

Once south of the desert, the great empires of the sahel receive most attention because travelers from North Africa wrote about them, but these travelers stopped there. Further south, our knowledge is limited to shadowy outlines. The Hausa-speaking region of northern Nigeria, for example, had already begun to develop extensive towns that served as marketing and craft centers. These towns came into existence as early as 1000 to 1300 AD, apparently without much direct influence from the patterns of urbanization in North Africa. But Hausa emerged into the light of recorded history only in the fifteenth century, when Muslim influence first began to be important. In this case, Islam came indirectly from the Niger bend to the northwest, or from Borno to the northeast. By the fifteenth century, Hausa was divided into a series of walled towns, each ruling over the surrounding countryside; Katsina, Kano, Zazzau (or Zaria), and Gobir were already important.

Other centers of state-building existed still further south. On the Benue, a state had already emerged among the Jukun people, alongside the resolutely stateless Tiv. Still further south, both the Yoruba states and Benin had been founded before the fourteenth century. Their bronze sculpture demonstrates great art and technical proficiency in metallurgy, but the lack of other evidence forces us to overemphasize the savanna as against the forest.

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4

ECONOMY, SOCIETY AND LANGUAGE IN EARLY EAST AFRICA

Many characteristic elements of East African life, including the distribution of languages, the ways people earn their livelihoods, and the forms of local social organization, took shape in a time without written documentation. Arabic documents, so important for the early history of the West African savanna and for towns on the East African coast, are almost entirely absent for the eastern interior. Historians have therefore had to turn to archaeology, linguistics, and the study of oral traditions to piece together an account of the formative centuries in East Africa.

Linguistics, archaeology, and history

Well over a hundred languages are spoken in East Africa. This presents a challenge to historians (even those born in East Africa) who wish to hear the voices of East Africans within their diverse local societies, speaking about their own histories. But it also provides scholars with a rich body of linguistic evidence about the region's history. Historians examine languages that are closely related to learn the circumstances under which ancient speech communities separated from one another. They are able to discover which words were likely to have been spoken in the distant past – words for ritual leaders or crops, for example – and thus to learn about ancient cultures. They are able also to uncover the way ancient speech communities borrowed these words from one another.

The languages of East Africa are divided among four language families. We have seen that languages belong to a single family when they resemble one another so closely that we can think of them as descended from a single ancestral language, or proto-language. Linguists examine the similarities among living languages so as to reason about what the proto-language must have been like. They understand that when speakers of an ancestral language began to live apart from one another, speech in each locality took on unique characteristics, and separate local dialects emerged. Later, the dialects became so different that they were no longer mutually intelligible; they became separate languages. These new languages, in their turn, continued the process

of local differentiation. Each early language thus developed into a cluster of related languages or a branch of a language family.

Each of the language families is spread over a large part of the African continent, and, in some cases, beyond the borders of the continent itself. For this reason, when historians refer to linguistic groupings of the people of East Africa, they usually refer to subgroups of the larger language families. Dozens of Bantu languages are spoken across East Africa, from southern Uganda and southern Kenya southward. Other chapters show the importance of Bantu-speaking peoples in Equatorial and southern Africa. Yet the Bantu languages are merely a part of one subgroup within a larger grouping (Benue-Congo), itself a sub-branch within the Niger-Congo language family which includes many of the languages of West Africa. A second major group of East Africans speak Nilotic languages, one small sub-branch of the Nilo-Saharan language family. A very large majority of present-day East Africans speak either Nilotic or Bantu languages.

Historical linguists make a careful examination of relations among groups of languages to learn about the histories of the people who spoke them and who spoke the ancestral languages that preceded them. By locating the languages of a present-day language family on the map, and then constructing a history of how these separated from one another in the past, they are able to get some sense of the geographic spread of related languages at different stages in history. By studying the degree of difference among related languages, they can talk about how long it took for the separations to emerge. The more different related languages are, the longer ago they separated from one another. Historians and linguists examine also which of the branches of a language family has a word for a particular thing or practice: for cows, or sheep, or milking, for example. By placing those branches within the family's larger history, they are able to point to the period when these things were first introduced – when people first kept cattle, for example. Historians of language are also able to identify words that people in one language family or branch learned from people in another, and thus to talk about the way cultural or economic practices spread from one group to another after they were introduced.

While historical linguists study today's languages to learn things about speech in the past, archaeologists study material remains to learn about similar historical periods, but from a different angle. Just as linguists study relations among many words and many languages to imagine what life was like in a particular speech community, archaeologists study relations among many kinds of remains to construct a picture of society and culture in the past. They may find, for example, that wherever iron working is found in a particular region, a specific kind of pottery is also found, and these always occur in places where the forest has been cleared and grain crops planted. They identify a way of life through its material remains.

A community identified through its assemblage of material remains may, however, be quite different from a speech community of the kind studied by historical linguists. This should be clear to us from our experience of today's world. A car factory in Japan has a lot in common with one in the United States or France, but each one exists in a very separate speech community, where different languages are spoken. To understand how we construct a picture of early East African society we must imagine a world

in which we have one body of knowledge about the material remains of car factories (of iron-smelting and pot-making), and another body of knowledge about the development of the Japanese, English, and French languages (or Bantu and Nilotic languages) and we must then bring together the different kinds of knowledge to create a single coherent picture.



Map 4.1 Major language groups of East Africa c.1880 AD

Nilotes and Cushites

A large majority of East Africa's people at the start of the twentieth century spoke Bantu languages or Nilotic ones, lived by farming mixed with livestock keeping, and used iron tools made by blacksmiths who knew how to create iron from local ores. These patterns of language, livelihood, and tool-making took shape over the preceding four thousand years. The whole landscape of peoples, their economy, language, and culture, would have looked radically different in 2000 BC, a time when iron tools did not exist and when most people relied on hunting, fishing, and gathering for their livelihood.

The shift from hunting wild animals to the breeding and rearing of animals and from collecting wild plants to cultivating domesticated ones was long and complex. In each generation, and in each locality, people created new economic forms, drawing on the full range of economic possibilities that had come before. The unfolding of this history in East Africa was not marked by a succession of clear stages – hunting and gathering, then pastoralism, then farming – but rather evolved when local people created new possibilities, which they added to the wide range of practical knowledge that had come before. After farming emerged, people did not reject the earlier activities. Farmers continued to collect wild plants; some also supplemented their crops by hunting to win the meat of wild animals. In some places pastoralists (or farmers) lived side by side with hunter-gatherers, together creating a regional economy based on the interdependence of domestication and other forms of food production. Farmers and hunters came to rely on trade with one another; no group planned its economic activities in isolation.

The pattern of change in the economy was, therefore, one in which new possibilities were explored, but old ones were not always abandoned. People of each generation, in each locality, created their own syntheses, their own ways of combining economic activities, using the inherited expertise of earlier generations, creating new knowledge, and borrowing knowledge and practices from their neighbors.

Domesticated cattle were first introduced in and near the Rift Valley of what is now Kenya in about 2000 BC. The archaeological record indicates that this new form of activity – the raising of animals rather than the hunting of animals – was not the radical break then that it sometimes seems to us now. The first cattle keepers made the same sorts of stone tools that their hunting and gathering ancestors had made; their skeletons look the same, supporting the idea that the earliest cattle keepers were people with local roots. Most important, they did not simply shift from hunting to domestication. For the first thousand years of cattle rearing, and longer, the bones of domesticated animals (cattle, sheep, and goats) were found alongside the bones of wild animals. Indeed, the bones of wild animals predominated, and livestock were only gradually introduced.

Some time after 1000 BC a very different sort of economy emerged around the Rift Valley, in which livestock played a much more central role. This economy was more like the economies of pastoralists who live in the region today, people for whom hunting is marginally important, at best. One possible explanation for this pastoralist shift away from hunting is that it took place after the introduction of a new breed of cattle (the Zebu) that thrived more easily than earlier breeds in the region's conditions of heat stress, periodic drought, and periodic food shortages.

The earliest pastoralists were probably Southern Cushites, speaking languages forming a sub-branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family. Calculations about the timing of the spread of Southern Cushitic languages show that they are likely to have entered northern Kenya in about 2000 BC, the time when domesticated livestock were first introduced. The hypothesis identifying the earliest cattle keepers with the Cushites, despite the relative absence of Cushites today, is based on the survival of isolated groups of Southern Cushitic speakers in Tanzania's Rift Valley, as remnants of what must once have been a more widespread community. That Cushites must have been more numerous in the past is indicated by the survival of Southern Cushitic words in Nilotic and Bantu languages, which are more common in the region today. These words must have been learned by Nilotes or Bantu-speakers at a time when Southern Cushitic languages were spoken widely. The historical reconstruction of early vocabularies shows that the Southern Cushites grew grain crops, although the archaeologists have not yet found supporting evidence for grain agriculture among the earliest generations of livestock keepers.

The recognition of the importance of Cushites is mildly embarrassing to African historians who have spent years trying to slay the dragon of the Hamitic myth. "Hamitic myth" is the term writers have used for a racist set of historical ideas, which attributed the great achievements of Africa to light-skinned outsiders who came down from the north. In the words of C. G. Seligman, a major proponent of the idea, "the incoming Hamites were pastoral Caucasians – arriving wave after wave – better armed as well as quicker-witted than the dark agricultural Negroes."⁷ This is maddening; it breaks a basic rule of method by mixing race (Caucasian), language ("Hamitic"), and culture (weapons, economy), and further makes the assumption that lighter skinned is quicker witted. Joseph Greenberg was among the first to point out the one-hundred per cent negative correlation between "Hamitic" languages and pastoralism in West Africa.⁸ He succeeded in having the word "Hamitic" dropped from respectable use by discrediting the linguistic analysis on which the grouping was based.

