

Infrastructural Attachments: Technologies, Mobility, and the Tensions of Home in Colonial and
Postcolonial Kenya

by

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Abstract

At the heart of this dissertation sits a question: why have access to infrastructures and services emerged as key metrics by which people evaluate and debate the meaning of social and political belonging in contemporary Kenya? Part of the answer, I argue, lies in the long and entangled history of marketization and state-formation in this corner of Eastern Africa. The tensions between the public and the private, the state and the corporation, were the basis of early infrastructural projects undertaken by the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) under the dual mandate of “commerce and civilisation.” This marriage, I argue, formed the durable foundations of the austere state. Indeed, the tension between private capital and the commonweal did not end with the formalization of colonial rule, but critically shaped the infrastructural landscape of both the Kenya colony and later the postcolonial state. In understanding these dynamics, this dissertation addresses three infrastructures ‘in the making’—roads in the interwar period, radio broadcasting in the postwar period, and services offered by Safaricom, Kenya’s wildly successful communications company, in the present.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, I explore how the state and Kenya’s various communities have negotiated the technopolitics of infrastructures enacted under durable conditions of austerity. As I argue, public austerity over the longer term has repeatedly undermined infrastructures’ purported status as public goods to which all should have access. Specifically, conditions of austerity not only guided the distribution of infrastructures and services, but critically shaped the conditions of infrastructural work.

Considering infrastructures as multiply authored cultural and material objects, this dissertation pursues two lines of inquiry. First, I explore the ways in which designers and administrators imagined how infrastructures could materialize new economic, political, and social orders. Second, I trace the unforeseen ways that Kenya’s multiple publics, including ordinary and extraordinary experts, reshaped infrastructural networks in staking out the domain of the political.

Introduction

The din of an amplified voice joined the rumblings of traffic as I left the Kenya National Archives (KNA) one afternoon in September 2014. There was nothing particularly unusual about this. Everyday spectacles are a common occurrence at this spot where daily activity takes place under the watchful eye of Tom Mboya—Kenyan trade unionist and, in the end, vocal advocate of development along capitalist lines in the independence period, who was assassinated on Government Road in 1969. It is his imposing statue that dominates this site, one of the few open spaces in Nairobi, Kenya's bustling capital city.

While in theory a public space, not all are welcome here. On many occasions, I had seen market women's produce thrown onto the street by *kanjo*, the feared City County Council Askaris who routinely beat up, stab, extort, and steal the wares of the hawkers for whom Nairobi's sidewalks and streets are their places of business. But they routinely return, joining street preachers and purveyors of herbal concoctions of various kinds, some guaranteeing weight loss, others the miraculous accumulation of wealth. Those who are allowed to stay, it is widely acknowledged, pay for the privilege. And there is always a crowd. Office workers lunch here, joining Nairobi's un- and under-employed who occupy this space during the day as they engage in the work of "killing time," the Kenyan shorthand for the labor of making unfilled time productive absent waged work. Sitting on the concrete benches that divide the sidewalk from the road, these people and other passers-by are the unintentional audiences of the daily 'entrepreneurs' that make this space their stage.

On this day, a man with a small loudspeaker and generator stood in the center of a large, slightly disinterested crowd of onlookers. As I approached the group, it became clear that he was collecting signatures in support of a referendum. Proposed by the main opposition, the Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD), and headed off by Raila Odinga, the referendum called for the abrogation of the newly written constitution. I joined the crowd and listened as the man outlined the "corruption" of the current administration. He spoke emphatically: "Today," he said,

“the biggest bank in Kenya is M-Shwari. One might even think it is the national bank. It doesn’t matter if you’re with Equity,” he continued, “they are the same. Mark my words, in five years there will be only one bank. Like the Monarchy, they want to control all the money.”

He did not stop with outlining the current administration’s supposed monopoly over the financial sector. “What about the media,” he asked. “K24, Citizen...KBC [Kenya Broadcasting Corporation], these are all coming to be one. You buy *The Nation*, you buy *The Standard*, and what does it matter? They are all the same. They want to control all the information. Like the Monarchy, it is all one man, representing only one tribe.” If the speaker was soliciting the crowd for signatures, this was also a money-making venture. On offer that day was politics in a digital register in the form of a DVD for purchase. Its title: “The Uhuru Monarchy.”¹

What are we to make of the claims of this political preacher? Taken together, these accusations were tantamount to claiming that the presidency of Uhuru Kenyatta holds a *de facto* monopoly over the means of communication and the means of exchange, as well as the infrastructures undergirding them. This monopoly, the street preacher argued, benefited “only one tribe,” thereby excluding the rest of the Kenyan population. And yet none of the entities he listed are, formally, state controlled.

