they used the practice to cement ties across social and linguistic lines. Oral histories speak of blood pact relationships with Waata hunters and Oromo-speaking pastoralists living in the drylands adjacent to the coastal uplands, as well as Dawida speakers in the Taita Hills and Kamba speakers in central Kenya.¹²⁴ From the eighteenth century, Mijikenda trade parties traveled to Kamba-speaking areas (or Ukambani) to exchange cloth, beads, and wire for cattle and ivory. According to Giriyama oral histories, men from certain clans had *kurya tsoga* relationships with specific Kamba villages. When trade

parties reached Kamba-speaking areas, the men would split up and stay in the village of their established *kurya tsoga* partners. At the end of the stay, the trade party's members recongregated with their wares and made the journey home together.¹²⁵ By the end of the eighteenth century, small groups of Kamba speakers began relocating to the Kenya coast to escape famines in the interior. They built on these preestablished links with Mijikenda traders and founded new settlements in the vicinity of their "blood brothers."¹²⁶

While *kurya tsoga* relationships show the social nature of inland trade, they also highlight the ways that Indian Ocean connections were supported by gendered ideas about homestead reproduction and cross-societal male bonding. As Louise White argues, East Africans' expressions of blood brotherhood were foremost about male bonding. They offered ways for men to develop relationships with established rights and obligation outside of the context of lineage or clan.¹²⁷ Although White downplays the importance of trade to these bonds, sources on Mijikenda blood pacts emphasize the intersection of bonding, imagined kinship, and commerce. Accounts in Thomas Spear's collection of oral traditions describe *kurya tsoga* relationships between Mijikenda- and Kamba-speaking traders as being as real as biological kin.¹²⁸ According to historian Thomas Herlehy, blood pact partners sometimes solidified these relationships by marrying one another's daughters. In addition to formalizing kinship ties, blood pacts encompassed social practices that enabled men to mitigate various uncertainties. An existing pact could secure a trader the "first preference . . . in any business transaction," making them especially important during times of "economic scarcity or intense competition." During the nineteenth century, some men even turned to their blood brothers for access to food provisions during famines.¹²⁹

The oral traditions describing practices associated with the two-millennia-old root word *-cog- offer an East African example of a key concern in studies of premodern trade: how people established trading links with individuals beyond family members who they could trust based on kinship.¹³⁰ In the Indian Ocean, an Islamic institution called the *suhba* provided an important framework for expanding the business of trade beyond recognized kin. The *suhba*, which is sometimes described as a "formal friendship," was a reciprocal trading arrangement where a merchant in one port would sell goods on another merchant's behalf. These economic friendships were underwritten by Islamic law but not limited to Muslim traders. They ultimately enabled people living an ocean apart to sell their own goods and obtain items from other ports by extending their commercial sphere beyond that of their immediate kin network.¹³¹ For Mijikenda speakers, *kurya tsoga* relationships supported similar goals, fostering longer-term relationships with trading partners from other inland regions based on mutual trust and gendered social bonds, which they articulated using the language of fictive kinship.

For a person to engage in a cross-societal arena like long-distance trade, they had to have a sense of how to engage with social and commercial worlds that existed

beyond their home village. A person couldn't just walk out the door one morning and decide they'd like to get their hands on some ivory so they could obtain textiles. Much like elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, trade in East Africa's interior was built out of social relationships and shared knowledge and institutions. A practice like *kurya tsoga* helps to imagine how Mijikenda speakers' longer-term orientation toward southeast Kenya's interior supported a variety of exchanges. Scholars of the Indian Ocean have long assumed that trade goods moved from the interior to the coast through "down the line" exchanges, moving from one village network to another, until they reached the port.¹³² However, these movements did not follow random patterns. Instead, trade goods circulated along well-established networks where people exchanged goods and medicines; in spatial contexts like markets; and through technologies like blood pacts, which supported bonds between men from far-apart villages and even entirely different regions.

