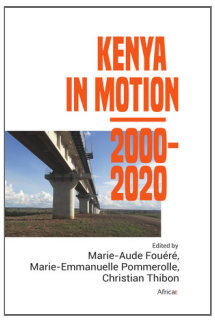

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Kenya in Motion 2000-2020

Africae

Chapter 12

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DOI: 10.4000/books.africae.2600
Publisher: Africae
Place of publication: Paris & Nairobi
Year of publication: 2021
Published on OpenEdition Books: 8 June 2021
Series: Africae Studies
Electronic EAN: 9782957305889

http://books.openedition.org

Electronic reference
WILLIS, Justin ; MWAKIMAKO, Hassan. *Kenya's Coast: Religion, Race, Ethnicity and the Elusive Nature of Political Community* In: *Kenya in Motion 2000-2020* [online]. Paris & Nairobi: Africae, 2021 (generated 28 janvier 2022). Available on the Internet: <http://books.openedition.org/africae/2600>. ISBN: 9782957305889. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/books.africae.2600.

Chapter 12

Kenya's Coast: Religion, Race, Ethnicity and the Elusive Nature of Political Community

Justin Willis & Hassan Mwakimako

In January 2019, Kenya's already crowded political landscape was joined by another new party. The Umoja Summit Political Party was, avowedly, a party for the coast "formed on the basis of bringing back the elusive unity of the region," as its founder declared.[1] Observers might have been forgiven for regarding this initiative with scepticism. Following the general elections of 2013 there had been a series of meetings amongst a slightly shifting cast of politicians from the six counties which had—until the implementation of the 2010 constitution—made up Kenya's Coast Province. Those meetings too had announced the formation of a new party to embody coastal unity.[2] Even then, the idea was one with a long and inglorious history. There had been several avowedly "coast" parties in the brief initial phase of party politics in the late 1950s and early 1960s—the Coast People's Party, the Coast African People's Union, the Kenya Protectorate National Party (Salim 1973). The idea that the coast should have its own party had been revived in the 1990s, with a succession of parties laying claim to this role: Shirikisho and the Kenya African Democratic Union–Asili are the most obvious examples (Gona 2008). Again and again, it has been argued that a distinct political constituency of *wapwani* ("coast people") or (as some put it) "coastarians" requires united political representation.[3]

The idea of such a party reflects Kenya's wider politics which, while they have been described as ethnic or "ethno-nationalist," may more usefully be called "ethno-regional"—since the grievances that lie behind ethnic mobilisation are a long-term product of regional inequalities (Muigai 2004; Branch & Cheeseman 2009, 3). Regional big men seek to mobilise

1. Baya, Samuel. 2019. "New Coast Party Out to Woo Hassan Joho, Amason Kingi." *Daily Nation*, 27 January. https://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/USPP-the-new-party-in-the-Coast/1064-4953386-8hvi3kz/index.html [archive].

2. "Coast Region to Form One Political Party." 2014. *The Star*, 6 January.

3. "Coast MPs to Quit ODM for New Party." 2014. *The Star*, 1 April; "Coast Leaders to Discuss Political Future." 2014, *The Star*, 13 November; "MPs Form Group for Unity, Economic Clout." 2015. *The Star*, 17 November.

and maintain political constituencies which are defined both by ethnicity and locality, amid a popular sense that government is unpredictable and responsive only to claims made through the affective ties of kinship, ethnicity and locality. The core term of this politics is marginalisation. It is a term that expresses a salient historical truth—that the centralised nature of the post-independence constitution allowed incumbent presidents to channel the spoils of power to their own home regions. It is also a term that has become something of a cliché; now every act of political claims-making tends to be prefaced by the assertion that a particular community and region has been marginalised. Yet those who claim to speak for the coast will readily agree that the region has been especially subject to marginalisation under British rule and subsequently; grievances over land, education and employment are keenly felt.

Despite their unanimity on that core issue, however, those who claim to represent the coast have never actually created a distinctive coast party with general support, nor is there likely to be one in the near future. Though a succession of politicians from the coast have risen to brief prominence, all have struggled to mobilise widespread support at the coast itself. The idea of a coast party has been encouraged by the sense that since 2007 there has been a strong vote at the coast for Raila Odinga's Orange Democratic Movement. But as this chapter will suggest, the coast has not been, and still is not, a single political community. There are multiple divisions among the people who live in the six counties of the former Coast Province; like other ethno-regional identities, the coast is in practice deeply contested. Raila Odinga's apparent popularity in a succession of elections and referenda rested on a shared sense that the coast has been disadvantaged by central government—but was possible partly because he is not from the coast, and so cannot be readily identified with any particular one of the groups who vie to embody the coast. While "the coast" can be imagined as a singularity—the antithesis of "up-country" Kenya—there are in truth are many coasts, and they exist in tension with one another.