K24 and Citizen are but two of the myriad television networks that emerged following the liberalization of the media, which came on the heels of international pressures to open up the country’s political and economic spheres in 1990s. KBC, for its part, began its life as Kenya Broadcasting Services (KBS). In 1964 it was rebranded the Voice of Kenya (VoK) and was largely held to operate as the mouthpiece for the government of first, Jomo Kenyatta, and later, Daniel arap Moi. In 1989, the entity became KBC, a parastatal supposedly no longer beholden to State House, though as the street preacher knew, this was widely disputed.

M-Shwari, for its part, is a savings service offered by communications giant Safaricom. Safaricom began its storied life as a state entity—Kenya Posts and Telecommunications Corporation. In 1998 it became a parastatal, partially held by the government of Kenya “in trust” for the Kenyan people. In 1999, Britain’s Vodafone became 40 percent shareholder, with the government retaining shares. In 2008, the company went public. Safaricom, in other words, is a

¹ Fieldnotes, 9 September 2014.

publicly traded multinational corporation, whose management is appointed by Britain's Vodafone. On the face of things these entities are decidedly *not* state-held monopolies.

This is not the narrative of neoliberalism we are primed to expect. What the preacher offered that day was not a story of the increasing withdrawal of the state, with the 'public good' left to the whims of the market. Nor was it a story of undue corporate interest in politics, *per se*. Instead, the preacher offered listeners a story of the state intervening in the market, of the state directing the corporation. Embedded in these critiques was a series of infrastructural tales that pivoted on this boundary crossing, highlighting how the blurred lines between the public and the private, the state and the corporation, had led to an abrogation of the social good, generically conceived.

The chapters to follow explore the entangled infrastructural histories that help us understand why it is that, in Kenya today, access to infrastructures and services—core materializations of what people refer to as “development”—is a key metric by which people evaluate and debate the meaning of social and political belonging. As I argue, contemporary infrastructural politics tap into durable tensions regarding how the shifting balance between marketization and state-formation has shaped the infrastructural landscape of Kenya, in the process delimiting the shifting topography of social and political inclusion and exclusion.

But access to infrastructures, and their technologies and markets, do not simply frame popular experiences of citizenship and its limits. Discussions about infrastructures and their entailments act as an occasion for people to debate the appropriate boundaries of the ethnos, argue over the merits and moralities of new forms of accumulation, and engage in battles regarding the metrics and means of social maturation. It is the task of the chapters to follow to explain these dynamics.

A key concept I develop over the course of the dissertation is “infrastructural attachments.” I use this analytic to explore how various constituencies have mobilized infrastructures and their technologies to delimit and expand the scales at which individuals and groups are able to imagine their pasts, consider their presents, and devise possible futures. I conceive of infrastructural attachments as the tethers—material and conceptual—that bind people to scale, people to things, and people to people. But attachments are not only about warm and fuzzy feelings. Sometimes attachments are coercive, at other times they are sought out.

Sometimes they are about severing relationships with some people, some places, some things, some scales, in order to secure, preserve, and extend others. This makes infrastructures and their attachments—real or imagined—something worth fighting over. The infrastructural tales that I narrate in the pages to follow, then, are stories which highlight the tensions of home.

In the run up to the 2013 election Uhuru Kenyatta had promised a new “digital” era of market-driven and transparent “development.” The opposition argued that the “digital” was a mere veneer, obscuring durable relations of patronage that are widely held to be the animus for “corruption.” Indeed, surface appearances are popularly held to obscure relations of intimacy between the state and private capital. These attachments, people argue, attenuate relations between citizens and the state. In making his case, the street preacher worked to highlight the deleterious effects of these entanglements.

If on one level the “digital” has failed, though, discursively it has been a wild success. Sometimes it operates as a stand in for “development.” At other times, by contrast against its other, the “analog,” it marks the distance between a new and forward looking generation, and the outmoded “analog” generation of elders of which Odinga is sometimes assumed to be a part. In other instances, it is more partisan, distinguishing Odinga from Kenyatta, the opposition from the governing party. In other instances, still, people mobilize the digital in a bid to demonstrate their worldliness—their connections to global elsewhere evidenced by their use of smart phones, Facebook, and WhatsApp.

Whether as metonym or metaphor, the discourse of the “digital” is, in other words, both generic and particular, at once self-consciously global and irreducibly local. Indeed, in mobilizing the “digital” in his bid for the presidency, Kenyatta had conjured up these dual frames. Not only did Kenyatta hope to build on the miraculous ‘success’ of digital financial services, for which Safaricom—a multi-national corporation—is largely held to be responsible. But Kenyatta also hoped that by mobilizing the digital he could tap into the widely held perception that the success of Safaricom is due to its “peculiarly” Kenyan character. Kenyatta is not alone in making this argument. Indeed, these twin legacies have prompted foreign observers and techno-enthusiasts to brand Kenya the continent’s “Silicon Savannah”—a

moniker that grafts national icons to global trends.² This blurring between the ‘global’ and the ‘local,’ the private and the public, the corporation and the state placed Safaricom at the center of politics in 2014. These contemporary dynamics, however, build on longer-term trends.

