CHAPTER 6

A Tapestry of the Ruvu Past: An Overview to c. 1800 CE

There is no way to recapture the individual voices of Ruvu-speaking peoples who long ago lived in central-east Tanzania. But there is a way to recover the legacies that survive in the words they collectively spoke. This book is the first to bring forth a Ruvu social history using, primarily, reconstructed word histories. Within its pages the histories of the words Ruvu speakers once used are woven into accounts that highlight the ways speakers of proto-Ruvu diverged into many language communities. It also recovers details about how proto-Ruvu and speakers of Ruvu descendant languages lived within their communities in earlier times. The histories of some of those words also permit us to access facets of their speculative knowledge. Working from this tapestry of Ruvu word histories, the book argues that Ruvu people took into consideration foremost in building their communities that the cosmos was biaxial. In their views, people, animals, and the other features found on the earth's surface lived in the cosmos's temporal sphere. The other sphere comprised a world of influential spirits. In Ruvu worldviews, spirits could benefit or hinder peoples' lives and livelihoods. That precept did not determine the way Ruvu people lived, but it did underpin the rationales that legitimized the sociocultural institutions they established in their communities. **1**

This chapter is a chronological review of the thematic accounts covered in the foregoing chapters. In previous chapters, a majority of the data were presented along thematic lines because that approach preserved the integrity of the information that Ruvu-speaking consultants shared with me. Within those thematic accounts, attention was drawn to various innovations that the lexical data permitted us to discern within groups of Ruvu and other language speakers over time. Here, a comprehensive narrative outlines the broad contours of Ruvu history along a chronological framework. **2**

Azania's Rhapta and Steady Migration along Central Tanzania's Hinter-Coast, c. 200 BCE –500 CE

One early evening in December, a young man stood on a beach in the vicinity of what is now Bagamoyo, Tanzania. The air was hot and humid, but the damp sand beneath his feet tempered the discomfort it caused him. The young man was transfixed by the sprawling image that lay before him. It was his first look at the Indian Ocean. During his journey to the coast **3**

he had met people who tried to describe its enormity to him, but he now understood why they insisted that it would be unlike anything his mind's eye could envision. Was it possible to dream of an ocean without first seeing one, he wondered?

4 As dusk approached it pulled the young man away from his far-off thoughts. He observed immediately that the children, who had been playing on the beach all afternoon, had begun to exchange uneasy glances with one another. It was clear to him that they hoped that their mothers would not notice the coming darkness. But the adults were well aware of nightfall's looming presence. As the reliable evening mist began to envelope them, grown-ups huddled into groups. Wiping warm sweat from his face, the young man tried to imagine what they were discussing. After spotting the women who earlier in the day had grabbed his attention because they spoke a language he had learned while playing near his mother's side at the weekly market held in his home village, he decided to ask them what the concern was about.

5 The women watched the young man head their way. They wondered if he would introduce himself in a manner expected of a young man. When he did, they momentarily dropped their gazes toward the ground to signal to him that he could continue. He quickly asked them what everyone was concerned about. Although the women had anticipated the question, they could not resist the opportunity to laugh teasingly at his naïveté. Then they explained to him that the merchant vessels that arrive annually at their shores had been in route for nearly six months. They told him that people were nervous because the merchants typically arrived at their port in November, but this season they were exceptionally delayed. A teary-eyed woman told him that she could not bear the thought of waiting another year to see her sons. When they were sure the young man understood, the women turned away from him and began collecting their belongings.

6 As people reluctantly surrendered to nightfall they reassured one another, and especially the disappointed children, that the vessels would arrive the following day. Some of them had begun to leave the beach when it suddenly became eerily quiet. No one spoke, but they silently wondered if someone had heard ululating coming from the remote northern shore. A moment later they discerned the familiar rhythm that signaled to them that the merchants were nearing. The women immediately fell into the hypnotic cadence. The mood turned palpably festive as everyone took part in preparing the welcoming feast. Already playing on the sand again, the children smiled broadly because they knew that on that night no one would be sent to bed.

7 The preceding story is not verifiable, but if we allow for a moment of historical supposition, it is a representation indirectly substantiated by the combined data of archeology, linguistics, and surviving documents of the time. In the hinter-coast, peoples descended from at least three of Africa's four language phyla either made their permanent homes or were occasional visitors. In addition to them, peoples from Europe and Southeast Asia made their way to the

area for reasons primarily related to commercial enterprises. Those transoceanic peoples came to and from Rhapta, a metropolis located somewhere along Azania's (Tanzania's) central coast, since as early as the first half of the first century. Their arrival into and departure from Rhapta were determined by the monsoon cycles that transported their vessels in the Indian Ocean waters. Within that ebb and flow of contact, people indigenous to the African continent likely participated in those movements between Tanzania and transoceanic places.

8 The sheer presence of peoples from across the Indian Ocean added to the ethnolinguistic diversity in Rhapta and its surrounding environs. But it also added to the material options available to populations with direct and indirect connections to those areas. The objects imported in those eras included iron spears, axes, knives, small awls, and glass stones. People foreign to the continent sometimes intermarried with people living in nearby regions.[1] They were East Africa's early transoceanic immigrants. Archaeologists and linguists continue to retrieve material evidence reflective of their mixed contributions to the unfolding history of this era.