1. Where is the Coast?

A campaign for secession flourished briefly on the coast just before Kenya's independence in the early 1960s, and has been revived in the early twenty-first century in the context of debates over Kenya's constitution (Willis & Gona 2013). The campaign has always been driven by fears of political and economic domination by people from other parts of Kenya, but it was partly predicated on a historical distinction. The initial establishment of British authority at the coast, in the 1880s, had rested on the legal basis of the 1886 Anglo-German treaty, which had declared a ten-mile strip, running south along the coast from the mouth of the Tana River, to be the

territory of the Sultan of Zanzibar. The Sultan leased this to the British East Africa Company in 1887. In 1895 the British government took direct control of the strip as part of the larger British East Africa Protectorate. When, in 1920, the rest of that Protectorate became Kenya Colony, the strip remained, formally, the territory of the Sultan—hence the title "Colony and Protectorate of Kenya." So it was that as independence neared in the early 1960s, some argued that "Mwambao," as they called it, should either be returned to Zanzibari rule or become independent by itself (Brennan 2008; Prestholdt 2014). Those arguments were echoed some fifty years later by the supporters of the nebulous Mombasa Republican Council (MRC), which again called for independence for the coast. The MRC insisted—quite without evidence—that the 1963 agreement by which the Sultan had renounced all claims to sovereignty in the coast was subject to a time limit, and expired in 2013. Those campaigners for secession, in the early 1960s and in the early twenty-first century, were deliberately vague in their use of the term "coast." Sometimes this focussed on the shoreline, but sometimes it effectively embraced the whole of Coast Province, which stretched far inland to the Taita hills, and included a long finger of land along the Tana River, roughly following the area inhabited by Pokomo people. The claim that this larger coast could—or should—form a political community was driven by the idea that the "original" inhabitants of the province were threatened by an "up-country" monopoly on wealth and power; here, as elsewhere in Kenya, the claims of autochthony have been strengthened since the 1990s by the international efflorescence of a language of indigeneity (Hughes 2005; Geschiere 2009; Lynch 2011). This "coast" was very much larger—and more clearly defined on the map—than the "ten-mile strip," which had never been marked out by administrative boundaries (Willis & Gona 2013).

Both "ten-mile strip" and "Coast Province" were, of course, in some measure arbitrary: the first a useful legal device in the partition of Africa; the second a colonial and post-colonial administrative convenience. Yet the difference between these two definitions of the coast expresses two quite different imaginaries of the coast as a physical territory, as well as a human society—on the one hand, as a thin fringe of shoreline, looking out to the Indian Ocean for its commerce and cultural inspiration; on the other hand, as a wider landscape, across which people move and trade continually, combining shoreline with a hinterland which embraces both the relatively well-watered agricultural land of the coastal ridge and the Taita hills, and a swathe of semi-arid land long used by pastoralists. These contending imaginaries are both shaped by—and shape—everyday life in the very varied territory embraced by what are now the six "coast" counties; and these differing territorial visions are overlaid on religious, ethnic and racial divides, sometimes cross-cutting and sometimes coinciding. All of

these categories are, of course, social constructs: yet they are powerful forces in shaping people's experience and their ideas of personal and collective interests.

2. The Muslim Coast?

For many Kenyans—including many at the coast—the coast and Islam are somehow synonymous. Islam has a long history at the coast; both archaeological remains and the current architecture and public culture of most shoreline towns reveal the powerful presence of Islam as a daily part of many people's lives over more than a thousand years. But in terms of population, the six counties of the coast are by no means overwhelmingly Muslim. According to the 2019 census, there are significantly more Christians (2.4 million) than Muslims (1.6 million) in the six counties of the coast. Muslims are in a majority only in Kwale, Lamu and Tana River (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019, 422). While the population of the towns and smaller settlements of the shoreline have historically been Muslim, the people of the hinterland have not. South of Mombasa, and along the Tana River, there was a relatively swift process of Islamisation in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; but in the quite densely settled hinterland immediately north of Mombasa, Islam spread more slowly (Holway 1970). While Christianity too was slow to win converts at the coast in the colonial period, it spread more swiftly from the 1960s (Deacon et al. 2017). Even more significant, however, has been the movement to the coast of people from elsewhere in Kenya—"up-country" people, or *wabara*, as coast people call them—a large proportion of whom are Christians (Sperling 2000). This migration to the coast was already apparent in colonial Kenya, as Mombasa in particular drew in workers from many miles away. Since independence, this in-migration has continued, and over time it has come to affect many areas of the coast. It has been particularly apparent in the main towns and centres of the tourist industry along the shoreline, but is also a feature of some settlement schemes (Kanyinga 2000).