Although the Hamitic myth has been abandoned, the importance that recent authorities give to the Cushites is so strongly reminiscent of it that the two hypotheses must be compared directly. The Cushites did indeed enter East Africa from the north (although the language might then have spread to other people long-resident in East Africa), and they *do* speak languages of the same large family as Hebrew and Arabic (Afro-Asiatic). The evidence, however, roots the Cushites firmly in African soil. Of the seven branches of the Afro-Asiatic language family, all except Semitic are found only in Africa, from Berber of the far northwest across to Ancient Egyptian in the northeast. This makes it virtually certain that the family's ancestral language was first spoken on the African continent. The importance of the Cushites points to the creative role of movement and communication among Africans; it does not support the idea that creative ideas came from outside Africa.

Within East Africa, the "Hamites" had been described as bringing the civilized arts

⁷ C.G. Seligman, *Races of Africa*, rev. edn, London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939, p. 156.

⁸ Joseph H. Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa*, Publication No. 25. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore and Linguistics, 1963, p. 51.

to a pre-existing substratum of cultivators. In reality, the Cushites are among the early populations that were later absorbed and pushed aside, although they contributed institutions, words, ideas, and knowledge of the local environment that survived in the languages and cultures of those who supplanted them.

In about 500 BC a new group, speakers of Nilotic languages, began to move into the western part of what is now Kenya. This began a process which was to continue over the next 2000 years in which the domain of the Cushites and of the other early populations of East Africa began to contract as the Nilotes intermingled with and ultimately supplanted the more northerly of these early peoples, while Bantu-speakers occupied the south. The Nilotes spread from their homeland, between Lake Turkana in northern Kenya and the Nile River to the west and northwest. This is an arid belt which supports pastoralism and only the most marginal agriculture. Quite early, the ancestors of the Southern Nilotes began to separate from other Nilotes, and went on to occupy the highlands to the west of the Rift Valley of Kenya.

The Southern Nilotes, as identified through the history of their language, appeared in western Kenya in times and places known to archaeologists for the particular assemblage of material objects which they call Elmenteitan. The archaeological record tells us that the people who occupied these sites relied heavily on herding, and gave up the emphasis on hunting shown by earlier people in this part of Kenya. The expansion of the Nilotic languages appears to have been part of a larger process by which hunters and gatherers were assimilated or pushed aside by herders and farmers. Some of the earlier hunter-gatherers now being supplanted may have spoken Cushitic languages (while other Cushites herded and farmed), and others probably spoke Khoisan languages, of which there are few speakers left in East Africa today.

The western highlands of Kenya, where most of the Southern Nilotes settled, enjoyed much higher rainfall than the Nilotic homeland in the north, and grain agriculture became more important in their economy, along with raising cattle, sheep, and goats. The people who practiced mixed farming and herding lived alongside hunter-gatherers, the people of the high forests, some of whom came to speak Southern Nilotic languages also. The newer economic forms – grain agriculture and herding – did not supplant the older ones as stages in a succession. Each new generation created its own synthesis of inherited economic and cultural forms, and each generation added its own innovations to the inheritance for those who would come later.

One possible reason why the Southern Nilotes proved able to supplant earlier populations in the area was their reliance on the social institution of the age-set. Christopher Ehret, whose research on Southern Nilotic language history is the basis of our knowledge of the period, has shown that age-set organization was a comparatively early development. The Southern Nilotes and their early neighbors lived in scattered villages without chiefs. Age-set organization made it possible for the Kalenjin (the Kenya branch of the Southern Nilotes) to organize men on a fairly large scale, extending far beyond the single village. This was useful for defense, but also for absorbing strangers, whatever their origins, and in providing a structure for cooperation over a wide area.

As the institution has existed in more recent times, an age-set formed when a group of adolescent boys were initiated together. This set would then have its own name,

some common rights and obligations, and a sense of unity. A single set was supposed to move through the different grades together. Members of the *Kimnyeken* age-set, for example, were initiated together, immediately entering the grade of young initiates. When the appropriate time came, the whole of the set moved on to the next grade together, becoming warriors but keeping their set name, while the *Kaplelach*, the next older group, went from the grade of warriors to that of elders. When successive sets had used up each of the seven or eight age-set names (after somewhat more than a hundred years), the cycle would begin again with the first name.

Because similar sets existed among a number of neighboring Kalenjin Southern Nilotes, individuals or small groups who moved from one place to another could easily become part of local village life simply by entering the appropriate age-sets. This meant, furthermore, that aliens could be integrated more easily into Kalenjin society than they could be into a society organized on narrow lineage principles. Because members of an age-set had to treat one another as equals, the sets made attractive points of entry for strangers.

The historical reconstruction of this process of absorption is based on the existence of age-sets by the time of the early Southern Nilotic spread, perhaps in the first millennium AD, and on examples from more recent periods. Beginning in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, the Terik, a subgroup of the Kalenjin, offered asylum to neighboring Bantu-speakers on condition that they join the Terik age-sets. In the end, the Bantu were numerically superior to the Terik, but they called themselves Tiriki after their hosts.

Bantu-speakers

To the west of the Southern Nilotes, in the regions to the north and west and south of Lake Victoria, a somewhat different set of institutions and syntheses emerged between 3000 BC and 1000 AD. In this case speakers of Bantu languages, especially those of the Great Lakes branch of Bantu, came to emerge as central actors.

The ancestors of the Great Lakes Bantu-speakers lived in wet forest environments. Their economy was particularly well-suited to this kind of environment. They grew root crops, including yams, along with beans, gourds, a variety of peanut, and oil palms. They also raised goats.

Two very different kinds of evidence, explored by the historian David Schoenbrun, point to related long-term processes: one by which the environment was transformed as farming spread, and the other by which Bantu languages of the Great Lakes branch grew in importance and in the breadth of their distribution.* The first kind of evidence, from the historical study of the environment, suggests that medium and low altitude forests began to shrink at the extreme west of the East African region, in Kigezi and Central Burundi, by 3000 BC. This process, which may have been initiated by reductions in rainfall, became more intense in later millennia, when farmers and

* David L. Schoenbrun, "Eastern Africa's Great Lakes Region: Linguistic, Ecological, and Archaeological Approaches, c.5000 BC to AD 1000." Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1990.

herders worked to clear forest land. The area was particularly well-suited to the early Bantu economy based on moist-forest crops. The second kind of evidence, from the historical study of language, points to a part of this region – the area between Lakes Kivu and Edward (Rwenzori) – as the place from which Great Lakes Bantu languages began to spread. This was happening by 500 BC.

The spread of these languages was to unfold in a region that takes in the north-western part of Tanzania, the southern part of Uganda, the whole of Rwanda and Burundi, and the adjacent parts of Zaire. In this region, when the process of Bantu expansion was just beginning, the languages of several different language families were widely spoken. Each set of people, each group speaking related languages, occupied a separate niche within the region. We have already seen that Bantu-speakers occupied the humid forest, where their agriculture centered around root crops.

The long-term process of the spread of people who spoke Great Lakes Bantu languages was one by which they learned from the economies of their neighbors, created new agricultural and economic syntheses, and thus were able to break out of their particular niche in the low, wet, humid forests. Many diverse economies of Bantu-speakers emerged, each one suited to the environment of one part or another of this region.

As this process unfolded, Bantu-speakers spread until they occupied the greatest part of the western zone of East Africa. We do not know exactly how they did this – the moments at which the process might have involved warfare, or intermarriage, or the peaceful negotiation by which speakers of different languages came to live together in economic interdependence. We do know that speakers of Bantu languages created a number of radically new economic syntheses, each one adapted to the particular environment of one small part of the Great Lakes region. They continued to develop their own moist-forest agriculture. Where appropriate they took on cattle-keeping, so as to be able to make full use of the grasslands. In some places they adopted grain agriculture.

One possible cause of this movement towards diversification was the decline of the moist forest in which the early Bantu-speakers lived – a decline that became more serious as their numbers grew. Quite likely, also, these farmers saw that each movement towards greater economic diversity increased food security. When crops fail, people who have access to cattle as well as farm land, or to both root crops and grain crops, are more likely to survive than those dependent on a narrow economic base. If the decline of moist forest pushed people to try new crops and new techniques, the advantages of diversification pulled them at the same time. The two processes may well have unfolded together. The advantages of improved food security would have appealed to people who saw their forest base declining.

The pressure on forest land became very much greater from the first century AD, when more of the Bantu-speakers began to produce iron and to use iron implements. The iron tools contributed to the transformation of the forest because they made it easier for people to clear forest land and to plant and weed root crops. The development of iron technology increased the pressure on forest land for a second reason: because workers cleared large areas of wooded land to make the charcoal needed for iron production.

The introduction of iron technology did not mean that people necessarily gave up their earlier tools; it meant that they worked out new combinations of tools. For some jobs digging sticks were superior to iron, and for others stone tools were preferred. Iron, once introduced, did not replace everything that had come before; instead, it added an important new set of tools to the ones that already existed.