9 The movements and intermingling of distinct ethnolinguistic populations in East Africa anteceded the Rhapta era, but Rhapta's commercial activity and perceived opportunity likely made Tanzania's central coast particularly alluring to people harboring an entrepreneurial spirit in those times. Within Rhapta's environs peoples indigenous to the African continent, together with those who settled from lands across the ocean, founded communities. People who had certain skill sets surely played pivotal roles in procuring products desired by transoceanic populations and in organizing transport of those items to the coast. Among the products they contributed to the trade were ivory, rhinoceros horn, tortoise shell, and nautilus shell.[2] But people with the skills needed to meet local subsistence needs year-round were vital to sustaining Rhapta's successes. These were the people who claimed the local lands as their own.

10 Map 1: Azania Bantu, c. 200 BCE-1 CE

The early settlement areas thus far recovered by archaeologist and dated to the Rhapta era suggest that Bantu-speaking populations descended from proto-Mashariki speakers, who had lived in Africa's Great Lakes region since the early part of the last millennium BCE, likely made their way into Tanzania's central-east and southern coasts as early as the last couple of centuries BCE. Those Rhapta-era Bantu-speaking populations, whom we call Azania Bantu, spoke languages we are unable as yet to link linguistically to a subgroup of the Mashariki Bantu. However, the physical evidence that the Azania Bantu left in their wake includes material evidence supportive of their ancestral connection to Southern-Kaskazi (of the Mashariki subgroup) communities. Like their early Kaskazi ancestors, Azania-Bantu populations produced pottery styles commonly identified by archaeologists as Urewe/Lelesu/pre-Kwale wares. These styles comprise part of the Early-Iron-Age assemblage that derived

from Chifumbaze potteries that early Mashariki-speaking peoples produced in the early part of the last millennium BCE. In addition to pottery, Azania Bantu also produced iron and agriculture in their settled communities. Their adeptness in these areas also represents knowledge and skills bequeathed, at least in part, by their Mashariki ancestors. Azania Bantu living on the mainland and those who eventually occupied offshore islands would have played prominent roles in the early transoceanic trade networks that linked their communities with those adjoining other, distant parts of the Indian Ocean, but they also developed significant domestic economies that moved iron, pottery, and agricultural and marine products amongst their communities.[3]

Map 2: Azania and Upland Bantu, c. 1-200 CE **11**

In times following the BCE/CE turnover, Rhapta and its surrounding areas, from the Rufiji River to the Wami River, appear to have developed into a region where more and more people came in search of opportunities. As Rhapta commercial enterprises became more lucrative and long-lived, distinct populations of Bantu-speaking people may have joined others in the region. The archaeological evidence suggests this possibility. From about 200 CE forward it reveals that potteries made by populations distinct from those Azania Bantu produced were present. Those wares are characterized as variants of the Kwale ware recovered at Kwale, Kenya.[4] It has been argued that Kwale ware's distribution and the dates yielded for the potteries correlate well with the linguistic evidence that those were areas in which Upland-Bantu-speaking people (also of Southern Kaskazi background) lived.[5] The discovery of Kwale ware in central Tanzania and at the Kwale site in coastal Kenya and other interior sites thus suggests a physical presence of Upland-Bantu-speaking populations in those areas.[6] As in the case of Azania Bantu populations, the Upland-Bantu-speaking communities were also incorporated over the long run into communities of later-arriving Bantu-speaking populations.

Map 3: Proto-Northeast Coastal Bantu, c. 300 CE **12**

The domestic and transoceanic commercial undertakings underway at Rhapta and reaching into surrounding areas, coupled with the domestic productivity that characterized mainland and offshore communities, created a crucible of diversity in people, ideas, and material culture. Moreover, the economic networks local peoples would have brokered into and out of the interior of Africa would likely have established a regional awareness of Rhapta among peoples far into Africa's interior. People in those regions surely lived with awareness that their communities were part of a global society.[7] Among those who likely knew about Rhapta were populations of proto-Kati-Bantu-speaking people who decided to move away from their homelands in the Southern-Nyanza Basin to establish new homes in the central areas that comprised the thriving Rhapta commercial zone. Those people were the eventual speakers of proto-Northeast-Coastal Bantu. That population of speakers ushered in a spirit of change whose legacies include the extant presence of at least twenty-one spoken languages

comprising the Northeast-Coastal Bantu subgroup of languages. Proto-Northeast-Coastal Bantu speakers and their Bantu-speaking Rhapta predecessors were all, linguistically speaking, very close relatives. They shared ancestral ties with Bantu-speaking populations who comprised Southern-Kaskazi communities in the Southern-Nyanza Basin between roughly the fifth and third centuries BCE.

13 Early proto-Northeast-Coastal Bantu people set up their first homes somewhere within the stretches of coastline that reached from the Pangani River to the Ruvu River. As they moved into the region, they would have negotiated entrée amongst populations of Khoisan-speaking groups, Southern Cushites, and the Azania and Upland Bantu, all of whom had, in various configurations and at different historical moments, shared a presence in the region over an approximate five hundred-year period. When those ancestral-PNECB people arrived, they and their eventual descendants likely competed for the types of lands that would have appealed to the Bantu-speaking populations who had moved into the region in the preceding centuries. The reason is that these distinct Bantu ethnolinguistic groups would have shared commonalities in their agricultural practices and in their staple crops that each had inherited from their Mashariki and Kaskazi Bantu ancestors.