Relations between Christians and Muslims have often been tense. As David Sperling (2000) has argued, there has been a history of religious plurality at the coast. Both in the rural hinterland and in some urban settlements, a family may have members who are Christian, Muslim, or who follow neither faith, living close together and routinely involved in each other's daily lives; everywhere, Muslims and Christians live as neighbours, and there is no religious "zoning," though some areas may have particular concentrations of one faith or another. But this plurality has come under strain (Mwakimako 2007). Over the last three decades, a narrative of collective Muslim marginalisation has become increasingly powerful. This identifies individuals' quotidian experiences of inequality

and discrimination as aspects of a global marginalisation of Muslims as a community. While this narrative of marginalisation is by no means the only way in which Muslims at the coast talk about their political interests or identity, it is nevertheless powerful, and it has inspired a whole range of political involvements, from a peaceful activism focussing on constitutional change and human rights, to a violent radicalism which entirely rejects the state (Chome 2019; Thordsen 2009). At the same time, the identification of Christianity with political and economic power in Kenya has become ever more apparent (Wandera 2008–9). This is, moreover, a Christianity which is increasingly Pentecostal and often overtly hostile to Islam (Gifford 1994). The sense that Christianity and Islam are in conflict is readily aroused (Chome 2019, 17–18). Suspicion that Christians receive favoured treatment from the state merges with resentment against people who have moved to the coast from other parts of Kenya, many of whom are Christian.

This sense of exclusion in Kenya has become entwined with debates on the position of Muslims internationally, which have become ever more intense in recent years, enabled by new technologies and driven by events in Palestine and elsewhere in the Middle East, and by the complex conflict in Somalia. One consequence of this has been the emergence of a violent radicalism in Kenya, particularly amongst Muslim youth (Shinn 2007). The terrorist bombings of US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998 were largely externally planned, but between 2001 and 2014 there was a steady increase in the frequency of attacks, and considerable local recruitment of men who committed themselves to a violent jihad, largely at the coast, but also elsewhere in Kenya. Such recruitment built on the argument that local experiences—of poverty, poor education, landlessness, and misgovernment—are simply manifestations of a wider pattern of discrimination against Muslims globally, and that the only effective way to counter them is the violent overthrow of the state, and of the wider international system. The Kenya military intervention in Somalia in 2011 lent strength to this argument, and led to increased violence. Alongside occasional major terrorist attacks—one of which, at Mkepetoni, targeted a major centre of up-country settlement at the coast in a clear attempt to appeal to Muslim grievances—there was from 2012 to 2015 a bitter little war of assassination and counter-assassination, mostly in and around Mombasa, between the security forces, suspected radicals and suspected informers (Mwakimako and Willis, 2014). The often-brutal and extra-legal campaign of "counter-terrorism" at the coast increased tensions (Prestholdt 2011; Open Society Justice Initiative/MUHURI 2013). In 2012 and 2013, when radical preachers died in targeted assassinations which were widely blamed on the security forces, there were riots in Mombasa in which churches became the target of angry Muslim protesters; Christian pastors were also

attacked in several incidents. The ambiguous position of Christianity at the coast was evident in the debates around the nature of the MRC. Those who claimed to be the leaders of the MRC were Muslims; and MRC slogans appeared spray-painted on urban walls alongside the slogans of radical Islam, apparently by the same hands. Yet some MRC supporters insisted that this was a movement for all "coast" people, not just for Muslims (Willis & Gona 2013; Deacon et al. 2017).

A similar uncertainty characterises the debate over a "Coast party"; must the coast be represented by a Muslim leader? The most prominent politicians from the coast in the 1960s were Christians: Ronald Ngala was a Christian; so too was well-known politician of the early 2000s, Karisa Maitha (despite his earlier association with the United Muslims of Africa, an organisation founded with government backing in the 1990s to confront anti-government Muslim activists on the streets of Mombasa). But Maitha, who died in 2005, was not ostentatious about his Christianity; nor was Ngala. In the current national political climate, in which church services and fund-raisings are routinely used as political platforms, and political events blur uncertainly into prayer meetings, it would be difficult for a Christian national politician to avoid very public displays of faith; which, in turn, would make problematic any claims to leadership of "the coast." In recent years, those who sought national status as leaders of the coast—Najib Balala, Chirau Mwakwere, and most recently Hassan Joho—have been Muslims; though, as will be explained below, ideas of ethnicity and race have undermined their ambitions.