As this dissertation argues, since the earliest days of the British presence in the region, striking a balance between capital, state formation, and the ‘public good’ has proven to be difficult for a state whose origins were corporate in character. In 1888, the Crown granted a Royal Charter to the Imperial British East Africa (IBEA) Company. In so doing, the Crown sought to outsource the risk and cost of administering the region by enrolling private capital to enact the dual goals of “commerce and civilisation.”

The IBEA was, then, a complex entity; neither ‘private’ nor ‘public,’ the IBEA was an “amphibian” legal form (Ciepley 2013). These early entanglements between private capital and governance, I argue, formed the foundations of the austere state in Kenya. And this doubling of the private and the public quickly generated contradictions. While corporations, such as the IBEA, were responsible to sovereigns, they were not responsible to the public itself, and certainly not to the workers whose labor secured infrastructures as ‘public goods.’ In Eastern Africa, as I show, this contradictory vision of the public was compounded by the highly stratified racial and economic order that guided colonial administrative practices and shaped everyday life.

In chapter 1, I explore this early history to demonstrate that private capital has historically underwritten the ostensible public good. I argue that this blurring is not an aberration, but was constitutive of colonial statecraft and the contradictions it produced. The effects of these contradictions were not abstract. Arguments over infrastructural access, bifurcated as they were along the lines of race and ethnicity, became key sites where conflicts between various colonial constituencies and the state played out. Unraveling this early history is critical to the longer-form argument of the dissertation. Understanding the austere origins of the state clarifies the contradictory place of the public at the heart of visions of infrastructures as “common goods.” In so doing, it enables us to situate the conflicted place of the entities lambasted on the Nairobi street, such as Safaricom, *not* as aberrations but as colonial inheritances.

² David Smith, “Kenya Building a Digital Future in Africa’s Silicon Savannah,” *The Guardian*, 30 October 2012. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/30/kenya-silicon-savannah-digital-technology>

People's perceptions of the parameters of social exclusion have, of course, shifted over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the colonial period both access to infrastructures and the conditions of infrastructural work were critically shaped by conditions of austerity, on the one hand, and the racial hierarchies and "ethnic" topographies that structured the Kenya colony, on the other. Since independence, conditions of austerity have continued to ensure that people's experiences of infrastructures as 'public goods' reflects a bifurcated vision of the public; however, ethnicity and class have largely supplanted race as being the primary frameworks through which people interpret infrastructural exclusion.

The crowd outside of the KNA drew on this more recent history as they interpreted the words of the political preacher. These listeners drew on their reservoirs of experience of a technopolitics filtered through the lens of ethnicity, and shaped less by technological interventions than by their absence. Kenyatta is not only the son of the first president and thus heir to the seat of power—heir to the "Monarchy," as it were—but he is also Kikuyu. Those from Central Kenya, so popular wisdom goes, have gained access to infrastructures and services before, and often to the exclusion of, other ethno-linguistic groups that call Kenya home.

In the lead-up to independence, minority linguistic groups had called for a federated state in a bid to protect *both* against uneven political representation and the uneven provisioning of services that are widely held to be the result. Operating under the shorthand of *Majimboism*, this vision advocated for the financial and political autonomy of the regions. KANU, the party that many see as being the forbearer of Jubilee, by contrast, had advocated for a strong centralized state. Under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta, KANU had won the day. In the past, Luo constituencies, of which Odinga is a representative, had joined Kikuyu politicians in advocating for centralization. In the years since independence, the position of this constituency has, evidently, changed.

This longer-term politics of infrastructural exclusion shaped a central reform spelled out in the 2010 Constitution: Devolution. Devolution promised a wholesale restructuring of the state, with both resource allocation and decisions surrounding "development" moving from the center of administrative power to the county. Advocates argued that this scalar reconfiguration could address concerns over the unequal allocation of resources, services, and infrastructures.

At the national scale, then, discussions of relative "development," of infrastructures, of service delivery are filtered through long-standing experiences of "ethnoregional patterns

of stratification” (Apter 2005: 37). And with variation, this sentiment is popularly held. When I traveled to Kisumu, in Kenya’s west, and the region from which Odinga hails, a colleague and I chatted with our waiter in one of the many slightly run-down hotels in the city. Ochieng was born in the area and, he told us, he supported the push for a referendum. From his vantage point, Devolution was the only way to level out historical inequalities enabled by lumpy access to infrastructures and services. If Odinga were in power, he told us, he would usher in a new era for the region, an era wherein western Kenya would receive “some of the ‘developments’ visible elsewhere.”³ He offered an example: “People from this side of the country struggle to get bank loans.”

