

**CHAPTER 3****Ruvu Societies and Worldview**

When Christian missionaries disembarked on African shores they may have had their first awakening. Reading reports of their encounters with Africa's people, one often senses that nobody in their homelands thought to tell them that Africa was home to indigenous religions. In 1888, Reverend A. N. Wood experienced his first "itinerating tour" in Tanzania's Usagala region.<sup>1</sup> Writing for *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record* in 1889, he chronicled his meetings with Usagala's people. He was particularly mindful of describing the way they expressed their beliefs. Among his observations he explained that "Their idea of praying to God is simply dancing around a little fetish hut to the beating of a drum. How different it will be when they can look up to heaven, and say, 'Our Father, in spirit and in truth.'" He also added that he "saw a woman doing what she called praying to the dead, or to God on their behalf. She had two calabashes of flour and water each side of the door, and then poured it on the ground."<sup>2</sup> Though Wood likely believed he was reporting on Sagala religious naiveté, he managed to paint a picture that elucidated important Northeast-Coastal Bantu religious expressions. Moreover, the people he scrutinized were articulating religious beliefs that sprang in some cases from enduring Niger-Congo and Bantu worldviews. But he, similar to missionary and colonial affiliates that preceded and followed him in Africa, likely never understood that there were deep-seated logics underpinning such ceremonies. 1

When early Northeast-Coastal Bantu people began settling into central-east Tanzania in the early centuries of the first millennium CE, the religious tenets they carried were far more ancient than those of nascent Christianity. Just as modern-day Christianity is expressed in diverse ways owing to the passing of nearly two millennia, so too were early Northeast-Coastal Bantu religious expressions varied because they were deeply rooted in Niger-Congo and Bantu history. Yet for all the past and present variation in expression among Christian and Northeast-Coastal Bantu religious practitioners, each often exudes discernible commonalities because they emerged from common historical contexts and sets of principles. This variation occurs because the way people articulate their religious beliefs—their religious practices—are commonly far more pliable than their epistemological premises. Because those enduring premises represent a constituent part of inherited knowledge and religious expression, religious history is important for understanding the histories of societies generally. Working from this proposition, this chapter centers on recovering aspects of Ruvu religious history with an understanding that while its epistemological roots are sometimes as ancient as the early Niger-Congo periods, its day-to-day expressions were continuously reinterpreted.<sup>3</sup> 2

The goal is to provide an epistemological and sociocultural context for chapters that follow. **3**  
This chapter tells the story of what early Ruvu people presumed was true about the world they lived in. It suggests that in Ruvu views key precepts informed and guided the way they expressed their religion and set up their communities. Fundamental to the Ruvu community outlook, as well as Bantu-derived societies more generally, was that they saw themselves as part of a world in which overall social wellness depended on maintaining relationships of reciprocity between two spheres of potential power. One comprised the corporeal world of everyday lived experience and the other was an ethereal realm that encompassed various spirit forces. Together the two realms, incubators of power, had the potential to bring about desired or unwanted experiences for people in the physical world. Based on this perspective, Bantu people had a firm understanding that sheer will was not the sole glue that held communities together.<sup>4</sup> They believed *all* people, spirit forces, and social institutions were engaged in ongoing dialectical exchanges that crossed the two realms.

It may be because the physical world is the only one to which we are privy that exchanges between the physical and ethereal appear to play out only on earth's surface. Though it is important to recognize that this perception may be wholly inaccurate, it is unavoidable. With possible limitations acknowledged, the way those relationships are witnessed is through observances based upon religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices, what I term religio-ritual ceremonies. They are the physical and occasionally routine ways that people participate in customs expressive of religious premises. In Ruvu communities religio-ritual ceremonies were typically expressed through, among others, dancing, drumming, sacred offering and libation, initiation rites, art, medicine, spoken words (prayer), and song. These were the ways corporeal players communicated with the world of spirit. In return, Ruvu peoples believed those ethereal forces would bestow on their communities the capacity for regeneration in the material world. Indeed, people expected desired outcomes would be their reward. We can thus say that those relationships were seemingly cyclic, because Ruvu people knew such ceremonial communications were important avenues for maintaining overall wellness. They were, as we will see, constituent elements comprising their sociocultural institutions. **4**