If the divide between Muslims and Christians on the coast has become more evident in recent years, so too have divisions among Muslims. The perceived contest between "African Islam" and "Islam in Africa" has become a near-dominant analytical paradigm for understanding tensions amongst Muslims in Africa (Cruise O'Brien 1981; Rosander 1997). The neatness of that paradigm may misrepresent a reality in which individuals live across the two categories (Otayek and Soares 2007); but clearly Islam on Kenya's coast has long been shaped by debates over what it means to live properly as a Muslim (Chome 2019). Generations of Muslim reformers have sought to change established local practices and beliefs. Though the process is often dated to the 1970s, in Kenya it was first apparent in the 1930s, in the work of Shaykh Al-Amin Mazrui, and gained energy from the 1960s, notably through the work of scholars on the northern island of Faza, who were inspired by Egyptian teachers (Pouwels 1981; Swaleh 2012). External finance, and the intellectual influence of Islamic institutions of higher education outside Kenya, have played a part in these debates. From the 1960s, a growing range of governments and international bodies offered scholarships for religious studies, and provided funds for the building of

mosques and madrassa, and for the salaries of imams. Young men from the coast went to study in Saudi Arabia, Yemen or Sudan, and latterly also in Uganda; they returned with belief both that Islam should be spread to non-believers, and that "innovations"—the Arabic word *bid'a* is routinely used in Swahili to describe these—which had crept into orthodox Islam should be removed, as part of a process of religious and social reform and renewal (the Arabic words, *islah* and *tajdid,* are routinely used in Swahili and English text and speech for "reform" and "renewal"). South Asian movements such as the Tabligh Jamaat also became active participants in a rural campaign of proselytisation. Empowered by their education—which gave them the all-important ability to pursue theological debates in Arabic—and by the funds which supported them and allowed them to run minor local education and welfare projects, these men steadily shifted the terms of debate, and the bounds of permissible practice (Kresse 2007). The result has been tension over the propriety of some long-established practices: some funeral prayers; the offering of prayers at the tombs of renowned holy men; the playing of music in mosques as part of the celebration of the Prophet's birthday (the *mawlid*). Physical confrontations over these issues, became less common by around 2010, but debates remained lively, and occasionally divisive. After 2010, some practices—such as the celebration of *mawlid*—which had vanished for a time under the influence of the reformers have begun to reappear.

The debate over "innovation," on the Kenya coast as elsewhere in Africa, is often cast as a contest between a moderate form of established practice—usually described as Sufi—socially tolerant, and politically uninvolved as well as syncretic in ritual, and an intrusive reformism which is strict in its view of religious practice, intolerant of diversity and is inherently political. The reformist work of Salafists—as most now prefer to be called, shunning the Wahhabist label which some still apply to them—has come to be seen as linked with radical projects of political Islam and with violence and acts of terrorism (Haynes 2005; Rosenau 2005; Loimeier 2011). The narrative of Salafists using Saudi money or training to displace a tolerant local Islam is not wholly misleading (Ndzovu 2018). Yet it requires some nuancing. "Sufism" takes a particular form at the Kenya coast: practices associated with Sufism have been common in Islam at the coast. But, while mosques in which these practices are common may consider themselves as "*tariqa* mosques," Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqa*) actually have little significance. The widespread networks of spiritual patronage—and therefore of social power—which characterise Sufism in, for example, Senegal, are much less significant on the Kenyan coast. More importantly, the simple association of Salafism with "Islamism"—that is, with the quest for a political system run along Islamic principles—may underestimate the growing political engagement of all Muslims, which is both a wider Kenyan and international

phenomenon (Thordsen 2009). In Kenya, and on the coast in particular, the politics of multi-partyism and the constitutional debates which have dominated public life for the last two decades have involved Muslims from the outset (Bakari 1995; Haynes 2006). In the early 1990s the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) was for a time one of the most prominent organisations calling for political change (Cruise O'Brien 2003; Oded 1996). While it came to be dominated by a radical preacher who had studied in the Middle East, IPK's agenda was to challenge despotism, and mainly focussed on opening up political space for Muslim youth through multi-partyism and electoral participation. Since then, multiple Muslim organisations have been closely involved in constitutional debates, both because of the perceived threat to the position of "Kadhi courts" (which provided justice to Muslims in matters of personal law) and because constitutional reform was seen as a way to overcome the political and economic marginalisation of Muslims. In both 2005 and 2010, Muslim organisations took very clear stands in constitutional referenda, and Muslims everywhere in Kenya—whatever their views on *bid'a*—were encouraged to think of themselves as Muslims, with a shared political interest.

