



Nyimbo Yatoka Ngomani: Rise and Fall of the Swahili Coast

By Paul Goldsmith



Meru, Kenya - LATE MATURING PROBLEM CHILD

Once the real archipelago of peace in the vaunted 'island of stability,' the Coast has become Kenya's problem child. Formerly the most docile and well-mannered member of the family, although prone to indolence and performing poorly in school, the locals now appear truculent, drugged, and uppity. It is hardly surprising things turned out this way; the region has been drifting in this direction for several generations.

Several factors kept the potential for an even more volatile state of affairs in check. These include outmigration and jobs in the Middle East, the Sunni passivism of the region's traditional Islamic faith, and the non-violent quality of Coastal culture. But if the power relations of the post-Independence period worked to reinforce the prevailing status quo, it is a mistake to think that this is a permanent condition. The Coast was not always an exemplar of what one scholar referred to as 'Sunni quietism' in 1995.

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Coastal communities have for centuries resisted external domination. The later decades of the 19th century witnessed the heyday of Swahili nationalism provoked by Arab and European domination. The resistance tapered off after British cannons levelled the former independent Sultanate of Witu in 1895. Mbaruk Mazrui and his Miji-Kenda allies kept the spirit of independence alive after the turn of the century. But the die was cast, the malaise set in, and the focus of coastal affairs turned inward.

SUBLIMATING THE DRASTIC COLLAPSE OF COASTAL POWER

In many coastal towns, Beni dance competitions filled the vacuum. Thomas Ranger's book, *Dance and Politics in East Africa*, provides an important albeit often ignored chronicle of the transitional shift from Coastal political ascendancy to decline and marginalisation. The locals responded to the transfer of Coastal hegemony from Zanzibar to the British by forming clubs that adopted the trappings of power through costumes based on the uniforms of Imperial naval officers and royalty. Beni chama became established in towns across the Coast, and like other elements of Swahili culture and language, spread into the interior as far as Malawi.

The Beni phenomenon sublimated the drastic collapse of Coastal power through cultural performances that combined poetry, feasting, and other hedonistic behaviours. *Chama*, bearing names like *Kingi* and *Aronauti*, held 'dance' competitions accompanied by traditional feasts and parades. The energies that went into shaming their competitors substituted for the factional battles in the once independent towns and sultanates.

Theme and motif became the vehicle for identity; the Auronati, for example, decked themselves out in navy uniforms, and another chama in Lamu styled themselves after American cowboys. Cultural performances became proxies for real power struggles — like the internecine factional fighting that completed the decline of Pate after the death of the sultan during the early decades of the 19th century.

The standard Beni competition began with the slaughter of cattle for the mandatory pilau *karamu*, which followed musical parades through the town led by bands that had added brass instruments to the traditional complement of drums and tamboura. The events were lively and raucous affairs. The leaders of these chama waved the tails of the slaughtered cows to demonstrate the wealth lavished by their supporters. Their competitors responded by slaughtering more cows and holding bigger parties.

Beni became a Swahili variation of the potlatch of the northwest Pacific Amerindians, where villages met to feast and nobles gave away and even burnt material goods and food to shame rivals and to show they were wealthy enough to wantonly dispense with their most valuable possessions.

One friend mine described a Beni karamu he attended as a child. He and companions were served a mountain of pilau so large they could not see over the top

Such phenomena typically feed an unsustainable cycle of escalation resulting in their eventual demise. Beni was in decline by the end of World War II, but persisted in some settings — like the Lamu archipelago, where it continued into the early years of Independence.

The persistence of Beni chama in Lamu extracted a high price: Bajuni informants report that most of the stone buildings in places like Siyu and Faza were cannibalized and the valuable coral blocks sold off as building materials to fund Beni. This and outmigration had reduced these former seats of power and prosperity to backwater villages by the 1960s.

One friend mine described a Beni *karamu* he attended as a child. He and companions were served a mountain of pilau so large they could not see over the top; he recalls so many cattle were slaughtered for their tales a number of unused carcasses were left to rot on the Lamu waterfront. Beni chama ceased to exist soon after this crescendo — but only to be replaced by football clubs that kept the fires of internal factional competition burning, albeit with much lower expenditure.

Beni-style bands still exist and typically re-emerge during political campaigns. If you visit Fort Jesus today, you may see a tour guide decked out Auronati-style in navy whites. A Beni chama from Tanzania popped up in Lamu once during the late 1980s, precipitating a circus atmosphere as the townsfolk turned out to join their afternoon processions of music and bawdy lyrics:

Nataka ndogo ndogo, chipai, chipai!

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While many disapproved of the lewd choruses ‘I want a sweet young girl — right now, right now!’ and libertine behaviours they subsumed, this did not prevent them from turning out to dance behind the Beni to the cadence of rat-a-tat-tat snare drums and blaring trumpets.

As one anthropologist observed in a 1995 journal article, Swahili ngoma events function to ‘stake claims to higher positions on the social ladder, negotiate difference, create socioeconomic security networks, establish and mark group identity.’