Yet for as much as Bantu-derived religious expression was central to community stability, we must submit that, as far as we can tell, early Bantu-speaking people did not innovate a word or concept equivalent in meaning to that which contemporary societies call religion. Nevertheless, I propose that because of the way normative definitions of religion have of late included the idea of the ethereal or spiritual in a diversity of forms, I think it is suitable, though perhaps not wholly complete, to consider those moments when people conscientiously seek out or interact with—tangibly or cognitively—the ethereal world to be instances of religious practice. Using this understanding as the lens through which we examine Ruvu history, it becomes clear that ancient precepts concerning the power of spirit forces, those that sustained their Niger-Congo ancestors, were carried forward throughout myriad Bantu **5**

diasporas. Ruvu people harkened back to an overarching worldview that for millennia had provided their Bantu ancestors the broad parameters through which to create sustainable societies.

## Worldview and Religion

If understanding worldview and religious matters is key to recovering Ruvu history in central-east Tanzania, then we need a conceptual framework that explicates the cognitive-level assumptions that guided Ruvu religio-ritual expression. The reconstruction of vocabulary histories central to religious beliefs provides us with the most productive epistemological evidence for the underpinning beliefs and practices that most likely shaped the way Ruvu people established, lived in, and maintained their communities. In an effort to retrieve those beliefs, we begin with an examination of the way Ruvu-speaking people conceptualized the physical cosmos, its ethereal forces, and the reasons for solace and suffering, as well as the ways they maintained communications with the ethereal realm. **6**

If the definition of religion rested solely on the idea that people needed to believe in a foremost creative force—something Christians name God or Muslims Allah, for example—then Ruvu people had religion. Since the proto-Ruvu period of the middle of the first millennium CE, Ruvu-speaking people by and large believed that the force responsible for creating the cosmos was *\*Mulungu*. It is a word not easily translated because it cradles nuances that do not have an obvious synonym in the English language. I hesitate to refer to it as God because to do so would attach myriad epistemological notions onto a concept that predated Christianity and Islam, and was altogether independently imagined. In light of this, it is more constructive to use what may seem initially to be more cumbersome explanations to convey its broad meaning. **7**

Early Ruvu speakers viewed *\*Mulungu* as a first cause or force responsible for creating and properly ordering the cosmos. However, Ruvu speakers were not the first or only Bantu speakers to conceptualize such a force. Up through present times, *\*Mulungu* is used widely by extant Kati and Rufiji-Ruvuma speakers. This indicates that its origins lay at least in the historical period when clusters of Southern Kaskazi speakers first adopted it up with that meaning in the late centuries of the last millennium BCE. Presuming this is accurate, by the time proto-Ruvu speech communities emerged in the middle of the first millennium CE, *\*Mulungu*, both the term and concept, was already at least one thousand years old.<sup>5</sup> To glean what meaning *\*Mulungu* likely carried in those early-period languages, we turn to its etymological root. It derives from a proto-Bantu verb that loosely meant "to become fitting, straight, or right." Such an underlying verb intimates that *\*Mulungu* in all probability conveyed the idea of a force responsible for ordering things in a right or good way. But **8**

*\*Mulungu's* meaning carried an additional subtlety, namely, that of first cause or creator. Although this aspect of its meaning is not explicit in the root verb from which *\*Mulungu* derives, the reason behind this added nuance is explicable.