The smelting of iron was a technical process of great complexity. The master-smelters had to consider the heat-resisting qualities of the materials they used to build furnaces, for these operated at very high temperatures. In addition, the smelter needed to master a process by which the oxygen in iron ore would be removed chemically. African technologists of iron created their own methods; their innovations followed a unique course, one of great complexity, and one different from the course of technological evolution in Europe.

The iron-smelting and -forging technologies, and the complex farming strategies of the same period, were embedded in rituals and in religious conceptions about which we know too little at this moment. Smelters in the region in more recent times have shaped their rituals so as to respond to what they see as the female fertility of the furnace that gives birth to a child of iron. In addition, the sophisticated chemical and physical process could succeed, as they saw it, only if the god controlling earth and iron were honored.

By 1000 AD the Bantu-speakers, using iron, had changed the landscape of this region of East Africa. They had transformed large areas of virgin forest, making them into the kind of forest in which human intervention is visible. They had created many new economic syntheses, adapted to the region's varying environments. Some took advantage of the combination of grassland and forest to combine farming and herding; some created new combinations of root crops, or of root and grain crops. By the beginning of the present millennium, the people of the Great Lakes zone had begun to adopt new varieties of bananas and other crops originating in Southeast Asia. These too opened new possibilities for forest agriculture. The ecological evidence shows that by 1000 AD some of the lakes region's people were living in very dense populations, and managing their land intensively, in much the way that land has been managed in more recent times.

The spread of Bantu-speaking peoples, and the creation of new, diversified economic forms, took place also beyond the Great Lakes area, in many parts of East Africa. Bantu speakers appear to have concentrated especially in those wooded areas where rainfall was high, and where a yam-based agriculture was possible. This was the case in the mountain areas of central Kenya and of northeastern Tanzania. It was the case also in the highlands of southern Tanzania.

As in the lakes region, however, the Bantu speakers continued to adapt and improve their economies. In the highland areas the new patterns made use of crops from southeast Asia introduced by late in the first millennium AD – Asian yams, taro, and new varieties of banana. These were well-suited to the moist forest environment. In the mountains of northeastern Tanzania a complex agricultural system emerged combining the newly introduced bananas, widespread irrigation, and manuring.

In the same period, Bantu-speakers created new economic forms as they moved into new environments in the drier parts of western and of east-central Tanzania. Bantu-

speakers in the wet regions relied heavily on vegetative reproduction in which they did not plant seeds, but rather parts of the plant itself – parts of the edible root in yams, for example, or a single stem taken with its roots from a cluster of banana plants. In the drier regions, grain crops grown from seed became much more important, as did cattle-rearing. The process by which the speakers of Bantu languages spread to occupy much of East Africa was related to their capacity to adapt to new environments, and to borrow and make use of the technological and agricultural heritages of all their neighbors.

Traditions of movement and the environment

The cultures of Bantu-speaking peoples in East Africa were closely related to one another at first, and then diverged. Each small area developed its particular local culture. This happened in the early centuries of the second millennium AD. The change can be seen archaeologically in the emergence of numerous local pottery styles in place of the broadly similar styles of earlier centuries.

For this new period, oral traditions become considerably more relevant. They are a rich source of knowledge on the past thousand years, although in rare cases they shed light on historical processes as early as 500 BC. Oral traditions often describe the movements of groups or individuals from one place to another, the creation of cultural and social forms, and the way relations unfolded among social groups. For historians, the availability of oral traditions changes the whole style of description. It becomes possible, in a richer way, to place other kinds of knowledge – archaeological and linguistic – within the context of local ideas. When we try to imagine what life must have been like in past centuries we have the help of local historians who have expressed their ideas about the relationship between past and present, the way in which societies came to be what they are.

Two sorts of traditions of movement are important for the processes discussed here. First, many small lineage and clan groups recount where their ancestors came from, why they moved, and under what circumstances. Second, people who today identify themselves as members of a single ethnic group speak about the historical sources of their common identity. Each kind of tradition has its own historical uses. The traditions of a small lineage tell only about that group, and sometimes only about local events or details of land ownership. But tens of traditions, or hundreds, can be fitted together to form general patterns of history – as they do when we learn that many lineage groups moved after a particular nineteenth-century famine or war, or that people who moved tended to seek out particular environmental settings for their new homes.

The traditions of the highland peoples who live on either side of the eastern Kenya-Tanzania border, for example, tell of the movements of many small groups from one highland region to another, passing across lowlands, even for some distance. Each lineage or clan tells of its own movement, unconscious of the larger pattern which informs us of the way particular sets of people adapted their cultures to the highland environment.

The scattered masses of mountains are wetter than the lowlands, because the

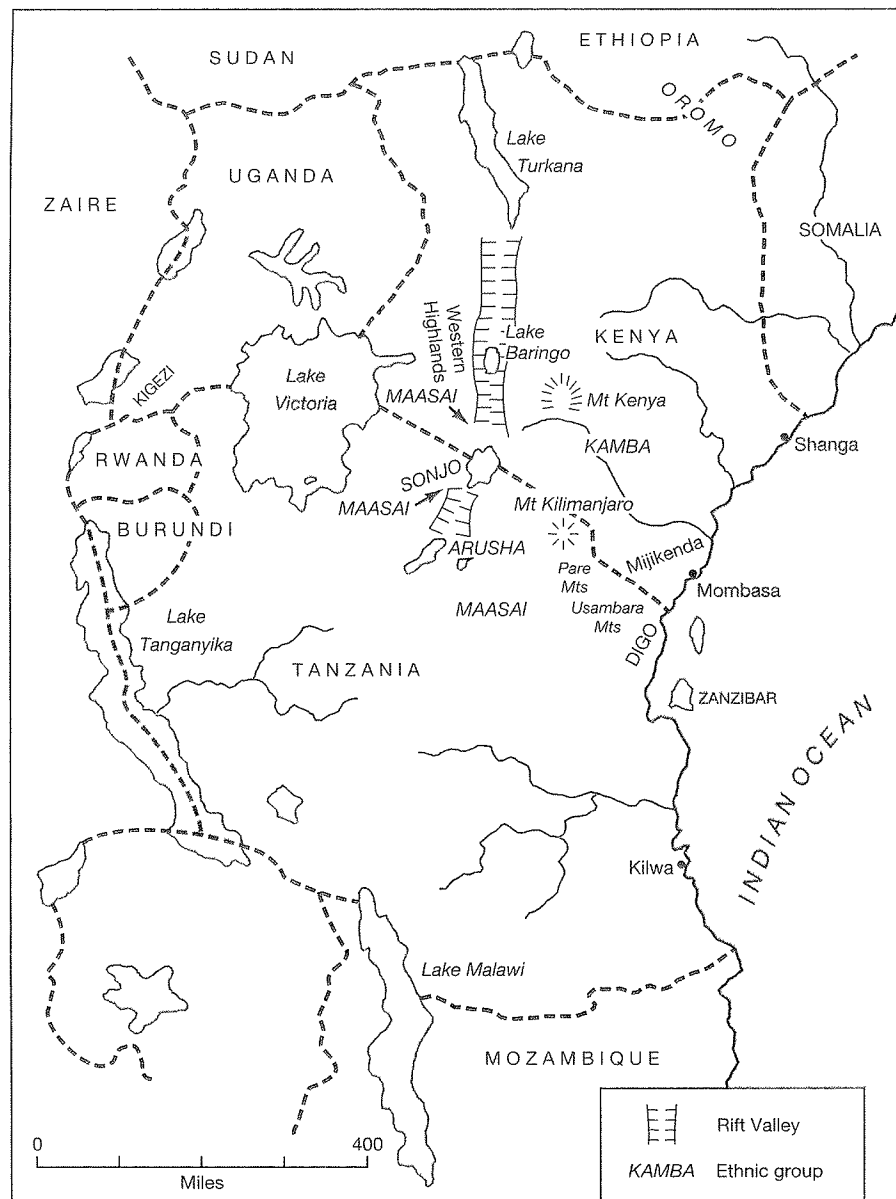
moisture-laden air blown in by the Indian Ocean winds passes over the lowlands, rises in the mountains, cools, then deposits rainfall. The technological knowledge and agricultural skills of highland peoples came to be adapted specifically to the highlands. Parents taught their children the properties of plants, how to use wild vegetation as indicators of when and where to plant, and how to identify and use different soil types. Learned medicine men of the highland zone today know the names and characteristics of thousands of highland plants. They know the taste of the leaves, roots, and bark of most plants, and which berries and leaves are eaten by birds or animals, which are not. Local plants were often the central symbols of complex rituals, so that a religious event strengthened an individual's sense of belonging in that particular part of the environment. When people were forced to move, therefore, they sought out other places where they could apply their knowledge, avoiding the lowlands.

Although in some rare cases highland peoples moved to the lowlands, this sort of move was more difficult, involving the development of new skills. The Kamba from the area southeast of Mount Kenya, for example, expanded from their highland home to the neighboring dry lowlands. As they did so they were forced to become less reliant on agriculture and more so on cattle herding and hunting.