Making Proto-Caravans: The Knowledge of Long-Distance Trade

Practices like blood pacts supported early inland connections, but over time, the structure of inland trade and the knowledge and practices that supported such trade changed. The remainder of the chapter looks at the growth of long-distance trading practices among inland communities during the second half of the second millennium. These inland initiatives laid the groundwork for later caravan routes. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Mijikenda speakers began borrowing vocabulary from Thagicu-speaking groups that enabled them to conceptualize positions like merchants and trade party leaders. Notably, these novel forms of trade overlapped with changes in the Tsavo region, which had long formed the backbone of the inland economy. Starting in the seventeenth century, many sites around the Taita Hills were abandoned as people moved their farming villages to the higher slopes of Taita's three massifs. Concurrently, seasonal camps in the adjacent Tsavo plains fell out of use as pastoralist communities retreated to fortified rock shelter sites, possibly to avoid cattle rustling.¹³³ These changes overlapped with the establishment of Portuguese control over Mombasa at the end of the sixteenth century.

In the context of these larger changes in Tsavo and Mombasa, we can imagine ambitious inland traders being confronted with new challenges: How would they obtain ivory? Where would they find markets for imported beads and wire? And most critically, how would they ensure the continued flow of imported textiles necessary for rituals and healing? These questions underscore both the contingencies of Mombasa's interactions with oceanic merchants and the iterative nature of inland trading practices. Connections between port cities did not simply happen because seasonal winds pushed and pulled dhows from one region of the ocean to another. Inland communities adapted and refined the knowledge and practices that supported exchanges in East Africa's interior. Their initiatives helped to establish and maintain Mombasa's maritime connections over the *longue durée*.

One good example of the ingenuity of people engaged in the inland commercial sphere is found in the regional circulation of the Thagicu term *-cogora, which meant to “buy, bargain.” This term spread as a loanword in multiple parts of Mombasa’s interior, including among communities in the Pare Mountains and Taita Hills. While communities living in these highland regions adopted and retained the root in its original verbal form, Mijikenda speakers only retained a noun meaning “bargain” or “price” from the borrowed verb, which they attested as *dhora*, or *roro* in different dialects.¹³⁴ Nineteenth-century dictionaries show that Mijikenda speakers compounded this borrowed word with other nouns and verbs to create a rich commercial vocabulary. In W. E. Taylor’s *Giryama Vocabulary and Collections*, for instance, the entries for the word *dhora* include the following meanings:

<i>mwenye madhora</i>	“merchant, trader”
<i>munena dhora</i>	“go-between in borrowing”
<i>kuhenda dhora</i>	“to trade”
<i>kutosa dhora</i>	“to finish a bargain”
<i>kutana dhora</i>	“to fail to effect a bargain”
<i>hat’u ha madhorani</i>	“shop” ¹³⁵

The available evidence makes it impossible to place these innovations precisely in time. But clearly people creatively adapted this borrowed vocabulary to describe intensive commercial activities and occupations between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (when Mijikenda and other inland communities first borrowed the word) and the nineteenth century (when these attestations were recorded in dictionaries).

Mijikenda speakers did not adopt loanwords like *dhora* in isolation. Recall from the previous chapter that interactions with speakers of Segeju (a Thagicu language) also influenced initiation practices among the *gophu* healing groups that prepared medicines that protected homesteads from afflictions. As we’ll see in the next chapter, through these interactions, Mijikenda speakers also adopted many loanwords related to specialized cattle keeping: a story that is intimately connected to intensifying cross-societal trade. Other Segeju loanwords in Mijikenda directly relate to long-distance travel. For instance, Mijikenda speakers borrowed the verb *-rumarya*, which meant to “accompany a departing visitor” such as one would do when seeing off a trade party.¹³⁶ They also adopted the verb *-dhyana/ryana*—which, like *dhora*, is also attested in Pare and Dawida—with the meaning to “spy” or “scout.”¹³⁷ Thagicu speakers used a noun form of the root to describe a “scout” or “tracker.” Later, both Kamba and Mijikenda speakers used reflexes of this term to describe the leaders of long-distance trading parties. Thus, an array of interactions and knowledge exchanges, including knowledge related to rituals and animal husbandry, overlapped with, and even directly supported, long-distance trading practices.