14 In addition to subsistence practices, they likely shared commonalities in sociocultural institutions and worldviews likewise inherited from Mashariki and Kaskazi forebears. But there was one important distinction among them, and it holds the key to our ability to corroborate archaeologically their emergence in the region in this era. Proto-Northeast-Coastal Bantu people were the makers of Triangular Incised Ware (Tana ware) found throughout much of the region in which their language descendants later settled. The earliest TIW/Tana site discovered thus far, at Misasa, yielded dates to the fourth century CE, in close accord with the linguistically-derived dating estimates of the period when the first PNECB-speaking people would have arrived in the region. Other sites reveal an expanding presence of TIW/Tana wares from the sixth century onward.[8] When NECB speakers introduced TIW/Tana ware, it did not displace Upland-Bantu Kwale ware. These distinct wares have been located in shared environments as late as the tenth century CE. After 500 CE, TIW/Tana varieties did, however, predominate within the region. And where TIW has been recovered, their dates have correlated well with linguistically-derived hypotheses for PNECB language divergence and settlement.[9]

15 Map 4: Northeast Coastal Bantu Language Groups, c. 500-600 CE

Proto-Northeast-Coastal Bantu speakers, as they spread out of their original settlement areas, almost immediately began to diverge into three emergent speech communities: pre-Asu, proto-Sabaki, and proto-Wami. Expanding their presence in the region, some of them set up their communities farther inland from the coast. Pre-Asu speakers made a westerly move to the Southern-Pare Mountain regions. Proto-Sabaki speakers moved north of the Pangani

River along and just inland from the coast. And proto-Wami speakers stayed near the center of their ancestral homelands in the watershed regions of the Wami and Ruvu Rivers. Amidst these dispersed areas Ma'a and Southern-Rift-Cushitic-speaking populations were variously present by 500 CE. Linguistic evidence that these diverse communities intermingled to some extent with these PNECB descendants is found in their modern language descendants' lexis.[10]

Of these earliest emergent NECB speech communities, proto-Wami underwent the most rapid secondary divergence. Within a couple of centuries, probably by the sixth century, it had already begun to differentiate into the proto-Seuta and proto-Ruvu set of communities. These particular languages and their descendants thereafter largely shaped the sociocultural milieus represented in central-east Tanzania. 16

Ruvu Roots, c. 600–900 CE

Map 5: Northeast Coastal Bantu Language Groups, c. 600 CE 17

In the period between 600 and 700 CE, proto-Ruvu-speaking people established a deep-rooted historical presence within the middle- and lower-watershed regions of the Ruvu and Wami Rivers. By that time Rhapta-era transoceanic trade had peaked, although evidence for its minimal persistence appears in the archaeological record as late as the seventh century in Kiwangwa, a town that lay west of Bagamoyo, Tanzania.[11] By the seventh century's end it had ceased. Though the impact of the cessation of regular transoceanic trade was likely palpable, by that point well-established domestic economies, subsistence strategies, and religious practices, among other institutions, guaranteed Ruvu speakers' continued existence. The evidence of their tenacity is apparent in the further growth and divergence in their language communities following Rhapta's decline, as is reflected in the linguistic record, and the material evidence accumulating in the growing archaeological record.

Map 6: Northeast Coastal Bantu Language Groups, c. 800-900 CE 18

By around the ninth and tenth centuries CE, proto-Ruvu speech communities had diverged resulting in the emergence of Kagulu, proto-West Ruvu, and proto-East Ruvu language communities. At the same time, there is indirect evidence for a fourth, proto-South Ruvu.[12] Their breakup created the first avenues through which their inherited Bantu episteme and sociocultural institutions were carried into the interior regions of central-east Tanzania. By the close of the first millennium CE, these ethnolinguistic communities covered a region that extended south of the Rufiji River, north to the southern edges of the Ngulu Mountains, and west to the edges of the Maasai steppe.

19 These early Ruvu-speaking people shared common worldviews and religious understandings. In those views, **Mulungu*, "Creator," had formed a two-sphere cosmos. One sphere was temporal and the other ethereal. For Ruvu people the ethereal realm represented a sphere of potential power held by two categories of spirit forces. One category comprised the spirits of recently departed ancestors. The other included nature spirits. In Ruvu consciousness, community success depended in large part on the advocacy of spirit forces. Spirits had final dominion over fertility of the land, female fecundity, beneficial rains, health, and more. Importantly, Ruvu people also knew that the spirits' foremost desire was for relationships with living people. In their understanding, when spirits were remembered and honored in ways that satisfied them, they bestowed blessings on the living. The manner in which Ruvu people have honored spirits has varied to suit the whims of particular spirits, but they typically have comprised a mixed offering of material goods and prayers. However, the way Ruvu peoples named their religio-ritual propitiation and reconciliation ceremonies did not vary. Since proto-Ruvu times, they have been termed **-tambiko*. The foregoing understandings were among the fundamental underpinnings of Ruvu ideological constructs, and they endured, in various refashioned forms, among all of their Ruvu descendants until recent times.

