Mobile Africa
Changing Patterns of Movement in Africa and beyond

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BRILL
LEIDEN • BOSTON
2001
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Territorial and Magical Migrations in Tanzania

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This chapter explores culturally specific idioms of movement amongst the Ihanzu and Sukuma of north-central Tanzania. Over the twentieth century, these two neighbouring peoples expanded in all directions in search of more fertile farming and grazing lands. The Sukuma’s numerical superiority and their preference for pastoralism have given them a decisive advantage as they increasingly encroach on Ihanzu lands. However, the Ihanzu have been concerned not just with a heightened influx of foreigners onto their soils but, more monumentally, with what they see as an all-out Sukuma witchcraft offensive against them. Migration is, therefore, not simply about moving bodies over physical terrains but is imaginatively crafted through particular cultural lenses. Above all, this chapter compels us to problematise locally-inflected understandings of expansion, migration and mobility and to consider how these interact with well-worn political-economy explanations of such processes.

Introduction

Anthropologists have had an abiding concern with migration, movement and mobility in Africa. Over the years, however, the focus of their attention has changed markedly. Earlier studies considered labour migrations, forced relocations and territorial expansions, and how these short- and long-term movements influenced ‘tribal’ life (Adam 1963a; Colson 1971; Richards 1973; Schapera 1947). Many such studies shared a concern with the underlying structural and historical forces that gave rise to routine movements from one locale to another, or to more permanent, territorial displacements and expansions. In all cases, mobility per se received only scant analytic attention. Mobility was seen rather as the consequence, the inevitable and unavoidable outcome of a host of colonial policies on ‘development’, migrant labour, taxation and cash cropping among other things.

Today, while anthropologists are still concerned with the structural aspects of mobility, they have come to dwell increasingly on the local imaginings of landscapes and people’s movements across them. This particular analytic turn comes at a time when anthropologists, like other social scientists, wish to draw attention to local agency

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and creative potentialities; in other words, to how local actors participate critically in the meaning and making of their own worlds. People are not simply overrun by global structural inevitabilities: instead they resist, creatively accommodate and selectively appropriate symbols and structures in meaningful ways. In Africa as elsewhere, this means that political economies demarcate rather than determine Africans’ life-worlds, that structural issues frame people’s actions but in no way provide the last word on their meanings. Instead, peoples-on-the-move provide meaning to their own worlds.

In this way, it can be seen how Lesotho migrant labourers working in South Africa frame their social world(s) through the oral poetry of ‘word music’ (Coplan 1994); how various refugees give meaning to their lives by creatively imagining their history and homeland (Malkki 1995; Wilson 1994); and how certain nomads imagine mobility, not sedentarism, as the state of normality (Turton 1996). Not surprisingly, such culturally specific understandings of mobility are frequently linked to historical consciousness and speak to other facets of social identity as well. Thus, for instance, over the past century the Giriama of Kenya have spread increasingly eastward towards the coast. This territorial expansion they imagine as being not solely about the search for more fertile farmland and waged jobs, which clearly it is, but also as a move between ‘past’ and ‘present’, ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ (Parkin 1991; cf. Cohen & Odhiambo 1989).

Similarly, since the early 1900s, the Iraqw of Tanzania have gradually but continually expanded in all directions from their highland homeland in Mama Isara to much of Mbulu District. They, like the Giriama, see this territorial expansion as a move from ‘past’ to ‘present’, ‘tradition’ to ‘modernity’ (Snyder 1993). One of the principle mechanisms in this expansion, from an Iraqw perspective, is a ritual called masay. These rites do many things but one of the most fundamental is to (re)create the boundaries between Iraqw and adjacent territories. Thus, as the Iraqw move into new areas, they use masay rites to appropriate these spaces, turning bush and other lands into culturally-meaningful Iraqw landscapes (see Snyder 1997 and 1999; Thornton 1980).

The noteworthy point is that migration, movement and mobility are variously imagined in Africa (and, of course, elsewhere) and that, of late, anthropologists have been keen to detail the myriad ways this is so (Comaroff & Comaroff forthcoming; Masquelier 2000). By imaginings, anthropologists do not mean that such things are culturally-concocted fantasies that can therefore be ignored. On the contrary, many anthropologists today see such imaginings as crucial to understanding migratory processes (Appadurai 1996). This is because people’s ideas about movement are not just ways of thinking about the world. They also provide ways to act upon that world. Cultural imaginations, to use Clifford Geertz’s terminology, are both models ‘of’ and models ‘for’ reality.

This chapter examines one such cultural imagination amongst the Ihanzu of Tanzania to show how they use witchcraft as an idiom of mobility, and as an explanation for Sukuma territorial expansion.¹

¹ This chapter is based on fieldwork carried out in Ihanzu, Tanzania between August 1993 and May 1995 and June – September 1999. The information on the Sukuma derives primarily from my reading of the literature. I thank the UK Economic and Social Research Council, the US National Institute of
The Sukuma, the largest ethnic group in Tanzania, live immediately to the north and west of Ihanzu. While both the Sukuma and Ihanzu extended their territorial reach during the twentieth century, the Sukuma have proved far more successful on this score. Today, as struggles over farm and grazing lands have become acute, the numerically superior Sukuma continue their expansion into Ihanzu territory virtually unabated.

One of the reasons Sukuma herdsmen have proved so successful, claim the Ihanzu, is due to the new form of witchcraft they bring with them. This witchcraft has allegedly allowed the Sukuma and their cattle to overrun and ruin Ihanzu pastures and farmlands, all the while protecting their own populace and herds against mystical countermeasures. It has also led, so people say, to the ‘consumption’ or ‘disappearance’ of many Ihanzu, resulting in the Ihanzu drawing crucial links between witchcraft, ethnicity and mobility.