Special adaptation to a particular environment could take biological as well as cultural forms. Epidemiologists now recognize that over the long run of history humans and the diseases that prey on them work out a kind of mutual adaptation. Even in comparatively short periods some special adaptations have been important in African history. Through most of tropical Africa, for example, people tend to have an inherited blood characteristic called sickle-cell trait from the shape of certain cells under the microscope. Some who have the sickle-cell trait die of anemia before they reach the age of reproduction. Over a long time, the trait therefore tends to disappear from the population. But the sickle-cell trait has another characteristic; it provides protection from falciparum malaria, the characteristic African form especially dangerous to infants and to people who first encounter the disease as adults. Where falciparum malaria is unimportant, the higher death rate for people with the sickle cell trait leads to a long-term decline in its frequency in a population. Where falciparum malaria is a threat, people with the sickle cell trait are more likely to survive than those without it, and their numbers increase to a high level.

In East Africa, to a greater extent than in any other part of the continent, the local populations developed optimum incidence of the sickle-cell trait so that, until recently, in many places tested the frequency of the trait varied in direct relation to the danger of malaria. In the non-malarial highlands of Mount Kenya or Kilimanjaro, populations had almost no sickle-cell trait, whereas those who lived along the infested southern shores of Lake Victoria had extremely high levels, and intermediate intensities of malaria were matched by intermediate frequencies of the trait. This distribution meant that migration from the non-malarial highlands to the wet lowlands would inevitably increase the death rate. Because it takes about seven hundred years for the slow attrition of excess deaths to bring sickle-cell frequencies to optimum levels, it also means that the people of East Africa must have been relatively stable in their choice of environments.

The traditions preserved by large groups – often all of the people who speak a single



Map 4.2 East Africa with modern national boundaries

language – contain a very different set of characteristics from those preserved by clans and lineages, although the two sets of traditions usually exist side by side. Local historians usually tell both at one time or another – the stories of their particular lineage groups and of the larger language group with which they identify. Indeed, the

large group traditions are instrumental in creating a sense of ethnic identity. The traditions of the larger groups often explain a group's cultural unity; they show which institutions are thought to be central, which local groups are closely related to one another and which are thought to be strangers or enemies. They are usually rich in literary value and symbolic content, and for this reason can be called myths. The power of a myth in shaping perceptions sweeps people along in agreement, so that alternative visions of history become hard to find. The myth seems all-encompassing. Where small-group traditions are usually poor in content and rich in variety, large-group traditions are rich in content but lack variants for critical analysis. Oral historians reconstruct the past by comparing divergent accounts; the more powerful the myth, the more restricted the divergence.

Maasai traditions and history

The pastoral Maasai of the Rift Valley have shaped their oral traditions to accord with the perception of themselves as the only pure pastoralists. They explain how they came to be different from the surrounding peoples who lower themselves by digging the soil or by subsisting on meat from the hunt. For example, a Maasai story about the hunting people they call the Dorobo begins when a Maasai elder came upon the first Dorobo. The Maasai, as yet unseen, overhears God telling the Dorobo to come the next day to receive God's gift. The next morning the Maasai goes to see what God will give, but the Dorobo does not appear. According to one recorded version of the tradition,

God then let down a bark-rope . . . from the sky and began to let cattle down, until there were so many that they intermingled with those of the Dorobo. Then the Dorobo came, and when he could no longer recognize his cattle among those of the Maasai, he was angry and shot away the bark-rope with an arrow. . . God caused the cattle to stop descending and he moved up into the sky, and was never seen on the ground again. Thus all the cattle which Maasai now own were first given to them by God, and it is because the Dorobo lost his cattle by not listening to God that he must hunt wild animals for his food.

According to the myth the division between hunters and cattle keepers originates in the relationship between humans and God. Maasai claim a God-given right to all cattle and therefore speak of themselves as the "people of cattle," and of their leaders as "leaders of the cattle" rather than leaders of people.

In another Maasai myth the first man, at the beginning of time, divided his goods among his three sons. The ancestor of the Maasai chose his father's herding stick; the ancestor of hunting-peoples chose the bow; and the ancestor of all farmers took his father's hoe. In either myth, the listener is told that economic specialization began in the time of origins and is therefore permanent and unchanging.

Maasai strongly preferred to subsist entirely on the products of cattle, but this was very difficult. A household needed a very large herd if they were to live off the milk, meat, and blood of cattle, without other sources of nutrition. People had difficulty doing this when disease reduced the size of herds, or when drought reduced milk production. In these times Maasai sometimes purchased agricultural products from

their neighbors. Maasai women were the main traders. In the nineteenth century they traveled to the territory of neighboring Bantu-speaking farmers to exchange animal products for the fruits of the soil. Trade with small groups of hunter-gatherers was also important.

Difficult times revealed divisions between rich and poor Maasai. Wealthy households had herds large enough to survive periodic setbacks while sustaining a pastoral way of life. Poor households were forced, at times, to take up farming or hunting, hoping for the day when they could return to cattle-rearing. When seen in the light of these divisions, the myth of permanent Maasai pastoralism can be seen as a selective and partial representation of experience, one that reinforced the prestige of those Maasai wealthy enough to remain pastoralists in times of distress.

A study of one village, Pagasi, shows the interplay between the experience of everyday life and the values of the myth. The village, as described in the 1960s, was located on the lower part of the escarpment separating Sonjo (agricultural Bantu-speakers) at the top from Maasai in the plains at the bottom. The people of the village all spoke Maasai but subsisted on farming. They were unable to raise cattle because of the tsetse flies which carry cattle disease, but some village members owned cattle, which were kept by Maasai relatives in the plains. Of the men in the village, about half were born Sonjo, half Maasai; they learned the language, joined Maasai clans, and had brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters living as Maasai in the plains. The village was thus a school for Sonjo who wished to become Maasai. When Maasailand was experiencing good times, young women from farming communities like Sonjo joined the Maasai as wives and young men came as herders. In this process of becoming Maasai, Pagasi served as a half-way house. In bad times Maasai went to their farming in-laws and friends for food and safety. The process by which Sonjo and Maasai learned one another's cultures was not new in the 1960s. The village existed in the same form and with the same effect in the nineteenth century.

The Pagasi pattern was one in which language change preceded full economic change, in which a Sonjo who wished to become a pastoralist needed first to become a Maasai. The linking of ethnic identity and economic activity was reflected in the myth on the origin of economic divisions. The myth, as a statement of fundamental values, was one of the ways each new generation learned about the importance of the divisions, which they then recreated by bringing their economic practice into line with their ethnic identity.

The Pagasi pattern was not the only way of reconciling contradictions between pastoral ideals and agricultural practice. The Arusha and the people of Nkuruman were farmers who spoke the language of the Maasai, and who continued to treasure pastoral ideals, but who practiced irrigation agriculture in well-watered oases in or near Maasailand. They were Maasai in language and in cultural ideals, but they practiced irrigation agriculture. They, together with pastoral Maasai, with hunter-gatherers and Bantu-speaking farmers, joined in creating a varied and interdependent regional economy. Within this region each set of economic practices, each language, and each myth (like the myth of the origin of pastoralism) was a contribution to a rich stock of inherited culture on which all peoples in the region could ultimately draw in creating new syntheses.

For historians, each myth is also a historical text which can be interpreted by comparing it with other oral traditions, in the light of evidence from archaeology and historical linguistics. Historians of the pastoral Maasai begin by studying the history of each separate Maasai clan-cluster. These are the largest political units in Maasailand. At any one time there have been twenty or more of them. Each clan-cluster has its separate oral traditions, as do the lineages of the religio-political prophets who provide leadership within many of the clan-clusters. By comparing many detailed local traditions, historians have been able to see that a few dominant clan-clusters were taking control of large parts of the Rift Valley in the nineteenth century. That is the time when the Maasai political system, as it is known, took shape. The dominant political units took control of grazing land and watering places, leaving defeated groups to scatter, to be absorbed by their conquerors, or to move off to terrain where pure pastoralism was more difficult to sustain. In light of these events, the myth of original Maasai pastoralism can be seen as making a political statement. It glorifies the dominant clan-clusters that took over the Rift Valley in order to sustain a pastoral way of life.

The movement by Maasai-related peoples into the region had taken shape a thousand years earlier. Historical linguists tell us that by about the eighth century speakers of Maa-Ongamo languages (the group that now includes Maasai) were moving into the area near Laikipya and Lake Baringo. They then spread southwards in the Rift Valley, occupying land where Southern Nilotes and Southern Cushites lived up until that time. These earlier peoples left their mark on Maasai language, and a few groups of Southern Nilotic or Southern Cushitic hunter-gatherers continued to live in separate settlements amongst the Maasai.

The linguistic and archaeological evidence points to the probability that the ancestors of the Maasai, in the Rift Valley, practiced some agriculture along with their herding. Pure pastoralism emerged late in this process, perhaps as late as 1800. Historians are not certain why people of the Rift Valley narrowed their economies to exclude agriculture. Perhaps political changes among clan-clusters played a role; perhaps the key was a shift towards drier weather, so that agriculture became more difficult to sustain. The progression from mixed herding and farming to "pure" pastoralism shows, once again, that it would be incorrect to treat pastoralism as an earlier stage which was then superseded by farming. Cattle-rearing is always part of a complex set of interrelated economic activities. Pastoralism in its "pure" form always existed as part of a larger economic system in which hunting, collecting, fishing, and farming were practiced by neighboring peoples. Even if the Maasai did not hunt or till the soil themselves, they relied on exchange and interaction with people who practiced these other economic activities.