The first cause or creator facet of its meaning represents a widespread ancient idea carried over from the proto-Bantu peoples' Niger-Congo ancestors who, by the sixth millennium BCE, believed a foremost creator was responsible for forming the material world. In early Bantu periods the proto-Bantu word for that creator was *\*Nyàmbé*. It is likely that proto-Bantu *\*Nyàmbé* and the word *Nyame* in the Akan language spoken in Ghana are cognate. If so, and more research is required to establish this point, it would suggest that this root word was in use even earlier than the proto-Bantu period, perhaps as early as the time of their common Benue-Kwa-period ancestors who lived in the rainforest belt in the fifth millennium BCE.<sup>6</sup> In either case, the underlying verb at play in proto-Bantu *\*Nyàmbé* was probably *\*-àmb-*, meaning to "begin" which connected the Creator with the beginning or creation of the cosmos. Since at least those early periods, then, there has been a widespread belief in such a creator that has persisted among Bantu-speaking descendants.<sup>7</sup> And yet, not all Bantu-descendant people retained the term *\*Nyàmbé* to name that force. Because of the various historical turns societies took, they sometimes acquired or innovated different words to convey the idea of the ancient Niger-Congo Creator, and they now and again added new nuances to it. The development of the word *\*Mulungu* as the "right" Creator in the Southern Kaskazi period is one such example. So, prior to the innovation of *\*Mulungu* in the late last millennium BCE, the notion of a force responsible for the universe's composition had prevailed as a worldview precept for at least five thousand years among Niger-Congo and earlier Bantu speaking descendants.

To sum up, by the late last millennium BCE there remained a widespread cognitive worldview that at minimum conceived of a world that began as a result of a creator force. But early-Southern-Kaskazi language speakers added a new sense to that core idea, which resulted in an understanding that a first Creator organized things in a right and good way. It was this idea that then spread with Kati and Rufiji-Ruvuma language descendents into central and southern Tanzania. As Kati language descendants, proto-Northeast-Coastal Bantu speakers entrenched this religious understanding in the central-east-Tanzanian hinter-coastal milieu. Subsequently, their Ruvu descendents maintained *\*Mulungu* as a core principle of their religious beliefs right up to current times.<sup>8</sup>

Now that it is established that a Creator comprised an aspect of the proto-Ruvu religious outlook, it is valuable to consider what *\*Mulungu* may have meant in the day-to-day lives of Ruvu people, and perhaps for early Northeast-Coastal Bantu-speaking people more generally. The best avenue for this is to turn to the published ethnographic data. Fortunately, it was common for ethnographers to center on describing African religious "thought," so many

examples are available. However, two points about the limitations of this approach must be acknowledged up front. As concerns the recorded ethnography, it is important to remind ourselves that ethnographic accounts taken by missionaries reflect their reading of Ruvu peoples' practices through a Christian—often evangelical—lens. Secondly, our reliance on the ethnography should not be presumed exact renditions of how Ruvu people of long ago ruminated on *\*Mulungu*. Rather they provide a basis for hypothesizing the way early Ruvu people may have envisaged *\*Mulungu*.

A principal observation that Tanzanian missionary workers made was that people living in the region were generally uninterested in relationships with *\*Mulungu*. Wood, for example, highlighted throughout his 1888 report that getting people in Usagala to accept the core idea that God was the Creator did not pose a challenge. Though he did not know it, that was because NECB descendants already had the equivalent concept in *\*Mulungu*. What was tricky, he found, was getting Usagala inhabitants to understand the importance of having sustained, meaningful relationships with God. He reported that while people were willing to listen attentively to his messages about God, they "seemed to look upon the idea of God being their father as a new one." And when it came to the idea of sin as an offense against God, he lamented, "these people, and I think all Natives generally here, look upon sin as between man and man, and not as between man and God."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in Kwele-speaking regions, anthropologist J. L. Brain witnessed that Kwere believed "in a Creator named *Morungu* [sic], who in a general sort of way was responsible for all creation, but there was not worship of him or sacrifice to him."<sup>10</sup> And among Zaramo speakers, anthropologist Lloyd Swantz found that God was believed to be the "creator of the earth and sky." For Zaramo, God was invisible and had power over the living and the dead, but "no *dawa*, medicine, or other means could be used against him."<sup>11</sup> Finally, a telling example of how Kagulu understood the Creator is demonstrated by the way missionaries attempted to reframe through direct translation local thinking about *\*Mulungu*. Anthropologist T. O. Beidelman reports that when the Church Missionary Society translated the Christian God into the Kagulu language they emphasized that *\*Mulungu* should be viewed as the Kagulu *baba* (father), *mundewa* (leader), and *muganga* (physician/diviner). And that Jesus should be thought of as a *mudimi* (shepherd).<sup>12</sup>