The first part of the chapter provides background information on some of the political and economic forces that have compelled the Sukuma and Ihanzu to spread across the land, while the second part delves into locally-inflected understandings of these movements. Examining witchcraft as a means of mobility provides an alternative way of thinking about movement in Africa, one that resonates soundly with local concerns.

The Ihanzu in Historical Perspective

The people who today refer to themselves as the Ihanzu number around 30,000, and are one of the many Bantu-speaking agricultural groups found across Tanzania. They reside in the northernmost part of what is today Iramba District, as they have done since at least the mid-1800s. Over the years, however, the Ihanzu have found it increasingly difficult to survive at home in the villages as formerly productive soils have grown weary. The growing population has put increasing pressure on available food resources. Famines, not unheard of in the past, now appear to be more acute. Colonial and post-colonial administrations have encouraged agricultural intensification (not always to much avail), further straining scarce land resources. For these reasons and others, over the course of the previous century, the Ihanzu have gradually spread from their small, central highland villages onto the lowland plains that surround them in search of more fertile farmlands. This outward expansion continues today.

In the late 1880s, immediately prior to the arrival of German colonial forces, the Ihanzu resided in the small, mountainous area they call ‘Ihanzu’, an area about one tenth the size of their current territory. The people probably then numbered only a few thousand. Pressures on the land, that was far more productive than today, were few. Even though the area was reportedly densely populated, crop yields were for the most part ample. This is because the soils were reasonably fertile, the population was low

Health, the Royal Anthropological Institute and the London School of Economics for funding different parts of this research; and the Tanzanian Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH) for granting me research clearances. I would also like to thank the editors of this volume for their constructive comments.
and villagers practised intensive agricultural techniques including crop rotation and manuring (*Deutsches Kolonialblatt* 1901: 903; Obst 1912a: 114). Even so, farming was and still is a precarious enterprise in this semi-arid climate, where rainfall averages a meagre 50-75 cm a year.

Staple crops included sorghum and millet that, together with an assortment of wild greens, formed the basis of their diet. Groundnuts, manioc, sweet potatoes, beans and tobacco were also grown. Additionally, some people kept domestic livestock, primarily cattle, sheep, goats and donkeys (*Deutsches Kolonialblatt* 1901: 903; Obst 1923: 218; Reche 1914: 69-70 and 1915: 260; Werther 1894: 238 and 1898: 72).2

At the time, each Ihanzu village in this highland homeland was mostly autonomous and male elders informally governed their own internal village affairs. When inter-village feuds developed over murders or adultery, as they sometimes did, fines were negotiated between the parties involved. Movement between villages was sometimes dangerous and required ritual precautions (Adam 1963b: 17; Reche 1914: 85).

Villages and villagers, in spite of tensions between them, were ritually connected in that all recognised the supreme leadership of one clan section called the *Anyampanda wa Kirumi*.3 In particular, there were two royal leaders of this clan section, one male and one female, known as ‘owners of the land’ (*akola ihî*). As in other pre-colonial African societies (Feierman 1990; Packard 1981), these leaders served a number of political and ritual functions. These included bringing the rain to Ihanzu each year, presiding over boys’ circumcision and girls’ initiation rites, and generally ensuring the well-being of Ihanzu and all those who lived there. Together, in short, the owners of the land provided the basis for the pre-colonial Ihanzu political structure as well as a source of collective identity (Adam 1963b; Sanders 1998 and n.d.).4

Far from being confined to their mountainous homeland in the pre-colonial era, the Ihanzu (or rather, some Ihanzu men) journeyed widely, maintaining extensive trading networks with most of their neighbours. Ihanzu men regularly bartered with people from the Sukuma, Hadza, Iramba, Nyamwezi and Iraqw areas to acquire such items as glass beads, iron, rhino horns, honey, arrow poison and livestock.5 In return, Ihanzu traders frequently gave salt gathered at Lake Eyasi or goods made by their own smiths like arrowheads, knives, hoes and axes. The only neighbouring peoples with whom the Ihanzu did not trade or intermarry were the Maasai and Datooga. These pastoral peoples regularly raided Ihanzu for cattle (Adam 1961: 2; Obst 1912a: 112; Reche 1914: 69, 71, 84, 86 and 1915: 261).

The pre-colonial picture of Ihanzu that emerges is one of a small number of decentralised and largely autonomous villages clustered around the boulder-strewn

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centre of the country, each village responsible for its own internal political, legal and economic affairs. People shared some sense of common identity that centred on the two royal *Anyampanda* leaders. Within individual villages, men and women farmed clan lands that appear to have been fertile enough to support those who used them.

When the Germans first arrived in the 1890s, the Ihanzu began gradually to spread from their highland homes to lowland peripheral areas in search of more arable farmlands. This was possible for the first time due to the German suppression of ‘tribal’ warfare, which coincided with a succession of human and animal plagues across the region (Kjekshus 1977). The German administration’s early bush-clearing efforts to allow for the building of roads and to reduce tsetse-fly populations also aided these movements.  

Following the First World War, the British administration actively encouraged Ihanzu emigration. As one early and zealous British official noted, the administration’s aim was "to continue bush clearing, to reduce flies, [and to] open up cultivation land for natives to increase food supplies." This demanded bush clearing on a massive scale.