The Luo

Over a huge area of East Africa people who speak Luo languages tell traditions that describe the movements of their ancestors. Luo-speakers are centered in Uganda, but live also in the Sudan, Kenya, Zaire, Tanzania, and Ethiopia. The oral traditions are enormously diverse, and yet they seem to fit together. Some of the traditions describe movements within sub-regions of the large Luo area. Others speak of ultimate origins.

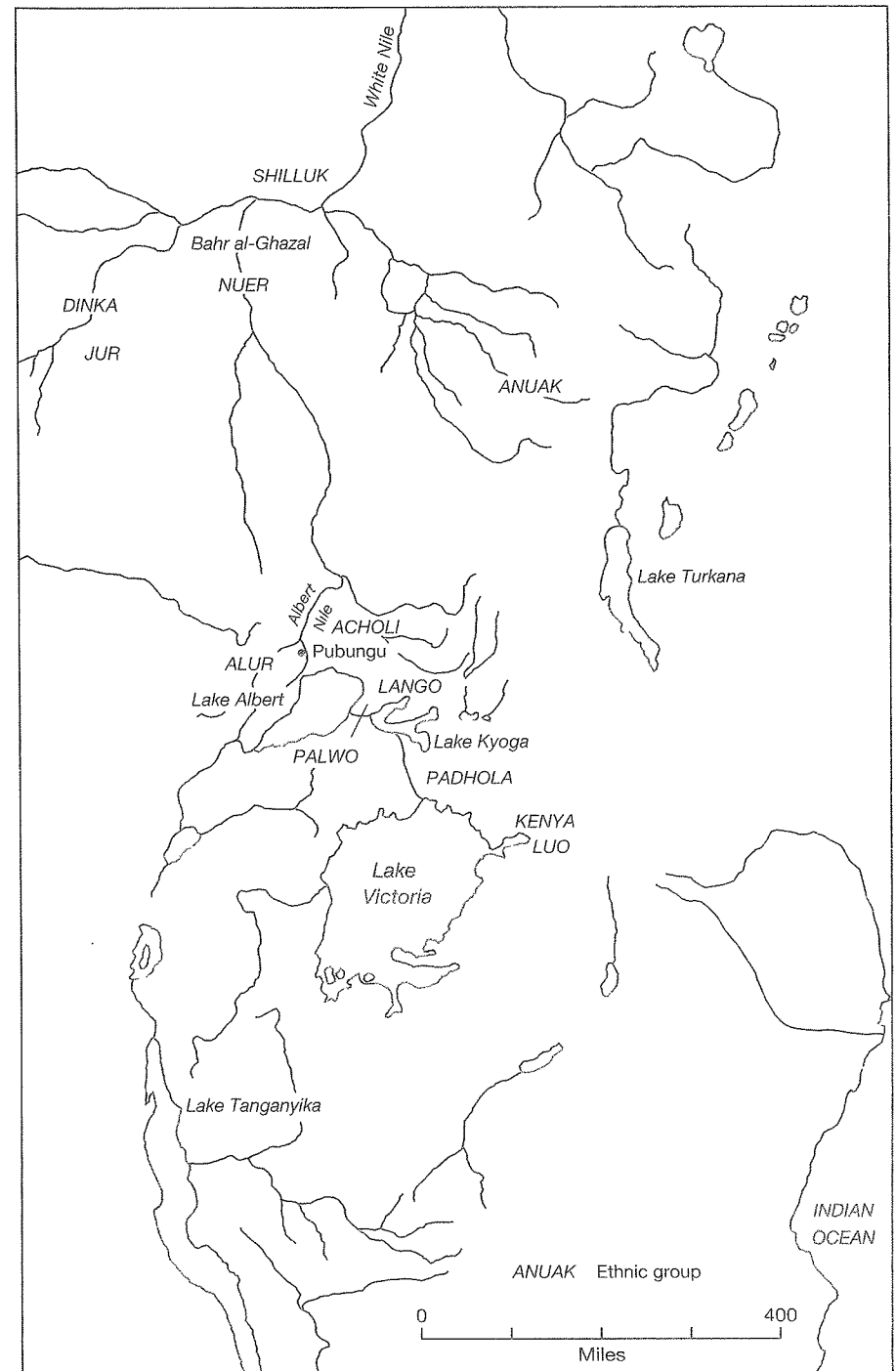
Many of the traditions point to movements from north to south, and some speak of Luo origins in the southern Sudan.

Within the large Luo-speaking area, people in each locality build on a rich shared heritage of ritual, culture, and language. In many places, for example, people use the word *jok*, or some closely related word, to refer to "spirit." Among the Shilluk of the Sudan, for example, *jok mal* is the creator God. Among the Alur of Uganda, each small chiefdom comes into relation with its own special chiefdom *jok*. Alur chiefs might have many wives, but *jok* possesses only one wife of the chief. She is expected to serve *jok* through her husband's reign. In Acholiland, in Uganda, the *jok* priestess is entirely separate from the chiefship. In recent times, at the annual Acholi feast of *jok* each clan head would report on the state of affairs in his area: the sicknesses that people suffered, and the distress or prosperity of the farmers in his area. It was the priestess who then decided on the causes of misfortune, and on the measures to be taken to cure it. In the same area "the hut of *jok*" is the shrine at which people honor their ancestors. Witchcraft and divination also involve entering a relationship with particular forms of *jok*. The cluster of meanings might seem unusual to Americans or to Western Europeans, to whom the conception is an alien one, but within Luo-speaking areas the cluster of meanings would seem familiar. People in each locality develop their own set of usages, but within an accepted range, so that shared cultural forms, while diverse and varied, have a kind of coherence and translatability from one local culture to another. The same sort of clustering and variation would be characteristic of other Luo terms – of *reth* or *ruoth*, for example, the term that refers to authority within a lineage, and to kingship, among many meanings.

Shared language and meaning are a consequence of shared historical experience over the very long term. Oral historians within Luo societies reflect on elements in that shared experience. Academic historians have also been concerned with this process, ever since the pioneering work of B.A. Ogot.* Many of the local Luo traditions interpret the sense that neighbors share related culture by saying that in the past we were one people with our neighbors, and now we have become two. They do this by telling of how small groups of people separated from others with whom they once lived together.

Among the things that many Luo-speaking societies share is a set of stories told in different ways in different places, each of them about a spear and a bead. These are symbols that oral historians use to talk about events in which people who once shared a common identity came to be separate from one another. One version of the story, told in Alurland, begins with two brothers who lived together – Nyipiir and Nyabongo. One day Nyipiir was tending his field near the Nile, to the north of Pubungu, when an elephant broke into the field. Nyipiir grabbed the nearest spear, which happened to belong to his brother, and hurled it at the elephant. The animal ran off wounded, with the spear hanging from its side. Nyipiir offered to pay his brother for the lost spear, but Nyabongo insisted on having it back. Nyipiir therefore set off through the wilderness to hunt for the spear. He finally found it at the legendary home of the elephants together with some beautiful beads that became the royal beads.

* Bethwell A. Ogot, *A History of the Southern Luo*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967.



Map 4.3 Luo-speaking peoples and other western Nilotic-speakers: twentieth-century locations

After Nyipiiir returned, a second episode tells how Nyabongo's baby swallowed one of the royal beads from the land of the elephants. Nyipiiir first demanded his bead back, then cut open the baby's stomach to get it. Nyabongo, his baby dead, left with all his dependents, and the other Luo families also left, driven on by the impact of the tragedy. Some traveled east of the Nile, some west. They sank an axe in the Nile as a symbol of this separation. The axe remains today at a sacrificial shrine, looked after by the headman of Pubungu, whose lineage remained behind to serve as guardians.

The story of the spear and the bead is not, of course, an account of actual historical events, for it is told over a vast area and in each place it is given as the reason for groups separating. Nevertheless, each particular version may preserve locally specific information about the past – about the names of particular individuals and the direction in which small family groups moved. At the same time, it is a way of conveying wisdom about humanity and society. The story explores relations between brothers, and what happens when extreme, unreasonable demands are made in the name of kinship.

The spear and bead stories, and other traditions of separation and movement, fall into three sets: a northern, a central, and a southern one. The first tells about the way northern Luo (Aniak, Jur, and Shilluk) separated from one another in a cradleland of Luo origins. The second and third are enormously diverse sets of traditions, told mainly in Uganda, in which people in hundreds of local groups try to explain how they came to be separate from other Luo groups with whom they were once unified. Central and southern Luo do not have detailed or circumstantial accounts of their origins in the Sudan, but their overall trend of movement is from north to south.

The oral traditions are reflections of a very long process by which Luo-speaking peoples came to occupy the large area that is their home. According to historical linguists, ancestral Luo came to be separate from closely related languages by about 1000 AD. This separation happened to the south and east of the place where the Bahr-al-Ghazal river runs into the Nile. What is remarkable about this process is that this is very close to the place identified in oral traditions as the Luo cradleland. In later periods, probably in the first half of the current millennium, the languages of the central and southern Luo began to separate from the northern languages and then from one another.