The reason that translating *\*Mulungu* precisely, and moreover, convincingly, mattered was that the Christian God carried an epistemological assumption that was not shared in Ruvu or NECB or even earlier Bantu understandings. For them *\*Mulungu* was a distant and powerful force over which they had no control or influence. This perception was intimated by the Zaramo belief that their medicine (Swahili *dawa*) was ineffective on *\*Mulungu*. In their view, *\*Mulungu* was a powerful entity but they did not engage it because to do so was unproductive. The epistemological distinction between the Bantu-derived notion of the Creator and of the Christian God highlights a long-enduring idea in Niger-Congo history; that is, that the Creator

was viewed as a distant figure and not one with whom people interacted.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, in their more comprehensive religious outlook, there were other ethereal forces that would respond to their *dawa* and, in fact, demanded relationships.

When scholars across academic disciplines examine Bantu religious ideas they often note the emphasis that people give to the centrality of spirit entities across much of sub-Saharan Africa. From the coasts of West Africa to the southern coasts of South Africa, references to the preeminence of what are termed ancestral spirits are familiar in the scholarly literature. Like the idea of the Creator, the reasons for their prevalence across the region is rooted in supple yet enduring epistemologies deriving from early Niger-Congo history. In those times, people believed their communities were guided and influenced by spirit forces of antecedent generations. Understanding this aspect of their religion reveals much about the ways in which Bantu-descendant groups over millennia depended on and used the power of previous generations to create and recreate social institutions capable of sustaining their communities. **14**

Two spirit types predominated in early Niger-Congo people's consciousness. The academic literature usually refers to them as territory/nature spirits and ancestral spirits. Niger-Congo-descended people believed that territory/nature spirits resided in and had influence within specific geographic zones. Such spirits were often associated with caves, rivers, floodplains, termite mounds, mountaintops, escarpments, or other designated sacred sites. For people living in, moving into, or otherwise vested in those areas, such sites and their associated spirits were important because they could impede or inspire community well-being. One way people managed such possibilities was through negotiation led by their community leaders, who they believed had the power to intercede with such spirits on the behalf of their constituents. For instance, it was probably commonplace for leaders to have appealed to spirit forces to end difficulties in times of famine, disease, or war that plagued an area. A second spirit category—those of familial ancestors—likely played a more immediate, personal role in the peoples' lives. **15**

Often referenced as ancestral spirits, these entities were considered central to community livelihood. In the academic literature, ancestors are commonly referenced in discussions related to ceremonies centered on agriculture, young adult initiation, and medicine. However, contrary to the way that these ceremonies sometimes are described—as a form of ancestor worship (read: primal/pagan ritual)—they were instead ceremonies demonstrative of remembering and paying homage to antecedent generations because antecedent generations held the power to affect the lives of their corporeal descendants. Because Niger-Congo people believed that their ancestors influenced the regenerative potential of their societies at many levels, they knew it was necessary to make offerings of goods and prayer to them, particularly in seeking help in times of need brought about by crises, but also as messages of gratitude in times of good fortune.<sup>14</sup> **16**

As inheritors of enduring beliefs centered on the power of ethereal forces, Ruvu people acknowledged and revered both spirit types. Proto-Ruvu used the term *\*-zimu* to name ancestral spirits. But like *\*Mulungu*, *\*-zimu* had deep-seated etymological origins. In the proto-Bantu period of the late fourth or early third millennium BCE, speakers innovated the word from a verb that meant "to extinguish or become extinguished," but they used it specifically to name the "spirit of a dead person" or "ancestral spirit."<sup>15</sup> Effectively, such spirits were "extinguished people."<sup>16</sup> As Bantu-speaking descendants diverged, they carried this idea across much of the continent, and eventually into central-east Tanzania with early Northeast-Coastal Bantu speaking communities. The idea *and* noun in this case are thus at least five thousand years old. But even though we can say belief in ancestor spirit forces represents a religious continuity, the way people conceptualized those who had departed varied over time. For example, historian Jan Vansina has argued that among early western Bantu speakers the term referred "to the spirit of a long-deceased leader, whose personality and perhaps even whose name had been forgotten and then rediscovered when he wrought wonders."<sup>17</sup> Because of this their descendants probably remembered them as heroes of long ago rather than as personally familiar members of their recent lineage. But in Bantu descendant languages from the later proto-Mashariki period and later, it appears that people had broad conceptualizations of those spirits, often identifying particular spirit types. Some, among other possibilities, were associated with wreaking havoc on people or communities, while others protected homesteads. It is in such senses that Ruvu speakers thought of *\*-zimu* spirits.