By contrast to Odinga, though, Ochieng likes M-Shwari and Safaricom, he “entrusts them.”⁴ For Ochieng the algorithmic regimes that guide decision-making surrounding the allocation of these small loans is leveling. Safaricom, unlike national banks, discriminates on the basis of objective metrics. This Ochieng contrasted against the partisan metrics of ethnicity and region that guide the decision making of brick-and-mortar banks. Despite being from “this side of the country” Ochieng, though, self-identifies as “digital.” Odinga, by contrast, Ochieng positioned as being unequivocally “analog.” The “digital” does not simply break down along lines of ethnicity or region, then, but can mark attenuated relationships framed by generation as well.

The uptake of the “digital” in such varied settings relies upon people’s ability to incorporate it into polyvalent projects of aspiration and valuation and yet, evidently, these are not always in accordance. In the run-up to the election, Jubilee had claimed that the “digital”—and the infrastructures that bear its name—was capable of enacting one scale: ‘the nation.’ Its opponents, by contrast, claimed that the ruling party was using the rhetoric of digital infrastructures to secure relations with foreign capital—‘the global’—in a bid to shore up a parochial project framed in ethnic terms. Ochieng, for his part, saw infrastructures being enrolled by various ‘Others’ from the center of the country as a means of impeding his own aspirations as

³ Fieldnotes, 5 June 2015.

⁴ For the significance of the concept of “entrustment” in this region, of which much more could be said, see Parker Shipton, *The Nature of Entrustment: Intimacy, Exchange and the Sacred in Africa*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007)

an entrepreneur. In another frame, still, young men like Ochieng marshal their access to digital infrastructures and technologies in a bid to claim their participation in globally circulating trends, technologies, and aesthetics. On occasion, as young people forge connections with global elsewhere, the rhetoric of the “digital” is transformed into a terrain where generational politics play out.

As this suggests, access to infrastructures, and their technologies and markets, do not simply frame popular experiences of citizenship and its limits. Instead, and as I argue, discussions about infrastructures and their entailments have acted as occasions where people debated the appropriate parameters of community, or argued over the effects of accumulation, or wrangled over the means of social maturation. In Kenya, infrastructures—and the conversations that assemble around them—are not neutral, nor are they banal. Both discursively and as material networks, infrastructures have been politically charged cultural objects.

At the heart of this project, then, sits a question. How has it come to pass that access to infrastructures and their markets have emerged as key frame through which people evaluate and debate the meaning of social and political inclusion, both in negotiating their relationships with the state, *and* in negotiating relationships at the scale of community and household? To understand these histories and their contemporary reverberations, this dissertation addresses three infrastructures ‘in the making’—roads from the late nineteenth century through the interwar period, radio broadcasting in the postwar period through the 1950s, and services offered by Safaricom from the corporation's birth in the 1990s to the present.

I track how various groups have tried to enroll infrastructures as scale-making technologies—that is, networks capable of enacting or foreclosing the scales within which people are able to consider their pasts, reckon with their presents, and imagine possible futures. Indeed, as I show, a heterodox group of actors felt themselves to have a stake in new infrastructural networks and the forms of circulation with which they were associated: administrators and missionaries, “men on the spot” and metropolitan experts, market-makers and shareholders, the landed elite and mobile entrepreneurs, cultural patriots and social juniors all made their opinions known. If these infrastructural tales are stories about the labor of state-building (Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 6) and market-making (Chapters 1, 4, 6), as I show, they are also stories about claims for inclusion within the infrastructural state (Chapters 2, 4, 6), and domestic conflicts over masculinity and social adulthood (Chapters 1, 2, 5, 7). To capture these dynamics

in the pages that follow I pursue two contiguous lines of inquiry. First, I explore how designers and administrators imagined how infrastructures could materialize new economic and political orders. Second, I track the unforeseen ways that Kenya's multiple publics, and ordinary and extraordinary experts, mobilized infrastructural networks in staking out the domain of the political. Focusing on the competitive work of scale-making between and across these sites clarifies why infrastructures have repeatedly emerged as the platforms where moral tensions and anxious politics have played out.

A word on scale. I use scale in two distinct ways in the pages to follow. First, the historical actors that people these pages were engaged in explicit projects of scale-making (and unmaking), projects in which they imagined infrastructures could play a central role. While these actors did not invoke the language of scale per se in staking out their positions, the synonyms that they used were suggestive of their scalar aspirations. Radio enthusiasts in the 1930s hoped to use radio to shake people out of their supposed "parochialism" and enact a regional way of being. In the same period, local administrators spoke of the need to "tropicalise" broadcasting technologies such that they would 'work' in the Kenya colony. Today, Safaricom expends a good deal of energy reformulating globally circulating technologies in a bid to make them "peculiarly" Kenyan. In each instance, these aspirations have turned on a dialectical vision of the relationship between technology and society, a vision premised on the conviction that as technologies were rescaled they could, in turn, reconfigure and rescale people's subjectivities.