Radical preachers who combined Salafist views on religious practice with an explicit support for violent jihad have undoubtedly encouraged recruitment to al-Shabaab on the Kenya coast. But not all those attracted to the idea of violent jihad—who are almost all young men—have any particular interest in debates over practice. The young men who flocked to an advertised "jihad training" event at Masjid Musa—a mosque in the Majengo area of Mombasa—in early 2014 were not all Salafists, or regular worshippers at mosques where Salafists preach. The sense that Muslims are marginalised, and that this is an international condition, is not restricted to those who call themselves Salafists; it is an idea articulated, in different ways, by many preachers in many mosques, as well as on the internet (Chome 2019; Mwakimako & Willis 2014). It is by no means always advanced as a justification for violence—there are many prominent Muslims at the coast whose views on religious practice might be viewed as Salafist, but who nonetheless encourage peaceful political engagement through the constitution and through elections. That encouragement tends to be conditional—based not on the belief that liberal democracy is a good thing, but rather on the argument that it is the best way to pursue the interests of the Muslim community in current circumstances (Mwakimako & Willis 2016). It is, however, the corollary of a substantial engagement in electoral politics; while a small number of Muslim youths at the coast have become involved in radical violence and denounce the very idea of democracy, it seems clear that large number of Muslims registered and voted in both 2013 and 2017 elections.

There was not, however, any "Muslim vote" in either of those sets of elections. In 2013 this was despite—or perhaps because of—attempts by various Muslim organisations to orchestrate a community consensus; in 2017, little effort was made to mobilise Muslims collectively. The rivalrous multiplication of leadership bodies has been a feature of Islam in Kenya since the 1990s, and there have been repeated disputes over which, if any, organisation has the right to endorse particular candidates or policies (Constantin 1993; Ndzovu 2012). The rivalry sometimes sets coast Muslims against Somali or "up-country" Muslims, but there are rivalries for leadership amongst Muslims on the coast (Kresse 2009). Debates over practice can drive such rivalries. So, for example, the Kenya Assembly of Ulama and Imams (KAULI)—which despite its name, was really focussed on the coast—was created specifically to represent imams of "tariqa mosques," who felt that they were inadequately represented by other bodies, notably the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK), which was also very largely a coast organisation. Both have become rather inactive since 2013. The proliferation of Muslim representative organisations was been fuelled by personal rivalries, and perhaps by the availability of "anti-radicalisation" funds from the US and its allies, some of which have been channelled through such bodies. But doctrinal differences and external funding aside, there are other dividing lines among Muslims at the coast, which were perhaps most clearly evident in the distinction between CIPK and another organisation, the Kenya Muslim National Advisory Council (KEMNAC). Like CIPK, KEMNAC has been based at the coast, despite its name—and is, in fact, very largely restricted to Mombasa. The difference between these two organisations was not doctrinal, and has nothing to do with the debate over *bid'a*. It was, quite simply, based on ideas of racial category. CIPK was led by men who—whatever they may call themselves—would be called Swahili or Arabs by many coast people who view themselves as Africans. KEMNAC, on the other hand, has been led by a man who has assertively argued the claims of—as he puts it—Africans (Ndzovu 2012, 34).

3. Who Are the Wapwani?

This sense of racial difference is a powerful force on the coast. Its influence is felt well beyond the rivalries of Muslim leadership organisations. It is also, of course, deeply problematic. Many of those who claim some distant Yemeni or Omani ancestry would nonetheless insist that they are Africans, as well as Arabs; and one of the many ways in which the ethnonym Swahili has been used is to capture a sense of an identity which is both African and coastal, looking out to the Indian Ocean but also rooted in the continent (Constantin 1989; Topan 2004). Arab and African, some would say, are entirely compatible kinds of identity. Yet there are many others who simply

do not accept this, and who resent what they see as a long-standing social and economic dominance of coast society by people who they categorise as Arabs. Undoubtedly, this sense of racial difference is partly the result of British colonial policy, which linked these categories to distinct sets of rights, privileges and obligations—so that, for example, Arabs could own land, and vote, and Africans could not. Arabs were citizens and Africans were natives (Salim 1973, 183–246; Willis 1993). But as Glassman (2011) has argued of Zanzibar, racial thinking is not simply a colonial imposition; it draws on local understandings of identity in which a sense of indigeneity is a powerful force.