By studying historical and ethnographic records on figures like trade party leaders, we can see how inland communities used cross-linguistic knowledge exchanges to support novel types of trade during this moment of regional transformation. The earliest caravan leaders curated a wide range of skills and knowledge, fitting with the term's original denotation of people with expertise in tracking. Among Kamba speakers, for example, the title *mũthiani* was given to the leaders of trade parties, but it was also applied to war leaders and expert hunters.¹³⁸ Similarly, for Mijikenda speakers, trade party leaders (called *mudhyani* or *muryani*) led small caravans across the Tsavo plains to obtain ivory and cattle from speakers of Kamba and Chaga, to whom they supplied cloth, beads, wire, and arrow poison.¹³⁹ Skills for long-distance travel were considered a form of specialized knowledge, or *uganga*. The leaders of trade and hunting parties protected themselves from wild animals and robbers with powerful medicines. They traveled with protective charms called *virumbi*, which were broadly used for tasks like guarding cattle herds, making war, and detecting changes in the weather. The *adhyani* affixed the charms to special staffs (also called *virumbi*), which signaled their status as the party's leader and helped them to guard their wares en route.¹⁴⁰

The use of this titled position for a trade party leader—and the practices surrounding it—in Mijikenda and Kamba offers evidence of the professionalization of trading activities in Mombasa's interior prior to the emergence of Arab-Swahili caravans. Relying on their geographic skills, knowledge of protective medicines, and relationships with distant communities, these individuals led the region's earliest long-distance trade parties, facilitating direct interactions between the coast and as far inland as Mount Kilimanjaro. During the nineteenth century, caravans crossing from Swahili ports into the far interior were called *safari*, an Arabic loanword in Swahili.¹⁴¹ But the earliest trading parties in the region were referred to by a different name: *charo*, an internal innovation in Mijikenda dialects that was later borrowed by many language groups in Mombasa's interior.

Charo's derivation allows us to consider how inland communities perceived trading parties that moved across ever-larger geographic networks. The term was produced from an inherited verb meaning "to burst" or "split."¹⁴² To create the noun, Mijikenda speakers added a class 7 noun prefix plus the nominal suffix -o to the verb root. The noun class in which they indexed *charo* generally includes instrumental artifacts and diminutives, but it can also indicate that a noun possesses the "qualities and attributes" of the root.¹⁴³ The prefix reveals that they understood their early trade parties to be entities that possessed the qualities of "bursting" or "splitting." The suffix, meanwhile, suggests that speakers understood *charo* to refer to the "action itself, the result of the action, the place or the instrument" of the same root.¹⁴⁴ Piecing together the derivation details, we are left with two possible interpretations of the word. If "burst" is the main productive root, it would indicate that when people used the word *charo* to refer to trade parties,

they recognized them as entities that both resulted from and had the qualities of speedy movement, i.e., “bursting” across expansive territories. In this interpretation, the expanding scales of trade parties in Mombasa’s interior elicited novel sensory understandings of what it meant to move across well-established geographic networks for the purpose of obtaining trade goods. Alternatively, long-distance traders may have understood their trade parties as entities that “split.” This interpretation of the root could refer to traders dividing the bounties of their excursion, or perhaps to different party members splitting up to trade with their *kurya tsoga* partners after arriving in inland regions like Ukambani, a practice documented in oral traditions.¹⁴⁵