Second, I self-consciously think across scales, conjoining an exploration of the large-scale technopolitical aspirations of states and corporations, with an exploration of the quotidian and everyday technopolitics of infrastructures (von Schnitzler 2016), and the moral arguments they engendered (Larkin 2008; Peterson 2012; White 2000). Scale in this second usage is both a methodological commitment, and an analytic stance. I follow Antina von Schnitzler and Gabrielle Hecht here in arguing that infrastructures are both sites where scale-making labors were enacted and contested, and are themselves "inter-scalar vehicles" (Hecht forthcoming; von Schnitzler 2016). Put differently, because people mobilized infrastructures in cross-cutting projects of scale-making infrastructures themselves act as a vantage point from which to track emergent conflicts over the parameters of social, political, and economic attachments. Holding these histories together is essential to understanding why infrastructures in Kenya, far from being

the invisible and unremarked background of social life (Edwards 2003), have emerged as fraught cultural and material objects, contested and lumpy domains of disputation.

In broad strokes, in the chapters to follow I demonstrate that since the earliest days of the British presence in the region, the state has mobilized infrastructural networks and their technological kin to reconfigure the scales of social, political, and economic inclusion. Since the 1890s and through to the present, these aspirations have been premised on a durable faith in the transformative capacity of technological things. Kenya's unique material environment, in tandem with durable conditions of *austerity*, required the state and designers to mobilize a variety of *prosthetics* to enact new infrastructural networks: private capital, consumer markets, and the ordinary and extraordinary expertise of Kenyans. These entanglements have critically shaped infrastructural politics in two ways. First, infrastructural networks in Kenya have concurrently been wrapped up in the project of state-building and market-making. These twin mandates have often worked at cross-purposes, not only undermining infrastructures' purported functions as public goods, but also confounding the technopolitical aspirations of the state. Second, as African knowledge workers and experts, as well as market-makers and users, leveraged their prosthetic positions within infrastructural systems, they transformed the networks themselves as well as the types of scalar politics and types of political claims-making for which they came to stand.

As this suggests, the stories that I offer today are not simply stories about the material networks of infrastructures themselves. Instead, I use an exploration of infrastructures 'in the making,' and the discussions, disputations, and practices that they elicited and enabled, to tell new stories about the changing relations among capital, state formation, and notions of belonging; to locate new histories of expertise and skill; to gain purchase on the durable relationship between technologies, the politics of gender and generation, and the tensions of home; and to explore the long-term continuities in “developmentalist” thinking, and how people have reframed “development” through vernacular notions of individual and collective transformation (Ferguson 2013; Englund 2011; Karp 2002). In moving across these scales, infrastructures emerge as “multiply authored” cultural and material objects (Welker 2014: 4).

Infrastructures as a Lens on the History of Eastern Africa

Scholars have long noted that infrastructures are one means by which states materialize their power over space and over people (Headrick 1981). In this way, infrastructures, such as the postal system, electricity grids, and hydraulic networks are key sites where relations between states and subjects are materialized. But infrastructures are also critical networks of circulation that are essential to the creation of new markets (Mitchell 2002). Exploring these histories 'in the making,' scholars of technology have elucidated the contentious social and political pasts embedded in large-scale technological systems (Hughes 1993, Mukerji 2009). Once technological networks are stabilized, however, they disappear from experiential—and often analytic—purview.

In Kenya, infrastructural politics have been shaped by somewhat more complex, and specifically colonial, genealogical and material inheritances. As elsewhere in the colonial world, early infrastructures were wrapped up in histories of violence and extraction undertaken under the mantle of “civilisation and commerce” (Adas 1989; Freed 2010; Masquelier 2002). Kenya’s material networks did not, then, mediate relations between citizens and the state, but between colonial subjects and the state. Indeed, for an administration that was thin on the ground infrastructural networks, while incomplete, joined taxation as key forms through which people experienced the colonial state’s interventions into their everyday lives. And yet people in the past did not experience state networks in terms of the generic colonial subject that theoretically sat at the heart of the colonial project. Nor in the present do people experience these networks in terms of the unmarked political subject that sits at the heart of liberal democracy.

Instead, Kenya’s infrastructural politics have been shaped by colonial administrative practices that produced a divisible public. Specifically, people’s experiences of infrastructures—both as infrastructural workers and as users—have been shaped by the racialized hierarchies and ethnic categories that have structured social, political, and economic inclusion and exclusion in Kenya more broadly. Understanding these histories is essential to unraveling the types of politics for which infrastructures stood, and the types of claims for social and political inclusion that people made when they enrolled infrastructures to pursue more desirable futures.