Whatever its origins, this idea of "race" continues to divide Muslims at the coast, and the population of the coast more generally, as Janet McIntosh's work (2009; also Ndzovu 2012) has shown. African Muslims believe that they are subject to discrimination and exclusion by their Arab co-religionists, and readily locate this contemporary condition to a history of slavery which is seen (not entirely accurately) as a history of Arab oppression of Africans. Landlessness is a constant source of friction at the coast, especially along the coast and its near hinterland north of Mombasa, where the legacy of nineteenth-century slavery and Omani rule, of British colonial policy, and of post-colonial rule is that tens of thousands of people live as squatters on the land of large landowners (Kanyinga 1998). For decades, this friction has been understood, and expressed, in racial terms, as conflict between Arabs and Africans—although that, again, is a considerable simplification. While some accuse "up-country" people—and especially, Kikuyu—of grabbing land at the coast, there are many squatters who prefer to blame "the Arabs" for their plight. In talking of land, in particular, people play with an uncertain categorical distinction between what might be called "race" and "ethnicity," which turns on an idea of autochthony. Up-country Kenyans are Africans—a term explicitly used—though they belong to other tribes; but "Arabs" are allegedly not. Public statements on racial difference have become less common in the face of threatened prosecutions by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission—but private language still routinely evokes race, in way that allows an allusive public style in which categories of racial difference are not mentioned, yet are ubiquitous.

The depth of this divide made itself apparent in the secessionist agitation associated with the MRC. The supporters of the MRC described themselves as *wapwani*. Yet there were uncertainties over who these *wapwani* were. The Facebook page of the MRC evoked a vision of the coast whose epitome was Mombasa's Old Town: Arab or Swahili in culture. The chosen symbols of the movement, which echoed the (largely Arab and Swahili) Coast People's Party of the 1960s, emphasised this link; in contrast, one self-defined African politician who was publicly critical of the MRC (though evidently

mindful of its potential to mobilise coast grievances), Chirau Mwakwere, suggested that the very name "Mombasa Republican Council" revealed how unrepresentative the movement was—a characteristically elliptical way of raising the issue of racial difference. Meanwhile, some of the written material circulating under the name of the MRC offered an inclusive, cosmopolitan vision of the coast; while other "MRC" literature pointedly excluded Arabs from membership of the community of *wapwani* (Willis & Gona 2013). These contradictions may to some degree reflect unresolved tensions in people's own sense of their identity; but they evidently also reflect the way in which the "MRC" as a brand could be appropriated by different groups, who had very different ideas of what "the coast" was.

Neither are the "Africans" of the coast united. Since the 1940s, the term Mijikenda has come into use to express an idea of political community amongst "nine tribes" on the southern coast: the nine being usually listed as Digo, Duruma, Giryama, Rabai, Ribe, Kambe, Jibana, Chonyi and Kauma. There are considerable cultural and linguistic continuities among the people of these groups (though also some differences); their slightly halting emergence as a "super-tribe" was roughly contemporaneous with a similar process among the groups who became the Kalenjin. A product of the late-colonial period, and particularly of the frenzied politics around independence, Mijikenda identity reflected the power of the idea of a collective voice which was both African and distinctively of the coast (Willis & Gona 2013). Uncertain attempts to fold other ethnic groups—notably the Taita and the Pokomo—into this wider identity have had little success, both because cultural and historical differences mean that there is little emotional power to this, and because members of those groups have seen little advantage in adopting this identity. If categorised as a single group, the Mijikenda form a clear majority of the population in the six counties of the coast: 1.9 million of a total coast population of 3.3 million, according to the 2009 census. Yet their sense of shared identity is fragile. Most Digo are Muslim, unlike other Mijikenda; not all Mijikenda languages are readily inter-comprehensible; and while multiple ties of migration and marriage bind Mijikenda, there are also bitter local disputes over land which can be expressed in terms of rivalries between Chonyi and Kauma, or Jibana and Giryama. At the same time, to be Mijikenda is not always so incompatible with being Swahili: ties of marriage and descent blur a boundary that appears very clear in rhetoric (Parkin 1989; Peake 1989). It is not, of course, unusual for identities to be multiple, and for larger groups to be internally fragmented. Yet it is striking that the mobilising and disciplining force of the idea of "being Mijikenda" seems so limited—perhaps because these divisions have been exacerbated by an engagement with national politics which sees aspiring Mijikenda leaders evoking these

differences in attempts to undermine one another's claims to leadership, and allows national politicians to playing on such divisions to keep the upper hand over their Mijikenda "point men."