The population movements which led to the current distributions of northern, central, and southern Luo languages, and which continued over many centuries, were not massive migrations in which thousands of Luo marched southwards. Instead, large population patterns emerged from thousands of decisions by lineage leaders and household elders who wished to move in search of better lives. These decisions unfolded in the normal course of events. Among many of the Luo who kept cattle, for example, it was often necessary for one group to move off from a collective cattle camp, to settle somewhere new in search of fresh pasture or more adequate water sources. In other cases family quarrels led to separation. Over a very long period Luo speakers came to occupy an area which extended nine hundred miles from north to south.

The Luo who entered this large area came to interact with, to live alongside, to learn from and to teach, people who spoke many different languages. These other peoples had created their own economic, cultural, and political syntheses before the Luo arrival. The Luo languages were Western Nilotic ones. The central and southern Luo

ultimately lived alongside Eastern Nilotes in some areas (of the group that included Maasai), Central Sudanic speakers in others, and Bantu-speakers in still others.

Luo patterns of interaction were substantially different from those characteristic in many other parts of East Africa. We have seen that the Maasai abhorred any change in their ecology, or in the way they won their livelihood. Highland Bantu clung to a familiar environment. The Luo peoples, by contrast, lived across a wide range of territories with considerable variation in topography and rainfall. They adapted to many different environmental settings, and adopted many different forms of economic activity. Most Luo-speakers of central and northern Uganda practice a varied economy, including cattle keeping, fishing, and seed agriculture based on millet. But the Alur, the Padhola of southeastern Uganda, and the Kenya Luo all occupied some areas of higher land where they relied less on seed agriculture or fishing than other Luo, less also (except for the Alur) on cattle keeping, and more on growing bananas and root crops.

In some areas, such as the lands of the Luo-speaking Acholi and Lango of northern Uganda, the environment lacked such dramatic contrasts as the high margins and low bottom of the Rift Valley, where the Maasai lived. It was difficult, therefore, for Luo-speakers and their neighbors to create sharp boundaries of economic practice, and therefore unlikely that they would use economic activities as a way of defining ethnic identity.

Wherever the Luo-speakers went they lived alongside, and came to interact intimately with, people who spoke other languages and practiced other cultural forms. We must therefore picture each place where Luo lived as a frontier zone in which diverse peoples were meeting and creating a new society. The Luo-speakers of Uganda, Kenya, and Zaire, were not practicing a pure variant of an ancestral Luo culture: they were building new cultures, creating new syntheses, based on many elements including the Luo language. Aidan Southall, the most important scholar to study Alur society, argues that when people refer to their ethnic identity as Alur they are not saying that they are Luo; they are referring to a new synthesis of diverse peoples, of whom ancestral Luo were only one element.

The Luo element in each of these syntheses was itself the product of many previous interactions. The concept of *jok*, for example, as it existed in Padhola, in southeastern Uganda, was the product of a long history in northern Uganda – in Acholiland and other Luo-speaking areas. In these places people did not simply transmit unchanging *jok* rituals in a passive way from one generation to the next. They shaped their understanding of *jok* and gave it new meanings in the process of passing it on. The Luo culture inherited by the Padhola was not the culture of the Luo cradleland in the Sudan; it was a product of all Luo history. The Padhola themselves added to that history of change, for example by borrowing the Bura shrines of their Bantu-speaking neighbors.

In each place some of the elements of everyday culture among Luo speakers came from earlier generations of Luo; some came from non-Luo neighbors; some were created by the diverse set of people who came to live together in a single location. People found ways to create new cultures drawing on diverse sources. For example, if we examine the material objects in everyday use among the Luo-speaking Padhola

early in this century, we see that they were part of a larger regional system of the creation and transmission of culture. Some of their stools resembled those of particular Bantu-speaking neighboring peoples, and also those of Luo-speaking Acholi and Lango. Their head ornaments, which they used when dancing, were the horns, hippotusks, and feather ornaments used by some of their Bantu-speaking neighbors. But their bracelets were blue beads, of a kind used by Luo and not by Bantu-speakers.

In each place where Luo languages were introduced people created new identities, drawing on all the diverse cultures of that place. It is for this reason that historians of the process speak of the creation of Luo encampments as a "rehearsal" for twentieth century identity formation on a wider scale.

In many places Luo appear to have had an influence out of proportion to their numbers. In Alurland and Acholiland, for example, the great majority of people speak Luo languages today in areas where, according to oral traditions, only a minority of immigrants were Luo-speakers. This happened in situations where Luo emerged as a separate stratum of chiefs. In Alurland, for example, the Nyalwo emerged as an aristocratic stratum, governing populations which included Central Sudanic Okebo, Lendu, and Madi. Some historians have suggested that where Luo were prestigious and powerful, other people learned their language, but it is difficult to see how power and prestige alone lead people living in their own villages to learn a new language and switch over to it.

A more specific possibility is that Luo men, as polygynous cattle owners and as wealthy chiefs, were able to take many non-Luo wives, whereas non-Luo were less likely to marry Luo women. This would have led to language shift, however, only if the women had chosen to teach their children the language and culture of their fathers. This would have happened only under very special conditions – at times when there was a great disparity of power between husband and wife. This was not the case at most times in these parts of Uganda, where women played a central role in transmitting culture, and in some cases had considerable authority of their own.

The time when Luo chiefs and husbands had the greatest power over non-Luo wives in Alurland was in the most recent period before conquest – in the late nineteenth century, after oceanic slave trading came to this part of East Africa (see Chapter 19). Once the slave trade came, Luo chiefs were able to take as wives captives who might otherwise have been sold, or who were looking for safety in very insecure times. These wives would have had little choice if their husbands wished for children to be raised speaking Luo, and the wives would in any event have wanted their children to be members of the dominant class. According to this scenario, the time when Luo speakers first entered the region was not the time of greatest language spread, which came much later under slave trading conditions that were completely new to the region.

The coast

At first glance the history of the East African coast seems very different from that of the interior. While men and women of the interior traveled short distances overland to trade, coastal traders traveled hundreds of miles across the ocean. While men and

women in the interior passed on their knowledge to the next generation by means of oral tradition, some coastal people were transmitting knowledge in written form from early times. While people of the interior practiced local religions, some coast dwellers had begun to practice Islam by the start of the second millennium AD. While people of the interior built with wood and grass and earth, some coastal people began to use stone in their buildings before 1000 AD.

Careful study by a generation of historians has shown that despite these differences, coastal society grew up out of local African roots, with a deep history in the African interior. Swahili, the most commonly spoken language of the coast, is a Bantu language with roots in the lakes region and beyond, across the heart of the continent to the western side of Equatorial Africa. A rich world of oral tradition, still alive, tells us about coastal history. In addition, when we look behind the written chronicles of the coast we find that many are based originally on oral tradition much as medieval European chronicles would have been. The agriculture, the domestic pottery, and many of the house-building styles of the coast are rooted in the wider cultures of Bantu-speaking East Africa.

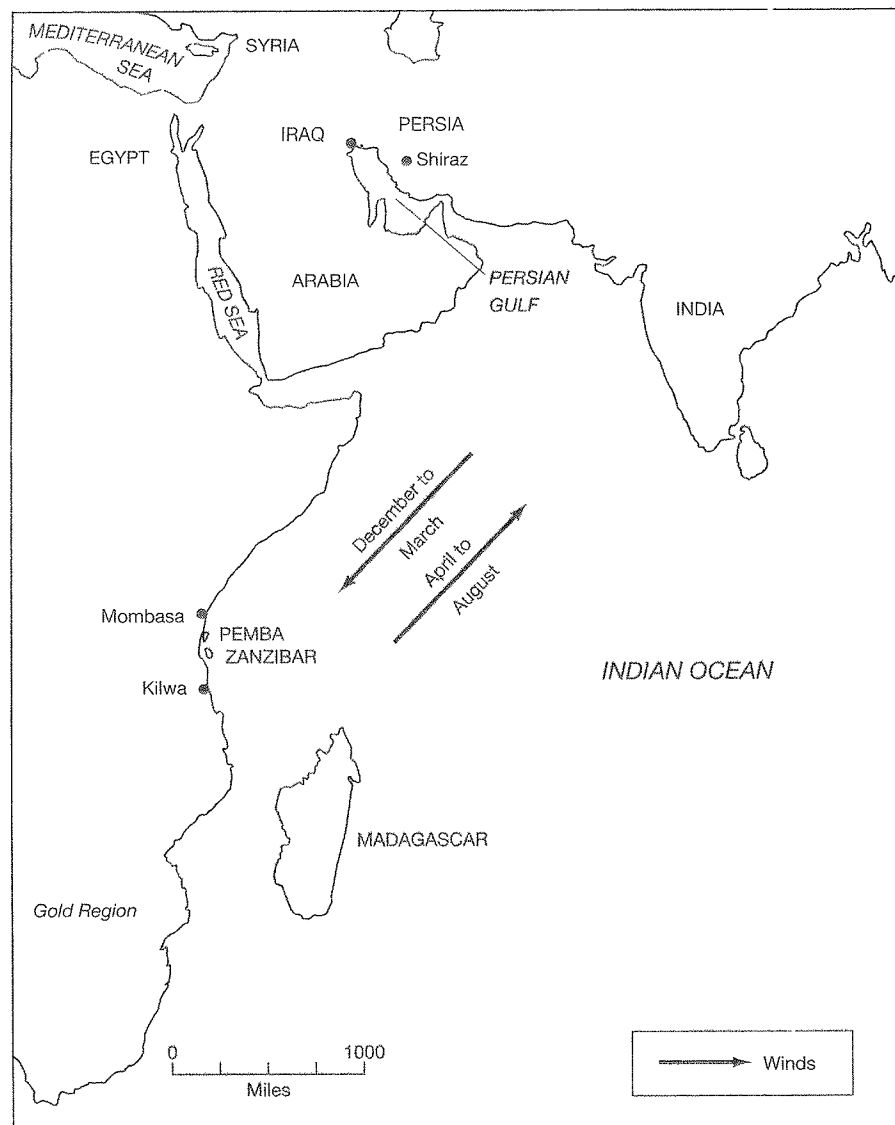
Swahili is one language within a subgroup of Bantu languages that are spoken today in a wide zone extending from the interior of Kenya and Tanzania to the coast. The ancestors of this subgroup (the northeast coast Bantu) were probably centered in an area running down from the high mountains of Usambara and Parc to the coast. Their farming patterns, knowledge of nature, and ideas about leadership all drew on the broad heritage of the Bantu-speaking world. Each particular community of Bantu-speakers created its own local synthesis, while drawing on the common heritage. First a small group of coastal languages broke off from the regional grouping, and then Swahili differentiated itself from those others. The emergence of Swahili probably began to take place during the middle centuries of the first millennium AD.