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Moreover, ancestor spirits were not limited only to an ethereal realm. It was understood that they could move in and out of the land of the living. They could return as embodied animate beings.<sup>18</sup> This belief, too, represents an aspect of an early-Bantu worldview. The ancestors in Bantu-speaking areas were also imagined as powerful forces. And they were not neutral in temperament. They might, among other possibilities, have been envious, happy, or disappointed. If neglected, deserted, or otherwise forgotten by their descendants, it was believed that they likely would inflict calamity upon the living. The larger context for this centered on the premise that ancestors "owned" the land on which descendants lived.<sup>19</sup> They were guardians of the land. Their power to interact with the living thus played an important role in society's ability to sustain its communities. If ancestors were not pleased, they could, for instance, intervene in life by impeding female and male fertility or by damaging sowed fields. On the flipside of this was the understanding that proper ancestor veneration resulted in desired outcomes, a conceptualization which highlights the reason for the emphasis on placating ancestors that prevails widely in the Bantu-speaking world.<sup>20</sup>

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Bantu people took at least two broad approaches to communicating with ancestors. Using what might be deemed a preventative tactic, some people presented gifts to ancestors with the hopes that they would keep them from inflicting suffering. If calamity were already being

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experienced, then communication through gifts was done with the hope that suffering would cease. The observances made by Wood, cited at the chapter's start, provide cogent examples. You will recall that in one observation he noted that Usagara people thought they were "praying" when they beat their drums and danced around, as he characterized it, a "little hut."<sup>21</sup> What he witnessed was likely an altar or shrine that housed an important ancestral spirit. The erection of such shrines represents a practice found widely in the Bantu-speaking world.<sup>22</sup> And the dancing and drumming he mentioned would have been honorific acts of communication with associated spirits. Such drumming and dancing, too, was demonstrative of additional, widespread Bantu religio-ritual customs.<sup>23</sup> In a second example, Wood noted that a woman was praying to ancestors "or God on their behalf" when pouring flour and water on to the ground. Because of his epistemological bias, we recognize that he misread what was happening when he presumed she was praying to *\*Mulungu*. Based on what is known, the expectation would not be that the woman was praying to *\*Mulungu* because in Ruvu religious understandings, *\*Mulungu* did not answer to people or anyone else. Instead, the woman was likely making an offering directly to the spirit forces associated with the area she was in, probably her lineage ancestors. Furthermore, calabashes were familiar medicinal containers. Their contents (which Wood described as "flour and water") were probably prepared medicine used to stave off negative forces or to insure protection of the structure or area.<sup>24</sup>

Other examples of ancestor supplication have been noted throughout Ruvu-speaking areas. Theologian Gasper Bombwe, who collected information about Lugulu religious ceremonies writes, "the Lugulu are essentially a religious people. They live their religion and celebrate it daily."<sup>25</sup> But he notes how little external evidence of religion there was, with the exception of small, grass-covered huts that could be easily overlooked unless people pointed out their religious significance.<sup>26</sup> Of course, those structures were important spirit shrines, similar to those Wood observed nearly a century before Bombwe did. Although Bombwe's comments seem to contrast the prevalence of great churches or temples attached to other religious traditions with those of Lugulu people, he, unlike many other observers, appears less invested in commenting on the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of Lugulu religious expression. Rather, his investigation was centered on the use of words—prayers—spoken in honor of and in communication with Lugulu ancestors.