From the 1930s onwards, British administrators organised local bush-clearing crews that spiralled out from central Ihanzu in all directions. And as new areas were opened up, the administration encouraged people to farm and live there. Indeed, resettlement was seen as crucial to the success of the anti-tsetse campaign because once people moved to a cleared area they were unlikely to let it return to bush (Johnson 1948: 91).

By the 1940s and 1950s there was a steady out-migration from the central, highland area of Ihanzu onto the surrounding lowland plains. The villages of Ng’wangeza and Ng’wansigwa were established to the east. In the 1950s other Ihanzu moved north onto the plains, while still others established new villages to the north-west, near the border of Sukumaland.

Since independence in 1961, ten new Ihanzu villages have been established on the lowland plains surrounding the central homeland area. All these villages have high proportions of self-identified Ihanzu, and today are also home to many peoples who, in times past, would have lived elsewhere. These include Sukuma, Iramba, Hadza and Datooga.

For the Ihanzu and others, there are – or more correctly, there were – significant advantages to farming in these newly opened-up areas. For one, having never been cultivated, the soils were marginally more fertile and thus more productive. Additionally, on the plains, expansive unbroken tracts of land could be cleared and farmed, as opposed to the small, broken parcels typical of the highland area. This meant that ox ploughs and sometimes tractors, rather than hand hoes, could be used to great effect.

For these reasons, particularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the colonial (and later post-colonial) administration encouraged plains villagers to grow cash crops. Those villagers who did, most of whom were Christians, grew sunflowers, beans and

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8 Letter from D.O., Kisiriri to the Settlement Officer, Kondoa-Irangi dated 6 February 1953, doc. 563 in ‘Medical and Sanitation, Mkalama Leper Settlement,’ *TNA* 68/37/22.
maize for sale in local and regional markets. One man might cultivate as many as 30 acres of such crops, the wealthiest among them even being able to hire tractors. As one anthropologist noted in the early 1960s, "there is no scarcity of uncleared land [...] boundary disputes [are] rare".9

By the early 1990s the situation in Ihanzu had changed dramatically. Following the tentative cash-cropping boom in the 1960s, there were no longer any local markets for the sale of foodstuffs. All local government agricultural cooperatives had collapsed and the infrastructure, such as it was, was wholly inadequate for farmers to transport their crops to Arusha or Singida. Ihanzu cash cropping, in short, had all but ground to a halt. This was, in part, the result of the 1980s *ujamaa* collectivisation policies gone amiss but can also be attributed to the largely depleted soils on the formerly-fertile plains.

In the outlying plain areas of Ihanzu, pressures on the land have intensified further as soils become less fertile and populations continue to increase. In these areas, there is today little bush left to clear and boundary disputes over carefully demarcated plots have become commonplace. It is against this backdrop of Ihanzu territorial expansion and increasing pressures on the land that the history of Sukuma movements in the area is examined.

The Sukuma in Historical Perspective

The Sukuma live immediately to the north and west of Ihanzu and form the single largest ethnic group in Tanzania, numbering around four million (Brandström 1990: 1). Sukumaland (*Usukuma*), which covers more than 52,000 square kilometres mainly in Shinyanga and Mwanza Regions, is fairly homogenous savannah with gently undulating hills and expansive plains. In the past, low population densities and high mobility across this vast area made the Sukuma agro-pastoral lifestyle viable and sometimes even prosperous in spite of the often unforgiving climate and poor soils. However, over the twentieth century the Sukuma, like the Ihanzu, had to cope with increasing competition for grazing and farmlands. This has led to a continual expansion in all directions.

‘The Sukuma’ are a relatively recent innovation. In the pre-colonial era they shared no collective identity, nor did they have any over-arching political or ritual organisation. It was only during the early British colonial period that a distinctive Sukuma identity was forged (Cory 1953: 2; Holmes & Austen 1972; Liebenow 1960: 232).

In the late 1800s, prior to the arrival of German forces, the people today known as Sukuma lived in a number of chiefdom states varying in size from fewer than 2,000 to as many as 90,000 people (Liebenow 1960; Shipton 1984: 120). It never proved possible to amalgamate individual chiefdoms into a larger, more centralised Sukuma state-system. This is because, as Holmes and Austen (1972: 386) noted, "there was

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almost no...competition for land, thus little need to centrally regulate its control" (see also Liebenow 1960: 233).

Within individual chieftdoms two social groupings were apparent. On the one hand, there were the 'owners of the land' (benekile ise) or chiefs. On the other were the non-chieflly 'builders' (bazenzi, bazengi) or 'occupiers' (banamiko).

The chiefly owners of the land included the head of the chieftdom – called the ntemi – his close relatives and some of his subordinate administrators like headmen. The 'ownership' of ntemi amounted, in the main, to his ritual control over the agricultural cycle, rain, hunting and warfare. It was, in fact, his ritual control over these everyday activities that "represented the fundamental source of his authority" (Cory 1951: 74).

An ntemi did not act alone. He was assisted in many everyday tasks by sub-chiefs, elders and headmen, many of whom were his relatives and who were also considered 'owners of the land' (see Cory 1954). Headmen, for instance, allocated parcels of arable land to new arrivals to a chieftdom on which people cultivated sorghum, millet and maize. Such lands, usually plentiful, were allocated on a first come, first served basis. There was no absolute upper limit to the size of land holdings. Rather, individual needs were carefully considered in light of family size. Once a parcel was allocated, a family was expected to remain and farm it. Otherwise, expulsion from land was extremely rare (Hartley 1938: 20, 22; Malcolm 1953: 26-27, 51; Tanner 1955).