20 Additional ideas, institutions, and practices that trace to the proto-Ruvu era have also endured in modified forms among Ruvu descendants. For example, the initiation of youth into young adulthood has remained a continuous feature of their sociocultural practice. Those processes represented periods for teaching soon-to-be adults about one's history, the importance of spirit reverence, and societal responsibilities. Boys were led through initiation in groups as it suited their instructors and their communities. Girls, on the other hand, were taken through initiation individually. For girls, initiation started as soon as they began to menstruate. A girl's initiation was especially important to her lineage because her potential fertility, marked by menses, was secured through the things she learned and the approval she gained from spirit forces during her initiation. Linked to female fertility were proto-Ruvu institutions related to pregnancy and birthing. As in the initiation processes, the women of a young woman's matrilineage were among the most involved in these matters as well. They instructed and coached their lineal daughters to insure successful births.

21 Proto-Ruvu societies were matrilineal and matrifocal. In their views, the growth and survival of their matrilineal clans depended foremost on their lineal daughters' capacity to bear children, especially new daughters. Because of this, they closely monitored the girls and young women within their lineages. The institution of marriage, in particular forms practiced since early Ruvu times, provides an additional example of their vigilance vis-à-vis lineal daughters. Male suitors who had an interest in a young woman needed permission from a woman's matrilineal grandmother and her eldest uncle to marry her. Once marriage had been approved and ceremonial agreements had been undertaken, a man moved into a woman's community to work for her matrilineage. After he proved himself a good worker and he

demonstrated his ability to add to her matrilineage, which was indicated by his wife's becoming pregnant and bearing children, he could usually thereafter request permission to take his wife to a separate area where she could establish a homestead of her own. Though she may have left home, her membership in her matrilineage was sealed.

22 Ruvu women were the producers of most accoutrements of material culture in their communities. They made the TIW potteries characteristic of NECB communities.[13] Women also fed their communities; they were the primary managers of agricultural matters, and they controlled harvest yields. Furthermore, Ruvu women prepared the meals on which their families depended. It was women, too, who were the likely organizers of collective work parties used in agriculture, and perhaps homestead building, since the proto-Ruvu period.

23 In times of personal illness, widespread calamity, or when people, property, or societies were in need of protection, proto-Ruvu speakers and their descendants often turned to diviner-doctors to determine the causes of and cures for affliction. In Ruvu understanding all suffering, death included, derived from among three possible sources, environmental pathogens, sorcery, and spirits. Diviner-doctors helped to discern the origins of affliction and they also treated the symptoms of illness. But an additional aspect of their work was to provide medicines that protected Ruvu people and society against susceptibility to calamity.

24 The initial period of Ruvu expansion was the first phase of a longer process which culminated in their eventual predominance in the region. One result of their westward movements was that proto-West-Ruvu speakers began sustained intermingling with early speakers of Njombe Bantu languages who, like them, were in the throes of migrating into the region. In that period contact was substantial enough that three words belonging to proto-West-Ruvu core vocabulary (which are commonly more resistant to replacement than other kinds of lexicon) were adopted from the ancestral Njombe language.[14]

25 By the end of this period of contact and incorporation at least one proto-West-Ruvu sociopolitical transformation occurred. It involved the innovation of a social and political unit termed **ikungugo*. An **ikungugo* was an even more extended kin grouping than the clans (**-kolo*) recognized by proto-Ruvu speakers and their earlier ancestors. The conjoining of a number of clans, who claimed a relation to a common founder, formed the **ikungugo*. They were, perhaps, something of a super-clan. **Ikungugo*'s occurrence among a cluster of West Ruvu and Kagulu language descendants suggests that this institution likely developed regionally among them after the proto-Ruvu period. The fact that they developed such an institution implies that these communities made deliberate, conscientious efforts to reconfigure their relationships to each other and with the land. Politically, it was a legitimate

way to incorporate new people, like early Njombe populations, into their communities. Religiously, it was a way for them to make necessary connections between their communities and important spirit forces.

26 At the central coast toward the end of this era proto-East Ruvu communities likely experienced their first contacts with Swahili populations who were moving into the region. Swahili speakers looking to expand their trade relations with the Middle East and the interior of Africa migrated into the lands in which generations of Ruvu-speaking people had lived for more than three centuries. One piece of evidentiary data reflects a potential outcome of their early relationships. It is found in the way proto-East Ruvu speakers reinterpreted their use of the proto-Ruvu word, **mitala*. In the proto-Ruvu era, Ruvu communities had applied the term **mitala* to a particular area of a village in which men and women involved in polygynous marriages maintained a homestead. In the proto-East-Ruvu era **mitala*'s meaning was expanded. It became the term people used to name their lineal affiliation with their father's maternal line. The development of this designation is noteworthy because it reveals an emphasis on a relationship that was not previously named in Ruvu societies. The appearance of this development after periods of incipient contact between East Ruvu societies and patrilineal Swahili societies suggests that it may have borne a relationship to their contacts. It may have been, for instance, a result of intermarriage among them. But neither the shift in **mitala*'s meaning nor the innovation of **ikungugo* appears to have significantly detracted from the centrality of matrilineality in their societies.