NO PLAN, AND NO REALISTIC ALTERNATIVE

This brings us to the Swahili aphorism, *nyimbo yatoka ngomani*, or, ‘The song will come out of the rhythm of the drums.’ This can be glossed as ‘the plan will emerge from the mix of events.’ It is also another way of saying there is no plan — which was the reality of affairs during colonialism and after the Coast Peoples Party’s attempt to secure Coastal independence during the run-up to Independence failed. The Coast was content to drift, and there was in fact no realistic alternative to acquiescence.

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The 1962 Carter Commission’s recommendations to provide a measure of autonomy for Kenya’s Coast featured in the Memorandum of Understanding that ‘legalised’ the Coastal Strip’s transfer from the Sultanate of Zanzibar. The measures, including a special land board, local representation in the civil service, and protections for human rights, were subsequently ignored, except for the retention of the Kadhi’s Court — which came under control of the new state and has done little to protect Muslim rights as a consequence.

The Coast came to be governed as a conquered people, with diminished local control over their resources and economy. This helps explain why the Coast’s sometimes frivolous and often destructive predilection for duality and disunity reappeared as the dominant meme of post-Independence politics. Parliamentary campaigns often displayed the same polarising dynamic of the Beni competitions. Before long, the fractious nature of post-Uhuru Coastal politics led President Jomo Kenyatta to elevate the provincial administration above local councils.

Around the same time, the president parlayed the Swahili chant of *Hallambee*, used to exhort the men pulling on ropes to launch boats - rolling off Mzee Kenyatta’s tongue as *harambee* - into the

policy of community self-help. Among other things, *harambee* forced politicians to contribute to community projects. Schools were built, clinics established, and bright students were sponsored to pursue higher degrees abroad, entire villages escorting their brightest sons to the airport.

The reverse principle prevailed on the Coast. On Pate Island, a community project to connect the two towns separated by the tide with a footbridge provoked a series of violent clashes. In Mombasa, one long serving MP actually charged his constituents when they came to him for assistance. Parliamentarians served as agents of the patrimonial *status quo*, while the alienation of Coastal land by state elites and upcountry settlers progressed unopposed.

President Nyerere adopted another Swahili term, *Ujamaa*, to identify Tanzania's African socialism. But like *harambee*, the concept enjoyed no real currency on the Swahili Coast. Rather, the Coastal intelligentsia used to lampoon Tanzania's 'visionary' leadership by referring to Nyerere as 'Musa.' Unfortunately, no Moses along the lines of William Ntimana or Francis Polisi Lotodo, who aggressively championed the cause of their Masaai and Pokot communities, emerged to lead the Coastals out of the wilderness.

Except for a brief spurt of activism over the proposed Islamic Party of Kenya, their counterparts on the Coast continued to be the compliant and tame wards of the independent state. The pliant quality of their politicians reinforced the common perception of Coastal Kenyans as supine and hedonistically inclined complainers.

Then the music stopped.

BROWN SUGAR, HOW COME YOU TASTE SO GOOD?

Insofar as the erstwhile Coast Province is Kenya's most popular open house, consistent with the region's tradition of interactive integration, and the indigenous inhabitants have proved to be tolerant hosts. The co-evolutionary cultural sensibilities evident in the region's appeal to foreign tourists and local transplants alike, however, are atrophying under the accumulating stress and displacement. The spreading anomie arising in its place is feeding issues, like drug abuse and radicalisation, afflicting the Coast's millennial generation.

In 1983, a clutch of wealthy Italian pleasure seekers vacationing in Shela introduced heroin to the quasi-Rastafarians supplying them with marijuana from Mombasa. They did not know it was addictive when they began sharing the 'brown sugar' with their friends. Before long, an alleyway in Makadara, two hundred metres away from Mombasa's Central Police station, became the central distribution point. I went there to visit an old friend in 1985 — and was introduced to a 'tea merchant' from Malaysia.

The number of acquaintances and friends who succumbed to the drug increased exponentially over the next several years, and then plateaued. The first generation of addicts confined themselves to smoking raw heroin; many of them were able to shake the habit. The scourge was a self-inflicted problem in the beginning, a development not inconsistent with the opiated political culture discussed above.

The users and dealers who followed them, however, unleashed a major epidemic. Other players moved in. Mombasa became a centre for transshipment of narcotics, a node in a much larger criminal network. It appeared this was no longer a strictly Coastal issue. In 2014, a dhow captured on the high seas with a tonne of heroin on board was towed out to the ocean and blown up. The demolition was done in direct violation of a court order, and Kenya's head of state witnessed the event.

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Local dealers flushed out by community activists, are routinely arrested only to be released in broad daylight. This has been going on for years. Although some real progress in curbing the menace may be occurring, it is hardly surprising that many view the latest round of drug busts and arrests as one act in the political circus preceding the elections later this year. In any event, in a 2016 coastal survey, entitled *Perceptions of County Governance*, the number of Mombasa respondents citing drug abuse as the area's greatest problem surpassed the numbers for unemployment and corruption combined.