Repeated attempts by individuals to establish a national position as "coast" leaders have been confounded by ethnic and racial division. Ronald Ngala was engaged in a constant struggle—waged often along racial lines—to assert his status (Stren 1974). Sharif Nassir became a powerful politician in Mombasa, but could never establish himself as a wider coast leader, because he was seen as a Yemeni Arab. Karisa Maitha, sometime protégé of Shariff Nassir (who used him to try and reach a Mijikenda constituency), became vocal in his denunciations of Arabs and achieved a degree of prominence, but at the cost of alienating his former patron. Rivalry for position in Kenya's politics of ethno-regionalism is not unusual, but the coast has seen a particularly high turnover of politicians, particularly since the return of multi-partyism (Gona 2008). Najib Balala, who more than one national politician has hopefully sponsored as a potential coast leader, has never been able to reach a wider constituency because he is seen as an Arab—his "Republican Congress" party was a spectacular failure in the 2013 elections. Chirau Mwakwere, who aspired to be the coast "point man" for national politicians, was unable to build any sort of reputation outside his own Digo community, even among other Mijikenda. In 2013, the competition for the position of governor of Mombasa revealed very clearly the nature of racial and ethnic politics: the two leading candidates, widely seen as Arab or Arab/Swahili, each took care to ensure that they had a Mijikenda running mate. Between them, these partnerships took 88% of the vote. The successful candidate in that election, Ali Hassan Joho, has become the most influential individual in coast politics, and has achieved a national prominence.

Between 2014 and 2017, Joho apparently courted confrontation with Uhuru Kenyatta, presenting himself as the champion of coastal interests against central government. The gambit paid off; despite criticism of his performance as Mombasa's governor, Joho won that position again in 2017 with a substantial majority. But neither this prominence nor his unconcealed ambition to run for the presidency have made him the unquestioned leader of the coast; there have been repeated attempts by Mijikenda politicians to form groups or parties that specifically exclude him.[4] In the run-up to the 2017 election one Mijikenda politician forecast that Joho would lose as

4. Oketch, Willis. 2016. "Governor Hassan Joho Says He Will Be First President from the Coast Come 2022." *Standard Digital,* 21 March. http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000195586/governor-hassan-joho-says-he-will-be-first-president-from-coast-come-2022. For one example of plans for coastal unity which exclude Joho, and are Mijikenda focussed, see Gari, Alphonce. 2016.

he lacked the support of the "indigenous communities"—which turned out be quite wrong, but was a reminder of the persistence of that racialised language.[5] The aftermath of the 2017 elections was revealing. Joho, together with the governor of Kilifi County Amason Kingi (a Mijikenda) made bold statements threatening coast secession as a response to the debacle of the presidential poll.[6] Both men then stepped back from that confrontational line, and were quick to welcome the "handshake" that reconciled Kenyatta and Odinga in March 2018. Since then, Kingi has apparently become more distant from Joho; one of his reported public statements simultaneously asserted and denounced divisions: "The importance of the Mijikenda must be recognised, as well as the unity of the coast people."[7]

Joho's presidential ambitions rest on the idea that he might become the regional big man for the coast. That hope is inspired by what looks like a pattern of voting, yet it may be misplaced. In the elections of 1992 and 1997, Coast Province—with the exception of Mombasa—was considered something of a "KANU zone," and Moi received 63% of the presidential votes at the coast in 1992 and 67% in 1997. At that time, however, the ruling party's dominance relied on a patchwork of local leaders playing to local constituencies, not on a single key "coast" intermediary. The coast vote looked more like a real phenomenon in the series of polls since 2005 that gave a consistent majority for Raila Odinga, or for causes supported by him, with an overall rise in participation levels.

"Movement to Unite Counties for 2017 Poll." *The Star*, 29 April. http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2016/04/29/movement-to-unite-counties-for-2017-poll_c1341235.

5. Mwaboza, Anania. 2017. "Why Joho Will Lose on August 8th." *The Star*, 27 June.

6. Ahmed, Mohamed. 2017. "Hassan Joho, Amason Kingi Call for Breakaway of Coast." *Daily Nation*, 3 November. https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Hassan-Joho-Amason-Kingi-call-for-breakaway-of-Coast-from-Kenya/1056-4172150-2rxmh2z/index.html.