The grammar of Swahili and its system of sounds show clear signs of its origin among the Bantu languages. Later in the life of Swahili its speakers adopted words drawn from the speech of people with whom they came into contact. At various times, especially after 1500 AD, Swahili speakers added many Arabic words to their language. In more recent times Swahili has added English words like *radio* (radio), *kondakta* (conductor), *edita* (editor), and *chifu* (chief).

The archaeological record, like the linguistic one, points to the presence of iron-using farmers in the region behind the coast from early in the first millennium AD. Early Iron Age remains have been found at Kwale, near Mombasa, dating to the second or third century AD. Related pottery has been found as far south as southern Mozambique.

At first the region's Bantu speakers lived across a broad strip of the mainland, and not on the coastal strip where many of the Swahili towns were later to emerge. Historians and archaeologists try to understand the process by which people moved from the hinterland to the coast, changed from building in mud and timber to building in stone, and left scattered villages or homesteads to live in towns. This process began in about the eighth century AD.

All the evidence points to a gradual process by which Swahili speakers moved coastwards, began building houses of mud on a framework of wood, and then gradually



Map 4.4 The Indian Ocean

shifted to stone. At Shanga for example (one of the early towns on the Kenya coast), the earliest layer of building, from about the ninth century, was done in mud. Then came a period in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when people used blocks of coral – a locally available building material – held together with mud mortar. Finally in the latest period, beginning in about 1250, they used coral with lime mortar. Even after the introduction of coral and lime as building materials, the towns of the Swahili coast held large areas of housing made of wood and mud. The fact that stone ruins survive over

time, while wood and mud ones disappear, has led historians to put too great an emphasis on the stone towns and to ignore houses that would have resembled the ones in the interior.

When the ancestors of the Swahili moved to the coast they began to do what other Bantu-speakers were doing across East Africa: creating a new culture to adapt to a unique environment. We have already seen that at about the end of the first millennium AD Bantu-speaking societies in many parts of the region were developing specialized skills to deal with local environments. They were becoming more different from one another by learning how to make the best use of their local landscapes. Bantu-speakers of the highlands, for example, were learning the plants and weather patterns and soils of the highlands, and basing their rituals and songs on this local knowledge. In just this way the Swahili were creating a new set of local adaptations, but theirs were geared to the coast and its islands.

The ancestors of the Swahili had mastered the technologies characteristic of Bantu speakers in many parts of East Africa. They knew how to make iron implements; they cultivated sorghum and other grain plants as well as yams; they grew beans and peas. They raised dogs and cats, goats and chickens, sheep and cattle. They made canoes, caught fish using lines and nets and baskets, and their tools included hoes, machetes, knives, axes, mortars, and pestles.

The movement to the coast and islands called for a new set of skills. One of the most important was the construction of wells, since the water on most islands was salty, and communities depended on scarce fresh water for survival. People in the coastal communities learned how to make shell beads for trade with the interior, to build boats adequate for the ocean, and to catch the fish and turtles and mammals of the sea. They also learned to work with coral, which was one of the most abundant local building materials. Increasing specialization implies increasing exchange. The people of the coastal towns often relied on the hinterland peoples to supply agricultural products grown on the more abundant soils of inland areas, and also to supply cattle products.

The Swahili were the creators of a new synthesis, one that drew on the cultures of their region and combined them in a unique way. In this they were very much like the Luo speakers of the interior. The Alur, for example, relied on multiple sources for their synthesis: they drew on the Luo language to talk about *jok* as “spirit,” but drew also on the skills of non-Luo highlanders who had mastered the art of raising bananas and root crops. The Swahili similarly drew on the knowledge of all the participants in their cultural region, but this region was significantly different from the cultural regions of inland communities.

The region of the Swahili, the zone within which they communicated with others, had a dual character. First, each town kept in touch with the people of the nearby hinterland. On the northern coast, in what is now Somalia and northern Kenya, Swahili traded with Cushitic-speaking herders and formed political links with them. Further south, Swahili interacted continuously with the Bantu-speaking farmers of the hinterland. All of these hinterland contacts, north and south, were characterized by difficult communications. In most places direct contacts extended only tens of miles into the interior. In contrast with the hinterland zone of communication, the second zone was a maritime one, its boundaries extending many hundreds of miles. Traders

moved regularly and rapidly among the coastal towns and also to distant ports of the Indian Ocean. The Swahili towns assumed a dual identity: their overland ties developed through the slow movement of populations and the arduous transfer of trade goods over short distances; their maritime links spanned thousands of miles.

The great contrast between sea and land travel lasted into the era of caravan trade between the coast and the interior in the nineteenth century. The accounts of European explorers document the difference. In 1848 and 1850 Johann Krapf, the missionary explorer, traveled first on land, then in a small coasting boat, and then in a ship sailing overseas. He made about six miles a day on land, twenty-five miles a day along the coast, stopping at small ports along the way, and over one hundred miles a day on the long-distance voyage. Krapf found it easier to travel 1600 miles to Arabia than to visit his neighbors in the not very distant coastal hinterland.

The small boats that moved up and down the coast, carrying goods between East African ports, also moved people who carried with them language, ideas, and technologies. It is because of the ease of coastal transport that a single language – Swahili – came to extend 1000 miles from north to south along the coast. It is because of the ease of transport that pottery and building styles quickly moved long distances, so that distant Swahili towns came to resemble one another. The coasting boats of the Swahili towns served local trade among East Africans, and they also helped traders to collect large quantities of goods in a few trading towns to await the arrival of overseas traders, who then carried them to Arabia, the Persian Gulf, or other regions.

The intercontinental trade was ancient, older than the Swahili towns themselves, and very much older than the trade down West Africa's Atlantic coast. It was under way early in the first millennium AD. Long distance sailing was made possible by the regular alternation of prevailing northeasterlies and the southwest monsoon. Northeasterlies blow from November to March, carrying ships south from India, Arabia, and the Persian Gulf. In April, the wind starts blowing from the southwest for the journey northwards.

Seen from the viewpoint of the Bantu-speaking Swahili of the coast, ocean travel and land travel brought many different sets of strangers from whom to learn skills for survival and for the enrichment of life. The Swahili towns could draw for enrichment on the people of their hinterlands – outsiders to Swahili culture, yet neighbors. Each region of the coast adopted cultural terminologies from nearby hinterland peoples: words for agricultural techniques and innovations, words also for forms of religious expression. In each region a separate dialect of Swahili developed, drawing on the cultural terminology and the style of a different set of hinterland peoples. In addition, people from ports all around the Indian Ocean contributed to the Swahili synthesis. The Arab contribution to Swahili has long been known, but ocean travel opened Swahili to contributions from all directions. For example Madagascar, to the south, was a major contributor to the culture of the East African coast.

Madagascar brought into the Swahili synthesis contributions from distant overseas regions. That large island, to the south and east of the Swahili coast, was settled by people from Indonesia about 2000 years ago. At about the same time, or soon afterwards, a number of Asian crops were introduced into East Africa and became important in a wide range of Bantu societies, including Swahili ones. Sugar cane, coconuts,

Asian rice, and new varieties of root plants and bananas all came from Asia to Africa. By the time the Swahili towns were developing, between the ninth and twelfth centuries, trade goods from the north were reaching Madagascar. This island was clearly part of the wider Swahili world.

The Islamic contribution to the Swahili synthesis is much more widely known. Ocean travel between East Africa and the Muslim world – especially Arabia and Persian Gulf – brought Africans into regular contact with overseas Muslims. The earliest small timber mosques were built at Shanga on the Kenya coast by the ninth century AD. Islam then expanded broadly on the coast in the twelfth century. Muslim religion ultimately became one of the central elements in Swahili identity. To be a Swahili, in later centuries, meant to be a Muslim. With the influence of Islam came also the growing importance of the Arabic language, seen from Arabic inscriptions on coins and carved into the stone of mosques. The importance of the language is seen (especially in a later period) in the growing number of Arabic words in Swahili: words for such basic things as the breath of life (*roho*) and for intention or purpose (*nia*), but also for religious conceptions. Some Swahili numbers are of Bantu derivation; others come from Arabic.