The radicalisation that began to manifest around the same time the drug problem surfaced represents a major disconnect with the region's Islamic traditions. The advocates of jihad ignore the region's formal ulama (Islamic scholars) and look to more activist theological sources to fight the rot. The resulting violence is a symptom, and not the source of shifting religious orientations.

HEAVY HANDED SECURITISATION

Radicalisation is an amorphous concept that subsumes a kaleidoscope of factors and unlimited individual combinations. By definition it is highly context dependent, and a product of social conditions, psychological predilections, and political forces. Although sometimes a precursor to terrorism, not all terrorists are radicalised, and many radicals are not violent. This is why failure to discriminate among the complex drivers of the phenomenon in Kenya qualifies some policy makers and their administrative counterparts as part of the problem.

When a Beni-style parliamentary campaign overheated in 1980, the district commissioner marched the GSU through Lamu town. For three days, this harbinger of things to come scared the bejesus out of the townspeople. Such heavy-handed approaches to securitisation are now standard procedure.

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After the terrorist attacks in Paris, a multinational dragnet captured 10 suspects. When a bank guard outside the Gulf Bank African Bondeni branch office was killed in a drive-by shooting, witnesses identified the perpetrator as Shoshi, a well-known criminal responsible for several other 'terrorist' attacks. Even so, an entire neighbourhood was rounded up and incarcerated. Police dragged my wife's son-in-law and his twelve year-old son from his fourth story flat and beat him severely before throwing him and other victims into the awaiting lorry.

Lamu has never been home to radical mosques or preachers. Ironically, the County has become an epicentre in Kenya's own long war against terror—even though almost all the actors come from outside the Swahili *umma*. The leader of the Al Shabaab unit who attacked Mpeketoni in 2014, for example, was identified as Ismael Kamau, several of his merry men were also Gikuyu, two other foot soldiers came from Germany and the UK, and many other Shabaab fighters are upcountry converts.

Terrorism is more a Kenyan problem than a Muslim issue. The government demonstrated as much when it claimed the attack was not the work of Al Shabaab, and instead arrested the Lamu County Governor, Issa Timamy. He was arrested again with his entourage *en route* to a meeting with the

president in Nairobi after his release. Yet despite the punitive curfew that brought the local economy to a halt, the County Perceptions survey data showed that only 18 per cent of the Lamu respondents listed insecurity as the County's biggest problem.

Where it is difficult to control drug abuse and radical behaviours through policing, building support within communities serves the double objective of prevention while promoting integration. Few Kenyans will dispute this. But responses to Coastal problems all too often repeat flawed approaches of the past due to the influence of distorted media reports and other sources of fake news.

Kenya's reaction to the Mombasa Republican Council is a prime exhibit. The social and political movement, a product of the Coastal sensibilities noted above, was committed to using legal advocacy and other non-violent methods to achieve 'Coastal redemption.' The movement's leaders have systematically eschewed violent methods. The MRC was nevertheless demonised by the press, misrepresented by the provincial administration, and violently repressed. Even after being legalised by Kenya's Supreme Court, the government continued to harass its leaders and drive the movement underground with numerous and sundry charges, like being in possession of *Pwani si Kenya* T-shirts.

The popularity of the MRC, undiminished despite its inactivity, does not contradict Coastarian communities' faith in the new constitution as reflected in the *Perceptions of County Governance* study. Unfortunately, the government has been rolling back many of its key provisions, through policies like the extra-constitutional revival of the former Provincial Administration through the creation of a post for the 'Coastal Commissioner.'

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The last question in the survey of three Coastal counties asked: 'Do you think the new Constitution is being implemented and enforced a) on the national level; and, b) on the county level?' Sixty eight per cent of the sample said no for the national level, and sixty two per cent for the counties.

DEVOLUTION WILL PRODUCE RESULTS OVER TIME

It is interesting that the feedback from our Coastal study were otherwise more positive than the general profile elicited by the recent National Constitutional Socioeconomic Audit,^[1] a study designed to assess the 'Direction of Things in the Country.' This mirrors the generally positive view that devolution will produce results over time.

But when it came to political leadership, the respondents on the coast ranked their Governors, Senators, MPs, and County Assemblies much lower than the cross-section of Kenyans featuring in the national sample. Civil society organisations, in contrast, received much higher marks than elected leaders, many hailing their contribution to peace, justice, and local welfare.

This backdrop provides the larger context of Governor Hassan Joho's triumphant Beni-style parade through Mombasa following his early March return from Washington. The MRC generated a similar circus-type atmosphere during its heyday, and the jubilant crowds are not indicative that a similar awakening is underway. Rather, waving symbolic cattle tails to mark the Governor's vendetta with the Jubilee government will do little to counter the noxious mix of historical grievances, poor leadership, and state impunity underpinning the Coastal conundrum.

As for the state's role in this trope, it is still *nyimbo yatoka ngomani*, but draw your own conclusions.

[1] SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC AUDIT OF THE KENYA 2010 CONSTITUTION: Data management processes and select findings. Office of the Auditor General, *Presentation to Working Group 6th January 2016*.

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