7. Reported in Lwanga, Charles. 2018. "New Bid for Mijikenda Unity Announced at Cultural Festival." *Daily Nation*, 12 September. https://www.nation.co.ke/counties/kilifi/New-bid-for-Mijikenda-unity-announced-at-cultural-festival/1183282-4752918-fq0qlxz/index.html.

Table 1. Voting figures on the coast from 2005 to 2017, with participation rates and percentages of votes for Raila Odinga

Year	Nature of vote	Registered voters, Coast Province	Turnout (%)	Votes for Odinga (%)	Votes for cause supported by Odinga
2005	Constitutional referendum	967,518	334,087 *34%*		269,855 ("No" votes) *81%*
2007	Presidential election	1,178,537	601,201 *51%*	353,733 *59%*	
2010	Constitutional referendum	997,080	537,158 *54%*		425,626 ("Yes" votes) *79%*
2013	Presidential election	1,164,803	817,209 *70%*	612,057 *75%*	
2017	Presidential election (August)	1,714,096	1,112,865 *65%*	801,031 *72%*	

Sources: figures released by ECK and IEBC.

This does suggest that voters at the coast see themselves as very much a part of Kenyan politics, whatever the talk of secessionism. It also suggests that the determined efforts by Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto to shift public opinion at the coast in advance of the 2017 elections—notably through some limited but high profile interventions over the chronic problem of land—were not very successful.[8] But to interpret this pattern as evidence that the coast as a whole supports Raila, or is an "ODM" zone, or that Joho could count on this vote in his own presidential bid, would not be safe. In the August 2017 poll, as previously, the vote for Odinga was concentrated very much in the southern half of the coast (where the bulk of the population is); Lamu and Tana River counties saw considerable support for Kenyatta. Despite Joho's national prominence, the turnout—and the vote for Odinga—in his Mombasa County was weaker than any other southern part of the coast (a 59% turnout, and a 70% vote for Odinga; by contrast, Kilifi saw a 65% turnout and an 84% poll for Odinga). It would seem safer to say that voting patterns have indicated a broad preference for devolution, and a suspicion of central government, in the southern counties of what was once Coast Province; since Odinga has been an advocate

8. Tsuma Nyassi, Daniel, Kalume Kazungu, and PSCU. 2016. "Uhuru to Visit Lamu and Issue Title Deeds to Waitiki Land Owners." *Daily Nation*, 6 January. http://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Uhuru-to-visit-Lamu-and-give-title-deeds-to-Waitiki-land-owners/1064-3022564-xwncc6/index.html [archive]. "Uhuru, Ruto, Start Coast Tour Full of Goodies." 2016. *Daily Nation*, 3 September. https://nation.africa/news/politics/Uhuru-Ruto--start-Coast-tour-full-of-goodies/3126390-3367774-15csglwz/index.html [archive].

for devolution, and the avowed enemy of centralised government, this favoured him. Were Joho to stand for the presidency, that support would not necessarily transfer to him.

Conclusion

The multiple divisions of the "coast" mean that no politician has ever been fully able to claim to represent this contested entity. Odinga's popularity was itself anomalous in a context where the most prominent "national" politician in any region is usually a person from that area—it seemed to contradict the logic of ethno-regionalism. His role as coast champion was the consequence of his status as an outsider, but also an outsider who is not connected with the coast's history of marginalisation: neither his family, nor his ethnic group are seen as land-grabbers at the coast. Coast politicians are irretrievably marked by their religious identity, by their ethnicity and—most of all—by the imagined but immensely powerful categories of race which shape and divide the coast. Odinga benefitted for a time by standing apart from those divisions and at the same time supporting devolution, which commanded widespread support.

Yet while "devolution" may be popular in principle, there are significant differences in how people understand the term, which expose the multiple divisions among the imagined "wapwani": will it offer Muslims relief from the apparently arbitrary violence of the security forces? Will it give land title to squatters? Will it allow Digo to monopolise employment in Kwale, or Giryama to do so in Kilifi? These divisions have been amplified, not resolved, by the debate over the Building Bridges Initiative. Rival politicians from the coast continue to seek support for their own ambitions—and rewards for their particular religious, ethnic or racial community—by offering themselves as intermediaries to national politicians. Despite the constant rhetoric of coast unity, the coast remains profoundly divided: what devolution should mean, and which "coast" people should benefit from it, remain very much open to debate.

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