Practically and symbolically, 'owners of the land' were firmly anchored in their own chieftdoms. For one, chiefly lineages did not fragment as often or widely as did non-chieflly lineages, which meant they remained relatively localised (Shipton 1984: 120). The exception to this was when a contestation occurred over succession to office, at which point an 'owner of the land' might find a new chieftdom elsewhere. Furthermore, since an ntemi’s ritual control over the land depended on continual access to his chiefly forebears, owners of the land were buried locally. An ntemi and his rainmakers could then visit the chiefly graves for rainmaking and other ancestral veneration (Cory 1951: 49-50; Malcolm 1953: 50). In a number of ways, 'owners of the land' provided relatively permanent reference points on the landscape. This was not so for most Sukuma.

Non-chieflly Sukuma – by far the majority of the Sukuma population – were comparatively mobile both within and between chieftdoms. Their descent groups were shallow and regularly fragmented as conjugal families moved away from their natal homesteads (Hartley 1938: 17; Malcolm 1953: 43). Moreover, commoners did not bury their dead, at least until Christian missionaries arrived, but left them in the bush for wild animals to dispose of (Burton 1860: 25). This was because commoner spirits, unlike chiefly spirits, were not attached to specific parcels of land. Instead, commoners built household spirit shrines (kigabilo) to placate their ancestors: "Where the descendants went to live, the ancestors followed" (Shipton 1984: 121; also Tanner 1958: 225). This Sukuma familiarity with mobility greatly facilitated their later territorial expansion.

One of the principle reasons for relocating either temporarily or permanently to another chieftdom was to find new grazing grounds for livestock (Brandström 1985: 30). Although the Sukuma economy was underwritten by cultivation, the Sukuma were
also ardent pastoralists. Early explorers were much impressed by the sheer numbers of Sukuma flocks and herds (Broyon-Mirambo 1878: 30; Speke 1864: 286). These beasts, above all cattle, were of ecological, social and symbolic significance (Brandström 1990; Malcolm 1953: 62-82).

Sukuma movements and interactions with others in the pre-colonial past were not confined to Sukumaland alone. By the mid-nineteenth century, some Sukuma were deeply involved in trading and raiding with their close and distant neighbours, linked as they were into the Lake Route that extended from Unyamwezi in the south to Buganda in the far north (Hartwig 1970; Holmes & Austen 1972: 388-96). Closer to home, Ihanzu oral histories, genealogies and early written sources suggest there was at least occasional transit and trade between some eastern Sukuma chiefdoms and Ihanzu.

Sukuma used to (and still do) collect salt on the plains around Lake Eyasi just north of Ihanzu; while sometimes the Ihanzu, who also collected salt from the same lake, would exchange it with Sukuma for iron hoes (Obst 1912a: 112; Reche 1914: 84 and 1915: 261; Senior 1938). Marriage between Ihanzu and Sukuma was not unheard of in the past. During drought and famines the Ihanzu often moved into Sukumaland in search of food; while in the dry season in plentiful years, Ihanzu men used to fish in and gather reeds from the Sibiti River which today forms the boundary between Sukumaland and Ihanzu.\footnote{10} Also, in the late 1800s, northern and eastern Sukuma chiefdoms, like Ihanzu, suffered from Maasai and Datooga cattle raids (Ashe 1883 in Millroth 1965: 15; Itandala 1980: 9-13).\footnote{11}

On the eve of the colonial encounter, in summary, the Sukuma made up a number of autonomous mini-chiefdoms spread across the land. Each of these chiefdoms was composed of ‘owners’ and ‘builders’. The latter, the vast majority of the Sukuma, could move unproblematically from one chiefdom to another with their livestock. Since land was plentiful and populations generally sparse, they moved whenever they needed grazing grounds. They could also easily gain access to arable land in their new locales. The Sukuma traded with some of their neighbours, including the Ihanzu, but were raided by others like the Maasai and Datooga.

German colonial forces first entered Sukumaland in 1890 and until around 1900 pursued a policy of pacification (see Holmes & Austen 1972: 397). In a number of ways, unbeknown to them at the time, the Germans’ entrance and eventual...
entrenchment served as a catalyst for Sukuma territorial expansion that has continued to the present. Successive colonial and post-colonial regimes provided both the preconditions and the need for such expansion.

German pacification policies were in part responsible for the cessation of conflicts between the Sukuma and their pastoral neighbours, the Maasai and Datooga (Malcolm 1953: 11-12). Fewer raids meant fewer security concerns for the Sukuma. This, in turn, allowed them to relocate easily to distant and isolated locations where better grazing and farmlands were to be found. Without raiding, the need for chiefly medicinal protection was lessened, if not made superfluous.

Following the First World War, British bush-clearing policies further abetted and indeed demanded territorial expansion. From an early date the British were greatly concerned with eradicating the tsetse fly in Tanganyika, their newly acquired Trust Territory. So detrimental was the tsetse-fly problem in Sukumaland that the British administration chose Shinyanga, in southern Sukumaland and bordering on Ihanzu, as the first large-scale experimental area for bush reclamation and tsetse eradication in the Territory (Brandström 1985: 12). As in Ihanzu, bush-clearing efforts in Sukumaland were massive and continued for many years. The end result was that between 1925 and 1947 the tsetse fly steadily declined on all fronts (Ford 1971: 198-204).

This allowed the Sukuma and their livestock to expand in all directions in search of greener pastures. Well accustomed to moving when conditions so demanded and permitted, it was not only the search for new pastures that propelled the Sukuma and their cattle from central Sukumaland. It was also the need for arable farmland to fuel the colonial enterprise.