27 The adaptations made by these early proto-Ruvu descendant societies do, however, underscore the influential nature of contacts they experienced in this era. And just as importantly, the ways these communities managed those early encounters highlight the simultaneous resilience and fluidity of ideology and sociocultural practice that Ruvu worldviews allowed. Leaning on old epistemologies that demanded groups understand their relationships to one another, they worked out ways to incorporate change without undermining the social stability and legitimacy of their community structures. Of course, those relationships were still nascent in the late first millennium CE.

Ruvu Descendants and the Settling of Culture Clusters, c. 900 –1400 CE

28 The period 900–1400 CE ushered in continuing renegotiation of ethnolinguistic relationships in central-east Tanzania. These interactions resulted in the formation of several discernable yet malleable ethnolinguistic culture clusters that involved both Ruvu language descendants and people of distinct language ancestries. Their fluid cultural milieus were not isolated

enclaves; they were microcomponents of much larger, interconnected regions. They thus ebbed and flowed as people continually renegotiated their relationships and rights, particularly within the contested spaces that comprised borderlands.

Map 7: Ruvu Peoples and Neighbors, c. 1400 CE

29

By the period's end, the proto-East Ruvu language had become Lugulu, Doe, and proto-Central-East Ruvu. West of them the proto-West Ruvu language diverged first into Gogo and proto-Sagala-Vidunda, then, by the end of the period, into Gogo, Sagala, and Vidunda. Meanwhile, Kagulu speakers remained one language community.

30 One core area of sustained contact involved Kagulu speakers. Kagulu maintained close connections with Seuta (Wami descendant) speakers who lived on their northwestern border. Also significant in Kagulu communities were the movements of ancestral Langi (Kati descendant) immigrants into Kagulu homelands. Furthermore, Kagulu maintained strong relationships with Sagala speakers with whom they shared their southern border. These deep histories are reflected in a regionally shared lexis and their shared oral historical accounts of origins.

31 Although Gogo speakers were western neighbors of Kagulu speakers, the extent of influences in that direction appear much less significant. At least one reason may account for this. Kagulu disassociation from Gogo may have transpired because in this period Gogo communities began less and less to recognize lineal inheritance along matrilineal lines. Gogo de-emphasis of matrilineal descent may have been the direct outcome of heavy incorporation of patrilineal Njombe, South-Rift-Southern-Cushitic-speaking populations. Parakuyu Maasai populations who moved into the area during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a likely additional source of patrilineal influence. The transformation of a fundamental sociocultural institution would have been something undesirable among persistently matrilineal societies, like Kagulu, because intermarriage with Gogo populations would have meant difficulties in negotiating lineal belonging and inheritance. The most disadvantageous outcome of liaisons between them would have been the loss of their daughters to patrilineal Gogo communities. Thus the tempered contact among them may have had something to do with that change.

32 South of Gogo homelands, Vidunda, Sagala, and Lugulu speech communities sustained close interactions with those speech communities descended from ancestral Njombe. Like the majority of Ruvu descendants they remained persistently matrilineal. However, the occasional adoption of core vocabulary from an Njombe-derived language, along with a good number of

words related to cooking, marriage, and midwifery, suggest that they, like Gogo communities, continued to incorporate sizeable populations of Njombe-speaking people into their communities.

Along the central-east African coast, contacts among Swahili populations with interior people were ongoing. The linguistic data indicate that a good number of Ruvu terms entered into Swahili dialects in the second millennium CE. Likewise, a fair number of Swahili terms entered into the Doe and proto-Central-East Ruvu languages. In both cases, it is often difficult to discern whether those exchanges occurred in this 900 to 1400 CE period or the one subsequent to it. The important point that can be established, however, is that mutual lexical borrowings are markers of the enduring two-way relationships that were ongoing among their speech communities. In addition to words being shared by areal transfer, we can also speculate that at least some incorporation of populations happened in both directions, that is, from Ruvu-language speakers into Swahili communities and vice versa. **33**

To the south of proto-Central-East Ruvu, South Ruvu descendants experienced continuing integration into Rufiji-Ruvuma language communities. This is inferred by word adoptions into Rufiji-Ruvuma (Kaskazi subgroup) descendant languages that only could have come via a Northeast-Coastal Bantu descendant language. Particular among the words transferred into the Rufiji-Ruvuma languages were words innovated in the proto-Wami period. What is particularly striking in the history of South Ruvu speakers is that just as West, East, and Kagulu Ruvu descendants were accommodating newcomers into their societies, so too were early Rufiji-Ruvuma communities. **34**

As Swahili merchants established themselves as part of world trading systems in this period, many of them founded towns along the length of the East African Swahili Corridor. Until the nineteenth century, those towns were usually located no more than two miles from the coastline. From those zones commodities moved in all directions.[15] While Swahili people likely had skills aside from brokering goods, their emphasis on growing their profits in transoceanic economies required that they maintain relationships with myriad communities. In the interior regions of central-east Tanzania, Ruvu peoples, among others, surely played substantive roles in procuring and moving trade items needed to support their local economies, as well as those tied to Swahili-mediated transoceanic trade networks. The interior culture clusters identified above likely developed in part due to their relationships to these entwined trade structures. **35**