In early Bantu worldviews, words activated medicine and inspired other powerful forces.<sup>27</sup> Bombwe found that the force of words was thought important in beseeching ancestors for healthy harvests, when sowing, when calling for beneficial rain, when suffering from illness, and when searching for new home sites. In the case of prospecting for new settlement areas, he wrote that Lugulu speakers commonly prayed: "you our ancestors . . . wherever you are. Please, we are doing what you yourselves used to do. So you know what we are doing. If this spot is good to live in, may this thorn or needle pass through [the ear]. And if it is not good let it not go through."<sup>28</sup> As is common throughout much of Bantu-speaking Africa, Ruvu

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descendants sent messages forth to ethereal forces and awaited their replies to guide decision-making processes. Of Lugulu religion, Bombwe concluded that Lugulu people perceived God as the owner of the universe and that if they conceived of a way of communicating with said God it is through ancestors, who in their understanding were "nearer" to God.<sup>29</sup> For Ruvu speakers and their ancient ancestors, it was the world of ancestors that formed the basis of, perhaps, the most important and customary relationships between the ethereal and corporeal realms.

In the tradition of an early Niger-Congo worldview, however, Ruvu people also believed that spirit forces inhabited tracts of land and other territories.<sup>30</sup> The oldest and most continuous force of this sort thus far identified in early Ruvu history is *\*mulungu*, a spirit force associated with forested and vacated areas. It is important to note that it is homonymous with Ruvu's *\*Mulungu*, "Creator" and its likeness has resulted in some wrinkles in the ethnographic record because investigators commonly did not recognize the distinction between *\*mulungu* the "potentially evil spirit" versus *\*Mulungu* "Creator." The result being that they sometimes concluded erroneously that *\*Mulungu* committed evil acts against people. On top of that, because *\*mulungu* spirits demanded supplication in the places in which they dwelled, many times Africans are characterized as having "worshipped" God in the "bush" when their propitiatory ceremonies were in reality supplicating forest-dwelling spirits that could cause havoc and were wholly distinct from *\*Mulungu*, the Creator.<sup>31</sup> 22

Turning to *\*mulungu*'s etymology, we look to its prevalence in distinct Bantu language subgroups. Based on its distribution, belief in *\*mulungu* is likely rooted in the proto-Kaskazi period of the middle of the last millennium BCE.<sup>32</sup> Though its definitions within descendent linguistic communities vary *\*mulungu* can be broadly characterized as having covered large, unsettled areas, and is known for having a disposition that could create calamity but did not always do so. It was not, therefore, conceptualized as altogether evil or good. Turning to some Kaskazi examples, in historian David Schoenbrun's view, proto-Great-Lakes Bantu speakers likely thought of *\*mulungu* as a "dispersed territorial spiritual force" that came to the aide of hunters.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, among proto-Ruvu speakers, *\*mulungu* appears to have been "a potentially malevolent spirit" that moved within unsettled, neglected, wilderness areas. When people moved into its domain, it was understood that *\*mulungu* expected formal honoring or it might have responded by causing problems for trespassers. Recent Ruvu speakers frequently characterized *\*mulungu* as sick or hot in nature, and they often implicated it in periods of regional disease and death.<sup>34</sup> 23

Whereas ancestors were considered linked to the personal histories of early Ruvu people, *\*mulungu* were not conceptualized as close relatives, although it is possible that they were considered ancestors who long ago lived in the area. In the course of Ruvu history other nature-affiliated spirits emerged as significant forces in their communities. However, they 24

likely originated no earlier than the proto-NECB period. While these other spirits will be discussed in upcoming chapters, it is important to note that the belief in nature/territory spirits draws attention to the complexity of the spirit realm Ruvu and Bantu people considered to be important in their lives. It therefore underscores the need to consider them in the overall framework of historical analysis.