The British encouraged cotton cash cropping in Sukumaland and by the early 1930s, cotton production there had reached record highs. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this "severely increased pressures on land..." (Austen 1968: 244). Even so, it was not until after the Second World War that Sukuma cotton production rose dramatically and the pressure on land became acute. This led to yet further territorial expansion (Brandström 1985: 18-19; Shipton 1984: 120). Estimates suggest that between the First World War and the late 1950s the area inhabited by the Sukuma more than tripled in size, from about 10,000 to over 30,000 square kilometres (de Wilde cited in Brandström 1985: 20). This expansion affected all neighbouring districts including Iramba District where the Ihanzu live.

Sukuma territorial expansion has proved even more remarkable in recent years (see also Brandström 1990: 1). The relatively new villages on the Ihanzu plains, especially those in the north and west, all have high proportions of Sukuma living in them, either permanently or on a seasonal basis. In some (originally) Ihanzu villages like Nyaha, located in the far northwestern corner bordering on Shinyanga Region, the Sukuma language and population are now dominant.

In these villages, Sukuma, Ihanzu and others practise a mix of cultivation and herding. On the whole, the Sukuma are more successful pastoralists than the Ihanzu. For an Ihanzu to have twenty head of cattle is to be wealthy, while to own fifty is virtually unheard of. Some Sukuma, on the other hand, although they are themselves reluctant to reveal exact numbers, allegedly own a thousand or more head of cattle.
Many Sukuma are heavily involved in the lucrative cattle trade. They are usually those most involved at local monthly cattle auctions just outside Ibaga village, Ihanzu, often buying what they can at bargain rates. Many Sukuma venture further afield to sell their bovine goods at auctions in Arusha where they fetch top prices. The profits are usually ploughed back into the cattle economy. Such on-going cattle transactions – buying (locally) cheaply and selling (distantly) for high prices – ensure that Sukuma cattle herds thrive, even in difficult years.

For many in northern Tanzania, the year 1999 was perhaps the worst in living memory. The rains and crops failed completely. Famine was widespread. When visiting Ihanzu that year following the (non)harvest, there was a notable paucity of young and middle-aged men and women, many of whom had not yet returned from migrant labour in other parts of Tanzania. The very young and very old who had remained in the villages were distressingly thin. And for these unfortunate souls, especially for those in Ihanzu’s border villages where Sukuma populations are highest, to conjure ‘the Sukuma’ was akin to speaking a profanity.

Many Ihanzu villagers recounted bitterly how, for the exorbitant price of a cow, wealthy Sukuma cattle owners offered them a kilo or less of grain. Expanding Sukuma herds in search of fresh grazing ground increasingly trespassed on precious but mostly unavailing Ihanzu farmlands. Disputes between Sukuma herders and Ihanzu farmers increased dramatically and some were taken to court. In many of these villages, meeting after meeting was held, both by the government and local vigilante groups (nkili), to address ‘the Sukuma problem’. The common sentiment was that the Sukuma and their cattle were consuming the Ihanzu in their continual territorial expansion.

Witchcraft and Migration at the Millennium

Many Ihanzu and Sukuma alike have no difficulties understanding or relating the above explanation of territorial expansion. It is they, after all, who have experienced these things first-hand: rising colonial and post-colonial demands for cash cropping and taxation; the sometimes desperate search for fertile pastures and farmlands in a precarious environment; and the more recent invasion of Ihanzu by the highly-mobile Sukuma and their cattle. Yet there are many ways of imagining such movements, not all of them reducible to bottom-line determinants of the regional political economy. The remainder of this chapter turns to alternative Ihanzu imaginings of Sukuma territorial expansion, imaginings that revolve around medicine and witchcraft.

There is perhaps no better way to begin than by discussing some rumours I first heard in the northern villages of Ihanzu in the summer of 1999 immediately following the drought and famine. These were rumours about gambosh, a type of witchcraft traditionally associated with the Sukuma not the Ihanzu. Sukuma gambosh appear at night in the form of rapidly moving bright lights. They can easily be mistaken for buses. But these are no ordinary buses. While normal buses have a definitive shape and usually travel on well-marked routes, gambosh have no definitive characteristics at all apart from their bright lights. They are said to cruise through the bush, often at
dangerous speeds. They allegedly collect unsuspecting passengers en route, and transport them to unknown distant locations, perhaps somewhere in Sukumaland. Any hapless man, woman or child who encounters gambosh is in danger of disappearing forever.

Most Ihanzu would find this unproblematic were gambosh to confine themselves, as they always did in the past, to Shinyanga and Mwanza Regions where most Sukuma live. Regrettably, however, this is no longer the case. In the late 1990s, these Sukuma nocturnal bush-buses were for the first time traversing the borders of Sukumaland into Ihanzu. And apparently they were doing so in earnest. While people sometimes pointed to specific vanished individuals who had allegedly been abducted by gambosh, the tales were often framed more generally and recounted more ominously: gambosh are moving into Ihanzu and consuming her people.

It is worth remarking that the presence of witchcraft in Ihanzu today is not in the least unusual. African witchcraft and other traditions have not died as people modernise, as a number of social theorists – Marx, Durkheim and Weber among them – assured us they would. On the contrary, African witchcraft has proved highly flexible, alive to the basic rhythms of our world (Geschiere 1997). Far from withering away, witchcraft has reportedly increased in post-colonial Africa (Colson 2000: 341; Comaroff & Comaroff 1999; Rowlands & Warnier 1988). For this reason and others, anthropologists have sought to problematise Africans’ hybrid worlds that contain both tradition and modernity (Lan 1985; Piot 1999; Sanders n.d.).