Along the Swahili Corridor, hinter-coastal populations became, in some ways, chance intermediaries in the Swahili trade. The limits of space at the coast largely determined that their communities would intermingle. In the symbiotic relationships that they created, **36**

merchant-oriented communities, be they composed of Swahili, Ruvu, or Ruvu-Swahili mixes, surely depended on relationships with Doe and proto-Central-East Ruvu producers to meet their subsistence needs and more.[16]

As the era came to a close, the Swahili and East-Ruvu coastal communities living at the coast and involved in these relationship likely would have been hard to distinguish. In other words, some Ruvu people may have become Swahili-identified in language, religion, and worldview. They were one constituent of Swahili's hybrid history. Yet, in spite of the intermixing of economies, languages, and religions instigated by their continual interconnections, the majority of East Ruvu language descendants continued to identify in ways that distinguished them from Swahili society. Whether that was mandated by hegemonic Swahili powers of the time who precluded them from doing so, or it was the result of Ruvu self-determination, or some mix of these, is difficult to say absolutely. However, the evidence of their resilience is that East Ruvu descendants, like their West Ruvu and Kagulu linguistic siblings farther afield, remained committed to their unique proto-Ruvu-derived worldviews, religious expressions, institutions of marriage and initiation, medicinal practices, and, above all else, language, well into the following era. **37**

Ruvu Milieus and the Enduring Swahili Presence, c. 1400–1800 CE

In the middle centuries of the second millennium, awareness of the Swahili presence and all that it entailed had long reverberated along the coastal corridor and well into the interior of East Africa. By 1400 CE, the divergence of interior-lying Kagulu and West Ruvu descendant languages had ceased. But at the hinter-coast, East Ruvu descendants undertook two periods of successive divergence that created three additional language communities by 1500 CE, and two more by 1700 CE. These languages emerged as communities of speakers, first of proto-Central-East Ruvu, then of proto-Southeast Ruvu, who moved into the interstitial zones among the existing Ruvu languages. Their patterned movements are conspicuous in the visual story told through maps 8 and 9. Although a causal link between the divergence in East Ruvu languages and alterations of Swahili economies in this era is not known directly, there are prominent correlations that make for a tenable hypothesis. **38**

Map 8: Ruvu Peoples and Neighbors, c. 1500 CE

Map 9: Ruvu Peoples and Neighbors, c. 1700 CE

39 In the middle of the fourteenth century a bubonic plague pandemic devastated Europe and Asia, but it also had an impact on East African societies. While the effects of the plague overwhelmed trade economies everywhere, the blow in East Africa was not limited to a decline in commercial profits. There is evidence, for instance, that Tumbatu residents abandoned the city during this episode of bubonic plague. Similarly, it was also a time of noted decline and dereliction at Kilwa.[17] If suspected offshore reactions to the threat of bubonic plague provide any clues, it could be that coastal populations, too, may have responded to the same threat by moving away from vulnerable coastal areas. If this happened, the processes that led to proto-Central-East-Ruvu divergence may have been instigated, at least in part, by the threat of epidemic disease in the fourteenth century.[18]

40 Subsequent to that, proto-Southeast Ruvu diverged into Zalamo and Kutu by about 1700 CE. In this period there may have been additional external developments that motivated their movements. In the late fifteenth century, Swahili trade profits were already diminishing when Portuguese-speaking populations, like others of the time who set out in search of an inroad into spice trade and/or sources of gold bullion, further disrupted matters when they stumbled upon and then interceded in East African economies.[19] Although the Portuguese presence and undertakings were of consequence, Swahili merchants still maintained a foothold in interior and transoceanic economies. Reflecting on these developments, it could be that proto-Southeast Ruvu shifted their communities for a mixed set of reasons, including, but not limited to, the declining profits associated with Swahili trade even before the Portuguese arrival, the threat of the Portuguese presence itself, and increased incidence of kidnapping and enslavement associated with the ongoing trade networks, or because they looked to the interior for new ways to profit from the procuring of items like timber, ivory, slaves and other goods still demanded in established worldwide economies.

41 Map 9: Ruvu Peoples and Neighbors, c. 1700 CE

Motive aside, East Ruvu divergence netted four new languages over the period. This final phase of divergence increased the total of extant Ruvu languages to ten. Those Ruvu communities formed a fairly contiguous passageway through the varied central-east Tanzanian landscape. These links connected the East-Ruvu peoples with Kagulu, West Ruvu, and non-Ruvu communities as far away as the Kilombero Valley. The areas they occupied guaranteed that they would be aware, and probably involved, with the movement of trade goods and culture to and from the hinter-coast for the long run. They were for all practical purposes middlemen among middlemen vis-à-vis the Indian Ocean intercontinental economies. Their predominance, however, makes it likely that Swahili agents understood that their profits depended on the cooperation of interior populations. No matter the level of Ruvu involvement in trade matters, the cultural patterns their ancestors had established in the previous period appear to have continued.