As a result of these legacies, as I argue, people have rarely made claims to infrastructural inclusion premised on a generic notion of the colonial subject or, later, the rights-bearing citizen.

The multiply tiered, racialized and ethnicized social order has been too complicated for this. Instead, people engaged in comparative work, evaluating ‘Others’ access to infrastructures as indexing preferential treatment at the hands of the state (Chapter 1, 4, 6).

In Kenya, however, infrastructures have never merely been materializations of abstract state power. As I show in the pages to follow, infrastructures are also intimate objects; the everyday networks of circulation (and blockage) that structure people’s quotidian lives (Larkin 2008), sometimes becoming the terrain where social and political subjectivities are formed (von Schnitzler 2016). For this reason, it is useful to think of infrastructures as contested scale-making technologies. And considerations of scale have a long genealogy in Africanist scholarship.

John Iliffe argued that foreign rule, capitalist expansion, and the creativity of African communities had resulted in the production of polities and social worlds of an increasingly expanding scale (1979). Drawing on these critical insights, scholars working in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have demonstrated how Africans deployed pre-colonial strategies of mobility to address the changing contours of colonial economies (Harries 1994; White 1990). Others have explored how mobile itineraries were critical to the production of cosmopolitan cultural practices (Peterson 2012), historical and political imaginations (Cohen 1989; Roitman 2005; Rockel 2000), and specifically urban forms of sociality (Hunt 2016).

Infrastructures, I argue, played a critical role in this work of scale-making (and unmaking). Drawing on the insights of Science and Technology Studies (STS), however, I do not take scale to be a self-evident category. Instead, I focus on the difficult *work* of scale-making. Scale in this framing is not a given, but is an achievement. Indeed, and as I demonstrate, scale-making was an explicit and contested project within which people mobilized infrastructures and their technologies, as well as infrastructural work, to both generate and critique new and prospective political, economic, and social attachments (Tsing 2005; Hecht 2014). The projects of scale-making I trace in these pages were not, then, neutral, but were technopolitical tactics people pursued to enact social, political, and economic goals (Hecht 2009; Mitchell 2002). As Brian Larkin notes, in this regard, the “peculiar ontology” of infrastructures “lies in the facts that they are things and also the relations between things,” and, I would add, can come to mediate relations among people (2013: 329). This relational quality makes infrastructures good vantage

points from which to consider how people imagine and leverage their relations with things to reconfigure relations among people.

This reorientation is important. First, focusing on the work of assembling new infrastructures allows me to unravel how multiple constituencies, both within and outside of ‘the state,’ tried to gain a monopoly over the scale-making possibilities opened up by new infrastructural networks. Second, it forces us to confront infrastructures not simply as technological networks that enable people to access new forms of circulation—of people, goods, and ideas—but as political and poetic objects that generate debates and anxieties about the merits and moralities of these new circulations.

In pursuing these twin lines of inquiry, I build on the work of scholars who have tracked how technologies and infrastructures are integrated into, and transformed by, vernacular cultural logics, an approach that highlights their “material and epistemic instability” (Larkin 2008:3; Hunt 1999; Spitulnik 1996; White 2000). Infrastructures, on this framing, are not only technical networks but objects that encode the aspirations, fears, and desires of individuals and societies, often becoming the vehicles where such sentiments are made "emotionally real" (Larkin 2013: 333). Drawing together these critical insights, this dissertation moves in new directions to explore how the extension of infrastructural networks, and the emergence of the new forms of expertise, mobility, and sociality associated with them, not only mediated people's relationships with the state, but became embedded in micropolitical contests over power and authority.

This dissertation, then, narrates histories that are neither historical ethnographies of the state, nor histories of communities bounded in ethno-linguistic terms. Scholars of the state in Kenya have demonstrated that the colonial state was one that just barely "hung together" (Berman 1990; Mol 2004). Far from being a monolithic structure, the state was forced to confront contradictions as it worked to balance the demands of metropolitan capital, and the interests of white settlers, while retaining some measure of "legitimacy" in the eyes of its mainly African inhabitants. Moving away from structural analyses, later iterations on this theme explored how African laborers leveraged the state's anxiety about its legitimacy, and their own expectations of work (Cooper 1997), to secure better conditions of life and labor. This scholarship has productively demonstrated how workers mobilized putatively metropolitan discourses of "development" in making claims on the state (Cooper 2014; Lewis 2001).