But what does the recent arrival of Ihanzu gambosh reveal about mobility and territorial expansion in Africa? Why should such imaginings be taken seriously? The answer could be that they tell one a great deal about Ihanzu men’s and women’s sense-of-being in the world, a world that is growing evermore precarious. To see how, Ihanzu notions of medicine and ethnic identity need to be examined.

The Meaning of Medicine

In the Ihanzu language, the terms for medicines and roots (makota; sing. ikota) are identical. In Swahili, people use the term dawa (pl. madawa). Such root medicines are used by diviners, rainmakers and witches, both to heal and allegedly to kill.

Medicine or dawa, however, is not confined to the use of roots alone. Hospitals and dispensaries supply dawa; dehydrated and compressed foods eaten by soldiers and astronauts are referred to as dawa; and drug addicts, too, have their own types of dawa.

The term dawa (or ikota) is itself amoral. It is only when combined with the appropriate know-how and actual use that dawa becomes either good or bad. As one local woman rightly noted, "chloroquine given in the correct dose can cure malaria, but too much will kill you". The Ihanzu see all types of medicine with a similar moral ambivalence. The witch and the rainmaker may use the same medicines, the difference being that the former deploys them for evil, the latter for the benefit of all Ihanzu. This said, it is never entirely clear when the use of medicine (potentially good) becomes
witchcraft (by definition bad). Thus, for instance, in warfare, people routinely speak of their own use of medicine but the witchcraft (ülogi) of their enemies.

Many consider medicines an essential element of various everyday activities. Ihanzu men and women often use medicines known as kinga to protect their plots, homes, livestock and person, or so it is widely believed. Kinga consist of ground roots, leaves and other ingredients specially prepared by a seer, which are then strategically placed in one’s field, house, cattle pen or worn on one’s person, depending on what needs medicinal fortification. These are supposed to protect against medicinal assault on one’s property and self. In theory, kinga is protective and is therefore morally tenable. In practice, few admit to using kinga, since one man’s protective medicine all too easily becomes another man’s witchcraft.

Another type of medicine allegedly used on a regular basis is kisûmba. This might be called a ‘medicine of attraction’, since people purportedly use it to attract such things as material wealth, lovers, rain, fish or even a better job. This medicine, called nsambá in the Sukuma language, supposedly originated in Sukumaland.

Kisûmba, like kinga, is theoretically a good medicine that can be used by anyone without fear of social reprisal. Indeed, many say it would be foolish, perhaps even impossible, to do business without it. Yet only a few admit to doing so, for fear that it might be misconstrued as another form of medicine – witchcraft called ndagû – from which one benefits only at the immediate expense of others. Government officials, business persons and the wealthy are often thought to use medicine, good or bad, to acquire their positions and wealth, as well as to keep them once they have done so. The Ihanzu share the nagging suspicion that no one gets something for nothing and that medicines must somehow be involved (Sanders 1999a).

Conflicts, too, are often imagined in medicinal terms (Sanders 1999b). Naturally, conflicts are about this-worldly encounters between adversaries: warriors attack and kill each other, sometimes in violent and unpleasant ways; cattle thieves are occasionally caught and shot with arrows; and neighbours, kin and others have disputes over livestock and land. Yet at quite another level, such encounters can be and often are also about ‘mystical aggression’ (Goody 1970). Combatants in large- and small-scale warfare, especially when victorious, are invariably said to use medicine, both to protect themselves and to overcome their foes. From an Ihanzu perspective, all conflicts potentially have a medicinal component to them. Winners, not losers, are presumed to have more powerful medicines, and to have used them.

Finally, for the Ihanzu, medicines and migrations often go hand-in-hand. This is because their ideas about medicinal potency and impotency are often linked to their understandings of ethnic identity.

Medicine and Ethnicity

As was alluded to above, ethnic identities are not primordial realities but social constructions and the products of specific historical circumstances (Beidelman 1978; Ranger 1983). The Sukuma are largely a product of the colonial enterprise. Before the
Germans arrived, they did not exist as an imagined collectivity. For the Ihanzu, this is less the case, though of course what is meant by an Ihanzu has changed, and continues to change over the years.

Yet even if ethnic labels are socially and historically malleable, which clearly they are, this should not distract from the fact that they also comprise social realities in their own right. They are highly meaningful at particular moments in time, even if such notions change a great deal in the long run. Somewhat ironically, people the world over see ethnicity in precisely the ways anthropologists tell them they should not: as bounded, atemporal, essentialised, homogenised categories of people. The Ihanzu are no different.

Ethnic identity may be variously conceptualised in terms of culture, clothing, language, subsistence activities, and so forth. The Ihanzu characterise the Sukuma, for instance, in a number of ways according to their distinctive dress and jewellery, their ever-present walking sticks, their language, their large numbers of cattle and the fact that they, unlike the Ihanzu, are not circumcised. Ethnicity is multi-faceted and varies markedly at different times and places, in different historical and social settings. Nevertheless medicinal potency is a primary means by which the Ihanzu define and give meaning to ethnic categories. This includes the Sukuma and others, as well as their own self-defined category, ‘the Ihanzu’.