Within Swahili culture itself, it is possible to differentiate elements with roots in the wider Bantu-speaking world from others with roots in the wider Islamic world. The division is clear with regard to forms of religious expression. Prayers said in mosque are classically Islamic, but then people in Muslim families sometimes take part in rituals meant to control *pepo* – local spirits that bring illness and other forms of personal misfortune. Families differ from one another in the weight they give to *pepo* and neighborhoods also vary in religious practice. In general, women are much more likely to recognize *pepo* in rituals than are men.

Some scholars have observed that women are more likely than men to make claims under customary law, which has deep local roots, and men are more likely to resolve disputes under *shari'a* – the law of Islam. At times, women's rights to property or position are more substantial under customary law. This certainly was the case when it came to political office. Women served as the top leaders in a number of Swahili societies. On the island of Zanzibar in the seventeenth century, for example, the Swahili as described by the Portuguese were governed by a queen, possibly the one remembered in traditions as Mwana Mwema. She and other queens drew their authority from their position within the ancient Muslim Swahili-speaking families of the coast.

The greatest stone towns along the Swahili coast were built between 1200 and 1500 AD. It is to this period that the largest buildings at Kilwa are dated. Huweiza, the palace complex, extends for over a hundred and fifty yards, with a large audience hall, a pool, and domed roofs. The great mosque at Kilwa also dates to this period, as do many stone buildings up and down the coast. Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese commercial agent, described Kilwa at the end of the period. Kilwa, he wrote, was "built of handsome houses of stone and lime, and very lofty, with many windows like those of the Christians; in the same way it has streets, and these houses have got their terraces, and the wood worked in with the masonry, with plentiful gardens, in which there are many fruit trees and much water. This island has got a harbor over it, and from hence there is trade with Sofala with ships, which carry much goods."

It was the gold that drew overseas traders as far south as Kilwa. Without it they would have preferred to visit only the northern coast from which they could return with the shift in the annual winds, avoiding the need to wait months for a good sailing time. Kilwa's gold came from southern Africa, from the region between the Zambezi and the Limpopo Rivers. It was brought overland to the southern portion of the coast, then taken north by sea.

In the great age of the stone towns maritime merchants carried East Africa's ivory up to the Red Sea, and from there to the Mediterranean world. The ivory went also to Indian buyers, who preferred the soft and workable tusks that originated in East Africa. It was used for the bangles worn by Indian brides. When either the woman or her husband died the bangles were destroyed, thus insuring continuous demand. Substantial quantities of ivory were also shipped around India to China.

East Africa's trade linked the coast and the interior. The gold and ivory (and other products like rock crystal) were carried from the interior to the coast before being shipped. Some goods produced at the coast – iron, for example, produced by East African technology – probably went in both directions: they were carried overseas and overland.

The double heritage of coastal culture is reflected in the area's oral traditions. Speakers of Swahili and other Bantu languages of the coast tell one set of traditions in which they claim origins on the African mainland, and another in which they claim origins overseas.

Many traditions of mainland origin point to a homeland in the north, at a place called Shungwaya. Academic historians say that it was located in the hinterland of the southern Somali coast. The traditions begin with a period when a number of different peoples lived together at Shungwaya. Then conflict arose between these Bantu-speaking peoples and their Cushitic-speaking neighbors, the Oromo. The people of Shungwaya were driven out and began to move southwards until they came to their homes in what are now Kenya and northern Tanzania. Those who remember Shungwaya include the Mijikenda – nine related peoples who live in the strip of land paralleling the coast of southern Kenya and northern Tanzania; they include also Taita, Pokomo, and many local Swahili-speaking groups.

The stories of Shungwaya origins carry two different messages. One is that some elements of local culture are so central that they were brought from a single cultural source as a fully developed set of ideas and practices. These practices are too central to think of as developing slowly over a period of time, or as drawing on many different sources. They came, fully formed, as a cultural "Old Testament." The Mijikenda, for example, say that their most important clans all originated at Shungwaya, their age-sets originated at Shungwaya, and their protective village medicines all originated there.

The second message of these stories is that each of the Shungwaya peoples shares roots with each of the others: the Swahili Shungwaya clans of Mombasa share roots with the Mijikenda of their hinterland; Swahili-speakers of Vumba have a common origin with the Digo of their hinterland.

Historians have taken the Shungwaya story as a description of actual historical events. They find supporting evidence in the historical relationships among the languages of the Shungwaya peoples and in documentary sources. The linguistic evidence

points to a common origin for many of the Shungwaya peoples: Swahili, Mijikenda, and Pokomo are all related to one another within the Sabaki subgroup of northeast coast Bantu languages. Documents written by Portuguese of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries show that conflict between Bantu-speakers and Oromo, described in Shungwaya traditions, was an actual set of events, not an imagined one.

It would be a mistake, however, to take the Shungwaya traditions too literally. The traditions say that Bantu-speakers arrived in the Mombasa hinterland as a result of events that we know happened in the sixteenth century. People speaking Bantu languages had actually begun to occupy this area more than a thousand years earlier. Migrants driven from the north by Oromo found thriving Bantu-speaking societies already in place. They merged with the established population, formed a common identity with them, and were open to further settlers who came from many different places. People of the region recognize the diversity of their origins. Separate lineages maintain separate traditions of origin, often having little to do with Shungwaya, but then they also say "We all came from Shungwaya." In much the same way some Americans remember their origins in Scandinavia or Eastern Europe but say that their cultural heritage comes from Ancient Greece. The people of the East African coast formed a local cultural synthesis including, as one element, stories about origins in Shungwaya. A Mijikenda elder put it well in his own oral tradition. "The water and soil of a place determine a people's language," he said. "But we are all related and we all came from Shungwaya."

The Shungwaya story and other traditions of mainland origin tell us about one half of the coastal region's double heritage. We hear about the other half in traditions of overseas origin like those of the Shirazi. In most of the old coastal towns the Swahili-speaking families which seem to be the most deeply rooted, the most ancient in each locality, tell traditions about origins in Shiraz, in Persia. These people, the Shirazi, have typically been the fishermen, farmers, artisans, and small traders.

The claims of these traditions are not supported by the evidence for early coastal history. Early Arab travelers' accounts do not mention Persian settlers on the coast, nor does the Swahili language show the degree of Persian influence that would have come from substantial early immigration. When Shirazi tell traditions of Persian origin they do so as a way of emphasizing sharp differences between themselves and two sets of outsiders. On the one hand they explain how different Shirazi are from mainland Africans. They make the point that Shirazi are Muslim townspeople; mainlanders are non-Muslim rural folk. On the other hand they differentiate Shirazi as established local people from Arabs who have no local roots and who come in from the outside. While there may have been a few immigrants from Persia over the centuries, the vast majority of Shirazi ancestors were Africans. The Shirazi, when put down by visiting Arabs for their lack of Arabian pedigrees, have responded by claiming Persian ones.

One historian who has reviewed the evidence on the Shirazi has described them as "prototypical Swahili;" another has called them "primordial Swahili." The Shirazi are descendants of the very earliest Swahili – people who found themselves living at the intersection of Bantu-speaking East Africa and the overseas world of the Indian Ocean. They tell traditions of Shirazi origin so as to distinguish themselves from Arabs overseas and from non-Muslims on the mainland. They, like the people who migrated

from Shungwaya, tell oral traditions which define their cultural identities. In fact, they combine identities to express the dual character of coastal culture. We can see this from the fact that many Shirazi have, in the past, also told Shungwaya stories. They defined themselves as "Shirazi from Shungwaya," people who feel deep roots of shared heritage with Muslims around the Indian Ocean, and similarly deep roots of shared heritage with the other Bantu-speaking people who came from Shungwaya.

Suggestions for further reading

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5

POLITICAL CULTURE AND POLITICAL ECONOMY IN EARLY EAST AFRICA

In the two thousand years before colonial conquest East Africans developed an enormously diverse range of political institutions. Large kingdoms grew up in Ethiopia and near the great equatorial lakes. Age sets performed major political functions near the Rift Valley of Kenya. Independent self-governing kin groups, which did not recognize any king or chief, were important in many parts of the region, as were minor chiefdoms. Yet despite this diversity, the boundaries of political systems did not restrict the exchange of goods or of political ideas. People in self-governing villages exchanged salt, iron, grain, and cattle with one another and with villagers in large kingdoms. The rituals people performed in these kingdoms were similar to those performed in autonomous villages, and people in diverse societies spoke in similar terms about the nature of prosperity, of hunger, and of political values.

Political authority in early East Africa

Historians learn about political leadership among East Africa's early Bantu speakers by examining material remains and by studying words in reconstructed languages, from two thousand years ago or longer. The earliest Bantu languages had a number of words that tied together leadership and a settled place. The root *-banja* for example, and the words related to it, had a fan of meanings. It referred to a place where people built their houses, and also to a place where prominent people discussed public affairs. Other words show that at a time when people who spoke other languages usually lived in scattered homesteads, Bantu speakers spoke about, lived in, and organized their public life around villages.

The word for ancestor existed back then, and it is probable that leadership and the ancestors were tied together. In more recent times, the leaders of villages in Bantu-speaking societies around the Great Lakes have most often been older men who made names for themselves by accumulating wealth and having many children. These prominent men hope to be remembered after their deaths as important ancestors. As they grow older and approach death they are relied on to make connections on behalf