Written records and oral traditions suggest that Mijikenda trade parties traveled overland routes between the coast and Chaga- and Kamba-speaking areas by the eighteenth century.¹⁴⁶ From *charo*’s derivation and the places where it was spoken, we can speculate that inland communities developed and adopted this term to describe new types of travel and trading activities that were different in scope and scale from earlier modes of interaction. This region—ranging from Mombasa’s immediate interior, across the dry Tsavo plains, and extending into the highland regions of the Taita Hills and Pare Mountains—had long been an important corridor for exchanges between different resource specialists, both in trade and subsistence goods as well as ritual ideas and knowledge. But as the Tsavo region faced new challenges, long-distance trade parties led by skilled scouts became the region’s commercial leaders. They helped to maintain the interior’s connections to Indian Ocean trading networks. And critically, trading innovations enabled Mijikenda communities to continue procuring goods like textiles and wire from Mombasa while the town remained under foreign rule. Shared terminology for this novel type of long-distance trade extended into all places that Mijikenda traders reached. Derivations of *charo* ultimately referred to long-distance journeys, caravans, and trade parties in languages spoken around Mombasa, in the Taita Hills, in Ukambani in central Kenya, and in Chaga languages spoken around Mount Kilimanjaro.

Charo’s wide distribution indicates the geographic networks along which inland goods and knowledge circulated. By the mid-nineteenth century, coastal caravans moved along these exact routes. Early European travelers in East Africa frequently wrote of the outlying regions beyond the coast as wild lands, “hermetically sealed” from cosmopolitan port cities.¹⁴⁷ Yet, when overland *safaris* expanded across East Africa’s interior during the mid-nineteenth century, they followed the contours set by inland communities over preceding generations. After Johannes Rebmann became the first European to see Mount Kilimanjaro in 1848, for instance, he characterized Mombasa’s interior as a “great wilderness” despite traveling along a well-worn trade route replete with places to encamp and provision.¹⁴⁸ Rebmann even went so far as to claim that the mountain’s name was derived from its visible position for these long-distance trading parties. According to his journal, “The

Suahili of the coast call the snow-mountain Kilimanjaro ‘mountain of greatness.’” He added that it also meant “mountain of caravans” since it was “a landmark for the caravans seen everywhere from afar.” Rebmann derived this second theory from the mountain’s name, which he claimed was produced by compounding the words “Kilima, mountain” with “Jaro, caravans.”¹⁴⁹ His journal does not indicate whether he arrived at this etymology on his own or through conversations during his travels. Regardless, the offhand comment speaks to a deeper history of inland networking initiatives that prominently shaped the contours of oceanic commercial worlds.

Trading parties departing from Mombasa’s near interior employed knowledge that had been assembled over generations. The earliest *charo* trade parties moved at a new pace. But their *mudhyani*’s expertise rested on a deeper knowledge of the region’s interior, including routes, places to provision, and the location of seasonal markets. To navigate between the diverse societies living in Mombasa’s interior, traders had to establish social bonds with other communities en route, using practices like blood pacts. Leaders also needed to possess knowledge of effective medicines for protection from wild animals, robbers, and the elements. Knowledge exchanges related to social rituals, trade goods, and medicines provided critical support for ongoing commercial connections in the port city’s interior. Mombasa’s connections to maritime trading networks rested on these inland participation strategies, which were centuries in the making.

. . .

Across the second millennium, Mijikenda speakers developed new means to participate in worlds beyond their villages. They established strategies for building social relationships, for exchanging goods and knowledge, and for conducting commerce over long distances, often in collaboration with other—non-Mijikenda-speaking—inland groups. Over centuries, they adapted and refined their trading practices to meet changing circumstances. These initiatives made it possible for their dispersed villages to maintain their influential position as a gateway that mediated the flow of trade goods into Mombasa as it emerged as one of East Africa’s most prominent ports. As such, ideas and actions grounded in Mijikenda speakers’ social goals and material ambitions became central to Mombasa’s enduring connections to faraway port cities in southern Arabia, Persia, and western India. Much like mosques and merchants’ houses, inland markets and forest groves were important sites for the development of oceanic commerce, forging connections between disparate inland communities in East Africa’s interior. As we will see in the next two chapters, inland influences on Mombasa reverberated far beyond the realm of trade.