The preceding discussions have suggested the way that Ruvu may have explained some causes of negative or harmful experiences. However, to understand how they explained maleficence, it is helpful to delve further into their worldview understandings. As we have seen, keeping things right depended greatly on supplicating spirits in Ruvu communities. An additional understanding in Ruvu religious history included an idea that Wood broached when he described Sagala people as conceptualizing sin as "man against man."<sup>35</sup> What he alluded to was the Bantu-wide concept of witchcraft as the etiology of illness and other states of unwellness, including death, which likely originated in Niger-Congo worldviews. For early Bantu peoples, some suffering was explained as the work of malicious, envious, or spiteful living people who used medicine and medicinal implements, both material objects and spoken incantations, to make harmful witchcraft.<sup>36</sup> This epistemological assumption has persisted in recent Bantu history. Like the idea of a first Creator, the cognitive understanding was constant, even though the word used to identify it sometimes changed. **25**

As inheritors of a worldview in which affliction could be conjured, proto-Ruvu speakers believed people with the capacity and propensity for malice sometimes lived among them. Proto-Ruvu speakers referred to witchcraft and sorcery as *\*uhawi*, which derives from an underlying verb that meant "to heat, to boil." In Kaskazi descendant languages, including Ruvu, it usually is the root for words that identify "witches, witchcraft, and evil."<sup>37</sup> When someone was victimized by the works of people performing such evil-doing, proto-Ruvu speakers called that action *\*kuloga*. *\*Kuloga*, like many previous ideas, represents a direct retention of a proto-Bantu verb that meant "to bewitch."<sup>38</sup> **26**

From these etymological bases we can suggest that a common Kaskazi understanding maintained that states of affliction could reflect the workings of an evildoer's bewitchment *and* that affliction was thought linked to the infliction of a "heated" state. It followed in their thinking that healing witchcraft depended on returning people to a state of neutrality through transformative acts, both medicinal and spiritual, that cooled. And that, as we will see in following chapters, is just how they dealt with remedying states of unwellness. The idea of heat as a feature of and metaphor for unwellness, both individual and social, was associated with more than witchcraft since, for example, malaise associated with *\*mulungu* spirits were **27**

also tied etiologically to heat at a cognitive and physical level. Though this ideology characterized early Ruvu societies, it is rooted at least as far back as the proto-Kaskazi period of the middle of the last millennium BCE.

This broad framework of Niger-Congo and Bantu-anchored epistemology functions as a backdrop for understanding what may have guided Bantu-descended Ruvu-speaking people in central-east Tanzania. The expressions of these common underlying beliefs were not, however, homogenous or rigidly delimited. Instead, it is clear that as proto-Ruvu descendent communities moved into new geographic spaces, met with unique sociopolitical circumstances, and engaged in new social exchanges and relationships, they built on these inherited precepts while continually reinterpreting their expression. This was as true for them as it was for their proto-NECB and earlier Bantu-speaking ancestors. **28**

## Examining Ruvu Societies in the Early Hinter-Coastal Milieu

This next section of the chapter moves on to consider the ways in which newly-arrived Ruvu-speaking descendants settled into and refashioned the central-east Tanzanian milieu. Its focus is on the characteristics of their societies, and its aim is to give the reader a sense of how their community members were likely to have lived. To accomplish this goal, it seeks, when applicable, to draw attention to the entwined character of political, religious, and domestic (homestead-centered) concerns. Particular attention is given to the ways Ruvu people tapped into Niger-Congo and Bantu-derived knowledge to structure their lives in their new homelands. At the same time, this section equally seeks to uncover how these NECB descendants integrated themselves within their new environs. I am interested, for example, in the compromises they may have made through the incorporation of distinct language speakers and in their cultural adaptations. Ultimately, I seek to glimpse some of the dynamic choices they certainly made as they set up their sociocultural institutions and strove to meet their day-to-day needs. **29**

For approximately five hundred years after the turning of the first millennium CE, communities descended from proto-Northeast-Coastal Bantu speakers settled within the areas of central-east and northeastern Tanzania as well as southeastern Kenya, an area bordered loosely by the Sabaki and Rufiji Rivers. If the linguistic and archaeological data suggestive of settlement and material culture are representative of communities that took up residence in the region, then it is likely that when NECB people arrived, distinct linguistic and cultural groups already lived in or at least made use of lands in that broad zone. Furthermore, it is with such groups, and others that later moved into the region, that NECB people coexisted and intermingled. Based on the linguistic evidence, the groups on the scene at the turn of the first **30**





































