Kenya's social historians, for their part, have explored the micropolitics that emerged at the interstices of the fraught and uncoordinated ideological and economic project that was the Kenya colony. This research has shifted focus from debates between the metropole and colony to explore the social, political, and cultural work of African communities. Critical for my purposes, this research has demonstrated that material questions must be understood within the moral universes in which they were made meaningful. Pursuing this insight, this scholarship has explored how Kenya's various communities negotiated the large-scale structural changes that threatened to reconfigure relations of gender (Mutongi 2007; Shadle 2006; Thomas 2003; White 1990), generation (Blunt 2010; Lonsdale 1992; Ocobock 2017; Peterson 2004; Thomas 2003;), and the boundaries of social and political life (MacArthur 2016; Osborne 2014; Peterson 2012). But these scholars have largely followed the lead of "ethnic patriots"—those men who creatively worked to bind communities to place under the sign of "ethnicity" (Lonsdale 1992; Peterson 2004)—by framing their studies around territorially bounded units, often delimited in ethno-linguistic terms.

Taken together, then, these histories either work at the scale of empire, moving between colony and metropole, or work at the scale of the ethno-linguistic community. Neither of these scales, taken on its own, is appropriate to a study of the entangled politics of infrastructures in Eastern Africa. Instead, I draw together the concerns of these two literatures by following the technopolitics of infrastructures among and between these scales.

Indeed, the structural transformations—urbanization, the rise and decline of wage labor, and land alienation—that underwrite the inquiries of Kenya's social historians were closely tied to periods of infrastructural expansion. As I argue, people mobilized infrastructures and their technologies in responding to and negotiating these transformations. Infrastructures joined issues of bridewealth (Shadle 2006) and literacy (Peterson 2004) as occasions where debates over community, the appropriate forms of identification, and the morality of new markets were staged. Moreover, as social historians have long noted, these transformations in the colonial economy placed downward pressure on communities to shore up modes of identification bounded in ethno-linguistic terms. Kenya's ethnic patriots were key architects in this process, writing authoritative histories of peoples increasingly defined in ethnic terms. The politics of infrastructural access were part and parcel of this process. As people made claims on the infrastructural state they engaged in forensic work, comparing how their infrastructural access

measured up against that of various ‘Others’ (Chapter 2, 3, 4). Debates over infrastructures, then, joined the writing of official histories as domains where categories of ethnic difference were produced.

But people’s experiences of infrastructures have not been generic. For some, new infrastructures were sites of heightened discipline, the networks along which colonial power unevenly extended (Chapter 1, 2). For others, comparative work offered proof that the state did not recognize their cultural and linguistic particularities (Chapter 4). For those implicated in infrastructural work, these networks offered people opportunities to deploy infrastructures and technologies in their own cultural and political projects (Chapter 5, 6, 7). If, as Frederick Cooper argues, the power of the colonial state was arterial rather than capillary (1994), what and who made it hold together in its infrastructural form? As I argue (Chapters 1, 5, 6), African knowledge workers and experts routinely repurposed state and corporate infrastructures in pursuing their own projects of self-actualization. In this regard, the stories offered in these pages treat heretofore unaddressed colonial “middle figures” (Hunt 1999): infrastructural knowledge workers and experts. The work of men and women, experts of both technics and culture, I argue, has been essential to making Kenya’s fragile networks “hang together.” These unremarked upon but remarkable people joined ethnic patriots, colonial clerks, and “chiefs” in shaping the contours of colonial rule.

The entangled infrastructural politics that I trace in this dissertation were produced at the conjuncture of these scales and conflicting aspirations. Indeed, try as they may, designers and administrators never had a monopoly over infrastructures as material networks, nor as vectors of meaning-making, nor over the scale-making projects to which they were put. In the late nineteenth century, for example, the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC), operating under a charter granted by the Crown, hoped to use new road infrastructures to connect the hinterland to the Coast. This was in a bid to enact first, the region, then the empire through the creation of new markets. But IBEAC engineers and administrators were forced to confront both different rationalities of space, and different visions of how civilization was materialized through work (Chapter 1). By the 1920s, these competing visions articulated in interesting ways as social juniors took to the road in a bid to leverage their mobility into respectable maturity, labors that were subject to a good deal of censure at the hands of landed elite (Chapter 1).

Similar histories at the conjuncture are visible in the scale-making work of radio broadcasting. In the 1930s and 1940s administrators and technologists imagined radio broadcasting as capable of enacting the region, East Africa, and with it a new type of subject: the “East African” (Chapter 3). In the 1950s, people on the Coast, armed with new shortwave receivers, sought to leverage colonial anxieties regarding the fortification of extra-territorial networks as they demanded their inclusion within an expanding infrastructural state (Chapter 4). In these same years, African knowledge workers leveraged their position behind the microphone to call to order new communities bounded in ethnic and linguistic terms (Chapter 5). Safaricom (Chapter 6) engaged in scale-making of a particular kind as it tried to at once leverage ‘local’ knowledge in a bid to embed its networks and services in Kenya all the while working to distance itself from the state. For the corporation, this has produced contradictions as Kenyans called on Safaricom to act *like the state* from which it vigilantly worked to disentangle itself.