When I first arrived in Ihanzu and told people that I hoped to write a book about them, they often spontaneously launched into stories about former ritual leaders and the royal matriclan, their ancient (and perhaps mythical) journey from Ukerewe Island in Lake Victoria to Ihanzu, and the powerful rain medicine they brought with them (see also Adam 1963b; Kohl-Larsen 1943: 169, 194-95). Until recently, members of neighbouring ethnic groups, the Turu, Iambi, Iramba and Hadza, visited Ihanzu annually so that the rains would be plentiful in their own lands (Adam 1961: 2; Jellicoe 1969: 3). And today, as in the past, the Ihanzu have two ritual leaders whose responsibility it is to bring rain each year.

One of the most profound markers of Ihanzu ethnic identity today is their lengthy history of rainmaking and the connection to potent medicines that such traditions imply. So important were these matters to the men and women of Ihanzu, it turned out, that I abandoned my original research programme and focused instead on rainmaking (see Sanders 1998, 2000, forthcoming and n.d.). In a very real sense, to be ‘Ihanzu’ today is to situate oneself within this lengthy historical discourse on rainmaking, control over powerful medicines being central to it. If the Nuer picture themselves as ‘people of cattle’, then the Ihanzu imagine themselves as ‘people of powerful medicine’. Of course such medicinal imaginaries, as ethnic glosses, are meaningful only in relational terms, as the following story suggests.

The British District Commissioner (DC) of Iramba once held a contest to discover who amongst the Iramba Native Authority chiefs was the ‘real’ one. The DC summoned each of the three colonial chiefs separately to the local colonial administrative centre, the former German fortress in Mkalam village, instructing each that he must bring the rain with him when he came. Chief Kingu of Iramba arrived first. He failed to bring rain. The Chief of Iambi followed. He, too, failed to bring rain. Chief Sagilu of Ihanzu kept the DC
waiting for some time. Before he left home in Kirumi, a few miles from Mkalama, he and his mother (the then-female ritual leader) agreed that he must arrive with the rain. They prepared their rain medicines in Kirumi, and Sagilu then set off for Mkalama. Slowly, majestically, he walked. And as he did so, the rain followed immediately behind but never touched him, washing away his footprints as he proceeded. When he arrived in Mkalama, the skies suddenly broke. Although it was July and the middle of the dry season, the rain that had followed him from home now poured down, drenching everybody present. It rained continuously for three days. Thoroughly delighted, the DC proclaimed: "You, Sagilu, are the real chief!"

This well-known and often-recounted tale is interesting for a number of reasons, not least for what it says about submerged subaltern histories of the colonial enterprise and local notions of power and authority. In Ihanzu eyes, medicinal potency and ethnic identity are linked. In this story, the Ihanzu rain-chief, Sagilu, won because he possessed more powerful medicines than his chiefly Iramba or Iambi counterparts. In fact, ‘the Iramba’ and ‘the Iambi’ are always billed by ‘the Ihanzu’ as medicinally inferior groups. This is similarly the case with the nearby Iraqw and Turu.

Of all their neighbours, only the Sukuma are seen by the Ihanzu as medicinally more powerful than they themselves. It is for this reason that nearly all Ihanzu seers are trained, or claim to have been trained, in Sukumaland. During divination sessions Ihanzu seers often speak to clients in the Sukuma language, entirely or in part, a practice that gives them legitimacy in their clients’ eyes: they have learnt from their medicinal masters. Furthermore, some Ihanzu seers, when divining for foreign clients in other parts of Tanzania, invest themselves with some degree of mystical capital by claiming they are themselves Sukuma. If being ‘Ihanzu’ in many parts of Tanzania carries with it the association of being medicinally capable, then being ‘Sukuma’ goes that much further.

Like Sukuma seers, Sukuma witches allegedly have access to much stronger medicine than their Ihanzu brethren. Unlike Ihanzu witches, Sukuma witches are allegedly capable of bewitching their intended victims by using the evil eye, or simply by waving to them. It is often feared that the most powerful Ihanzu witches have obtained their medicines in Sukumaland, from where both ndagû and kisûmba (mentioned above) are said to have originated.

Sukuma medicine is also democratic. Not only Sukuma diviners and witches but also ordinary Sukuma allegedly use medicine liberally to gain and protect their cattle, crops and livelihoods. Common Ihanzu perceptions are that nearly any Sukuma man or woman is, by definition, medicinally better equipped than his or her Ihanzu counterpart. This is what Sukuma do. They make powerful medicine. And they use it.

It is in this context of inter-ethnic imaginings and medicinal potency that the recent arrival of gambosh buses is situated. Such understandings account, at least in part, for why the Sukuma have proved so successful in their migratory movements into Ihanzu. They allegedly use powerful medicine (or witchcraft, depending on one’s point of view) to overrun Ihanzu farmlands and to protect their own herds. Or so Ihanzu villagers repeatedly claim. Moreover, since the Ihanzu understand Sukuma medicine to be more potent than their own, the outcome is a foregone conclusion. The Sukuma will win. The Ihanzu will lose. The Sukuma are thought capable of consuming the Ihanzu at
many levels. The word ‘consuming’ (kula) is used here intentionally, as it is by the Ihanzu, since this is precisely what the Sukuma appear to be doing: consuming in everyday terms Ihanzu’s material resources, and in other-worldly witchcraft terms, the Ihanzu themselves. In Ihanzu eyes, this is a multi-fronted migratory offensive. It is about scarce resources, this is true. But more than this, it is also about Ihanzu imaginings of themselves as a people, and their potential consumption by a numerically superior and well-resourced neighbour. Rumours about migrating gambosh buses thus express a profoundly pessimistic view of the viability, in the long run, of the Ihanzu as a people.