42 The culture clusters spawned by the ancestors of other Ruvu descendents in the first half of the second millennium continued, with one exception. The postulated South-Ruvu language speakers, who had lived in the areas most probably astride and south of the Rufiji River, were fully incorporated into Rufiji-Ruvuma speech communities by the start of this era. They ceased thereafter to be a distinguishable ethnolinguistic population, although the influence they had on those languages, as we have seen, remains detectable.[20]

43 In the northwest, Gogo societies continued what, for all intents and purposes, became a cultural expectation of sustained exchange and incorporation of culturally and linguistically heterogeneous populations. The result was that they accommodated substantive alterations in their sociocultural institutions and their lexis. The changes included reorganizing their political positions of leadership and their manner of subsistence. Even in recent times, Gogo were aware of this history. And they understood it to be what made them distinct among their neighbors. In the ethnographic record and during my own fieldwork, Gogo elders have described their history as a mixed bag. And they explained that the ongoing effects of contact, inclusion, and related experiences, positive and negative, led to changes in their ways of doing things that made them different from the ways of their early ancestors. They sometimes suggested that this is why they have lacked cohesiveness since early times.[21] Gogo people indeed have held onto a good understanding of their long-ranging history.

44 Their Kagulu neighbors, in contrast, were unique among Ruvu descendant societies for different reasons. Relative to Ruvu's Gogo descendants, Kagulu appear to have been the most socioculturally conservative. They remained, for example, unflaggingly matrilineal and matrifocal into recent eras. Many recollected accounts of their histories maintain that women were the founders of their communities and, often, among the most influential religio-ritual authority figures. Their accounts of origin, too, are elaborately kept. Clan members tell their histories of earliest origins by explaining that they and their adjoining neighbors all originate from a common place in the northwest. Later, they explain, there was much immigration into their lands. In their views, as in those of their early ancestors, the first settlers of an area were its effective "owners." This is why, they explain, it is important to remember one's history. An additional aspect of their distinctiveness, as they explain it, is that they have had to maintain defensive postures from such marauding forces as Hehe, Parakuyu, and Kisonko Maasai populations.[22] A related point is that many Kagulu-speaking people have lived in mountainous regions that have served as a good buffer for cultural and physical defense. This has shaped their long-term cohesion as a single language community since they diverged from their proto-Ruvu ancestor. Their retention of much that was inherited from their proto-Ruvu ancestors remains embodied in the language they speak.

Concluding Remarks

45 The historical representations that emerge from the data illuminate many distinct developments within the central-east Tanzanian landscape and among Ruvu-speaking populations. But there is one aspect of the history that is particularly instructive. It is the undeniable level of steadfastness with which Ruvu descendants held to their ethnolinguistic identities in the face of both an ongoing Swahili presence and the absorbing of significant populations of Njombe people into their societies. While this is notable among Ruvu-speaking communities all over central-east Tanzania, nowhere is it more apparent than in the areas adjoining the Swahili Corridor. In those immediate coastal regions, East-Ruvu social and linguistic history does not tell a story of communities of hinter-coastal people enveloped by emergent or deep-rooted "Swahili Civilization" in the eras between 900 and 1800 CE. And while it does not suggest the converse, that is, that East Ruvu descendants disassociated themselves from Swahili-speaking populations and their civilization, it does provide a powerful corrective to the widely repeated historical narrative of purported Swahili cultural hegemony in those zones in the past 1,200 years.[23]

46 Although this is a first examination of Ruvu "hinterland" communities, their histories are already suggestive of the need for an alternative model for examining what Swahili presence may have meant in the eyes of people indigenous to the areas into which they moved. For too long the research focus has remained on how Swahili self-perceived and how people external from the continent—from colonial interlopers to academicians—perceived them. Among the things familiar in those history-of-identity narratives is that Swahili-Corridor merchants and urban-dwelling populations have intermittently negotiated their identities to benefit their social, religious, political, and economic positions. As Horton and Middleton explain, "identities are socially constructed and can be changed, exchanged, bought, sold and discarded. The Swahili have done all of these things at various times and in various places."[24] On this point there is agreement, but there is an important qualification. The identities that the Swahili created have been performed "in response to the observer—be they Asian or African traders, European or Arab overlords, or Western tourists."[25] Those identities were usually constructed to benefit or increase their empowerment vis-à-vis transoceanic populations and, most recently, colonial regimes on the mainland. They were not identities constructed or intended for the approval of the vast majority of populations living inland. But we can be sure that Ruvu peoples, and other communities of "hinterland" people along the corridor observed and were part of the metamorphoses of Swahili identity.

47 To begin to unravel the full complexities of the intertwined histories that emerged along the Swahili Corridor and into the interior, it is important to begin to recognize the corridor as a border milieu in which *all* people, regardless of wealth, status, and political clout, contested not just access to things but identities as well. The Swahili were not the only ethnolinguistic

group with an identity. That it seems that way is the direct result of their histories having been given disproportionate attention. As we have begun to see here, the majority of Ruvu-speaking people did not abandon their languages for Swahili in an act of language assimilation. We need only look again at the steadfast ways that even those East-Ruvu populations most closely positioned to the Swahili Corridor retained their languages of origin. This point is salient because, as we have seen throughout this book, language is a powerful embodiment of identity. While those East-Ruvu people were surely multilingual, speaking Swahili and probably additional neighboring languages, as they have been until recent times, they remained affiliated with their particular ethnolinguistic identities. Because Ruvu episteme and worldviews were anchored in *their* shared pasts and *their* shared realities, it was those histories that influenced the way Ruvu descendants constructed and reshaped their identities along the Swahili Corridor and beyond.

It remains to future research to seek to recover the nuances of the histories and relationships that transpired along the length of the narrow Swahili Corridor and the interior in early historical eras. But there should be every expectation that what will emerge from such work will reveal that, although hinter-coastal populations have for centuries been invested to some degree in what was transpiring among the trade brokered by the Swahili, just as Swahili were invested in the interior, the majority of the hinter-coastal populations remained entrenched in the milieus belonging to their homeland communities.

Notes

Note 1: Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 61; Chami, "Roman Beads from the Rufiji Delta, Tanzania," 237–41.

Note 2: Casson, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 61.

Note 3: Chami, "Roman Beads," 675–76. For an overview and map reference to the locations of the EIA/EIW-era communities within mainland Tanzania and offshore, see Chami, "The First Millennium AD on the East Coast," 232–37.

Note 4: Chami, "The Excavation at Kwale Island," 46–56; Soper, "Kwale: An Early Iron Age Site in South-Eastern Kenya," 1–17.

Note 5: Ehret, *African Classical Age*, 187–89, 191–92.

Note 6: The interpretation of the pottery presented here differs from Chami's analysis. Writing about evidence for these diverse styles in this zone he writes, "this means that the original EIW settlers on the coast were of older Urewe tradition, who after centuries of experience adopted new cultural elements to be identified as Kwale and later on as TIW tradition." Chami sees this likeness as a feature of diffused culture, but does not see them as necessarily deriving from distinct populations of Bantu-speaking people. Chami, "Excavation at Kwale," 52.

Note 7: Comaroff and Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, 23–27.

Note 8: Chami, "Excavation at Kwale," 673-77; Chami, "First Millennium AD," 232–37; Chami, "Roman Beads," 240. Chami, *The Tanzanian Coast in the First Millennium AD*, 95.

Note 9: TIW/Tana wares have been recovered from many areas along the central-east and southeastern Tanzanian coast. Its distribution is highly correlative with the postulated divergence and hypothesized positioning of NECB languages. See discussion in Chapter 2: The Nascent Northeast-Coastal-Bantu Period. The expectation is that upon further archaeological work far into the interior regions of NECB and south to the Kilombero Mountains and Rufiji-Ruvuma zones evidence of its coterminous spread will be found.

Note 10: For a discussion of Southern Cushitic words adopted into proto-Wami, see chapter 2. For other evidence of word borrowings into NECB languages in this era, see Appendix B in Ehret, *African Classical Age*.

Note 11: Chami and Msemwa, "A New Look at Culture and Trade on the Azanian Coast," 675.

Note 12: An initial four-way proto-Ruvu divergence is proposed based on the presence of proto-Ruvu word transfers into Rufiji-Ruvuma languages. See Chapter 1: Mapping Ruvu Divergence on the Tanzania Landscape.

Note 13: See Chapter 2: Archaeology of Central-East Tanzania c. 300–700 CE for a discussion of TIW in this era of Ruvu expansion.

Note 14: The words adopted into proto-Ruvu were **malenga*, for "water," **-tumbula* for "heart," and **-ganka* for "egg." Of these, the first two were proto-Njombe words, but the third reflects an indirect borrowing of an East Rift Southern Cushitic word that Njombe had previously used to replace one of their own core vocabulary words. For the discussion of this era see Chapter 2: Proto-West Ruvu Societies and Their Neighbors to 1000 CE.

Note 15: Horton and Middleton, *The Swahili: The Social Landscape*, 5, 82.

Note 16: Ibid., 200–01. Swahili oral traditions make the point that interior populations helped them resist foreign intrusion.

Note 17: Ibid., 37, 82. Horton and Middleton also propose the seventh century bubonic plague may have had effects on East-African communities and economies.

Note 18: In pre-colonial Tanzania local leaders mandated the isolation of areas where dead rats were suspected to have died from bubonic plague. As the Tumbatu and Kilwa cases suggest, there was a precedent for such responses to potential public health crises before the nineteenth century. See, for example, Juhani Koponen, "War, Famine, and Pestilence in Late Precolonial Tanzania: A Case for Heightened Mortality," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21, no. 4 (1988): 660.

Note 19: Horton and Middleton, *The Swahili: The Social Landscape*, 82.

Note 20: The recovery of the indirect evidence that led to the postulating of a South-Ruvu group was in many ways serendipitous. It came about over the course of searching the vocabularies of Rufiji-Ruvuma language descendant for evidence of areal spreading among them. It is anticipated that with future research on the Rufiji-Ruvuma and Ruvu languages more can be learned about the nuances of their relationships.

Note 21: Mnyampala, *The Gogo: History, Customs, and Traditions*, 41–44; Rigby, *Cattle and Kinship*, 14.

Note 22: Beidelman, *The Kaguru*, 15.

Note 23: Horton and Middleton, *The Swahili: The Social Landscape*, 179, 201.

Note 24: Ibid., 198, 202.

Note 25: Ibid., 198.