Conclusions

The relationship between political-economy and witchcraft explanations of Sukuma expansion is a complicated one. Isn’t it the case that educated westerners employ materialist explanations while the Ihanzu use witchcraft? And isn’t this because we westerners know the former are ‘true’ while the latter are ‘false’? In this sense, because we are correct and the Ihanzu are not, can we not just ignore Ihanzu musings over magical migrations? Not exactly.

While it is probably the case that most westerners would find materialistic, political-economy explanations plausible, this can also be said for most Ihanzu. As noted earlier, the Ihanzu in no way misunderstand the harsh realities – governmental policies, impoverished soils, drought, famine and so on – that compel people to move from one locale to another. It is they, after all, who have lived through such tumultuous times and can thus recall, in uncanny detail, the very real, material reasons for their own and others’ movements. Indeed, to be a good farmer or herder, an intimate knowledge of such things is not only possible but absolutely essential. Without such knowledge people’s very survival would be called into question.

Given this, it would be unwise to discuss such matters in terms of ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ distinctions – that is, our migration story is one of political economy while theirs is one of witchcraft. For to do so could imply, to the unsympathetic reader, that western and non-western logics and modes of thought are radically different, if not wholly incommensurable. Such unreasonable reasoning borders dangerously close to Lévy-Bruhl’s notion of the (non-Western) pre-logical mentality. Moreover, if the Ihanzu themselves have no difficulty understanding or subscribing to a rational political-economy explanation, then surely it makes little sense to see etic perspectives as being held solely by clever outsiders.

Explanations of migration that emphasise either political economy or witchcraft are not so much about western oranges and African apples as they are about additional layers of meaning, and different explanations for different contexts. Through rumours about Ihanzu-eating Sukuma witch-buses, the Ihanzu move well beyond the mere materialities of mobility and address, on a more cosmological level, their location in a rapidly-changing post-colonial world. And it does not stop there: discourses about
gambosh are not just ways of imagining the world. They are also ways of creatively engaging with it.

The Ihanzu privilege different accounts of Sukuma expansion in different contexts and to different ends. As argued elsewhere (Sanders 1999a), the Ihanzu make a firm conceptual distinction between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. Furthermore, certain things, peoples and acts are said to belong categorically to one or the other. Since this very dichotomy was itself the product of colonialism and its metadiscourse of modernity (Sanders n.d.), it is hardly surprising that vernacular understandings mirror those of dominant European discourses on the matter. For the Ihanzu, all things governmental are said to be ‘modern’; while many other things like rainmaking, witchcraft and divination are considered ‘traditional’. Naturally, in practice, there is a good deal of slippage between these two ideational categories. But people maintain the distinction all the same.

The important point here is that men and women knowingly situate different discourses about migration and territorial expansion solidly within this overarching tradition-modernity dichotomy. In modern settings, the Ihanzu discuss such movements in terms more material than ethereal, whereas in traditional settings precisely the opposite occurs. Border-village disputes between Sukuma herders and Ihanzu farmers were frequently brought to the government’s attention. Many Ihanzu complained bitterly to government officials about the Sukuma and their cattle. In the summer of 1999, government meetings were regularly called to discuss particular and general issues surrounding land usage and conflict. At some of these meetings, government officials attempted to demarcate boundaries around and through villages aimed at keeping Sukuma cattle on one side and Ihanzu farmlands on the other. The discussions observed were always well reasoned and well argued from both sides, for and against such boundaries, and whether such boundaries would work at all. That summer no such measures were ever adopted in any village. What is tellingly, here, is that in such ‘modern’ settings there was never any mention of Sukuma witchcraft. This topic would wait for late afternoon or evening discussions deemed more ‘traditional’.

If Ihanzu villagers were intensely engaged with ‘modern’ government using ‘modern’ discourses, they were also visiting diviners and carrying out ‘traditional’ vigilante meetings in the bush. And at these meetings it was not the rather obvious fact that the Sukuma cattle were moving into and eating Ihanzu farmland that most concerned people. It was, instead, the fact that Sukuma were ‘consuming’ the Ihanzu medicinally with their witchcraft. The Sukuma are medicinally far superior to the Ihanzu. This everyone knows. And their sheer masses, combined with their undeniable medicinal competence, could imply only one thing: the Ihanzu were doomed. How long this might take was anyone’s guess. Understandably, these meetings frequently had an air of despair and resignation about them, as if, faced with such odds, there was little any Ihanzu could do either with or without governmental support. Witchcraft, after all, works invisibly and can cross boundaries like the wind. Sukuma witchcraft, so people suggested, was simply unstoppable.
All told, Ihanzu imaginings of witchcraft are not merely a local lexicon used to conceptualise and contemplate territorial expansions, though this is certainly part of it. This would imply, among other things, that what is really at issue in such movements is an everyday struggle over scarce resources, and little more. Rather I would argue that, in Ihanzu eyes, witchcraft is also the very means by which such migrations occur. Thus, witchcraft is both a way to imagine migrations and a way to make them happen. It is a way of conceptualising the world and a way of acting purposively upon it. From an Ihanzu perspective, without powerful witchcraft, Sukuma expansion would hardly have been so successful. What is more, such imaginings – whether ultimately true or false – have true enough effects in the real world. The fact that the Ihanzu see the world this way, that they see witchcraft and migration as inextricably linked, profoundly affects the form such migratory ventures take. Such imaginings shape the ways the Ihanzu cope with Sukuma inroads into their lands – whether they resist such movements, accept them as inevitable, or do both simultaneously in different contexts. No longer can migrations and territorial expansions be treated as simply the product of broad, structural factors. The real world is far more complicated.

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