However, while I address a number of scales in the pages to follow—the *patria*, the colony, the nation, Eastern Africa, the empire—I do not treat them as isomorphic. Instead, I suggest that people were often simultaneously juggling multiple scales of potential connection and critique as they sought to leverage their positions within a constantly shifting social, political, and economic topography. In so doing, this dissertation offers a multi-scalar analysis that bridges the geographic and political coordinates that typically frame Kenya’s historiography. Like witchcraft (Luongo 2011), and the “politics of the womb” (Thomas 2003), as empirical objects infrastructures were as much entangled in the politics of empire, and later, state-building, as they were entangled in the webs of alliance and conflict that structured relations of patronage, gender, generation, and the consolidation of the ethno-linguistic communities.

If administrators and technologists, past and present, worked to deploy infrastructures as the material structures subtending new political, social, and economic orders, these networks were also intimately wrapped in scalar work of a more conceptual kind. Across the periods under study, designers and engineers were confident that new infrastructures and their technological kin were poised to bring Kenya and Kenyans forward in developmental time. Indeed, the infrastructures that I explore in this dissertation—roads, radio, and digital financial services—materialized transforming ideas regarding “development.” From the 1890s through the interwar period, roads were intimately wrapped up in the “civilizing mission.” Beginning in the 1930s, radio broadcasting was closely linked, indeed preceded, emergent ideas surrounding

development along “social welfarist” lines. Digital financial services, for their part, are routinely mobilized by their proponents as harbingers of a new developmentalist ethos, one that explicitly links marketization with the amelioration of the lives of the poor.

Administrators and technologists, in other words, imagined these technological networks, as capable of enacting a conceptual scalar leap—from the “uncivilised” to the “civilised” (Chapter 1), from the “undeveloped” to the “developed” (Chapter 3 and 4), from the “unbanked” to the “banked” (Chapter 6). The long-angle view of development enabled by an exploration of its infrastructures, however, demonstrates that what the scholarship typically frames as discrete epochs in developmentalist thinking—“civilisational,” “social welfarist,” and “neoliberal”—had much in common as designers fantasized about how contact with new technological networks would generate internal transformations in users (Chapter 1, 2, 3, 4, 6). But state administrators and designers did not hold a monopoly over the developmentalist aspirations embedded in new infrastructures either. As I argue, globally circulating ideas regarding how societies change embedded in infrastructures and their technologies were routinely rerouted as people read these ideas—and their materialized kin—through existing epistemologies of individual and social transformation (Chapter 1, 2, 4, 5, 7) (Ferguson 2013; Karp 2002; Shipton 2011; Smith 2008). People, as this suggests, leveraged infrastructures *both* to reconfigure the material and political dynamics operating at the scale of community and household, and to renegotiate their relations with the state.

By firmly rooting people’s engagements with state infrastructural policies in the social lives, political languages, and cultural practices of the historical subjects that people these pages, this dissertation works to trace out the contradictions of colonial rule ‘on the ground.’ Conjoining an ethnographically informed analysis of state-building and market-making with a close reading of the cultural politics of Kenyan communities, I track transformations in the political economy as manifest in infrastructures through the micro-politics that they engendered. In drawing out this longer chronology of the politics of infrastructures, this dissertation challenges the periodization that typically frames African history. Rather than independence marking a critical rupture, I demonstrate how the infrastructural technopolitics of the colonial period continues to shape Kenya’s technopolitical landscape in the present. Indeed colonial formations, as the opening vignette suggests, sit just below the surface when people debate contemporary infrastructural technopolitics.

Kenya's Infrastructural Technopolitics: Austerity and Prosthetic Work

The infrastructural tales that I narrate in these pages are firmly tethered to the imperfectly nested geographies within which they unfolded—Kenya's Central Province, the East African Protectorate, the Kenya colony, the region of Eastern Africa, the British empire, the independent state. Indeed, one of the arguments advanced in these pages is that designers and administrators hoped that new infrastructural projects could shore up these units as the geographic scales within which people's social, political, and material lives unfolded. And yet, this research offers suggestive lines of inquiry relevant to scholars concerned with the materiality of politics and the technopolitics of infrastructures more broadly.

In much of the global north, as scholars have long argued, infrastructures formed the material substrate of modernity; they were the integrative networks that enabled the reach of the modern state, and the foundations upon which modern citizenship was founded. Kenya's technopolitics, by contrast, have been characterized by the *incapacity* of the state to extend networks complete in their reach. This has two important implications. First, in contrast to producing a singular public, Kenya's networks have contributed to the emergence of a disaggregated public. Second, in negotiating this materially austere state, designers and engineers have repeatedly relied on the contributions of African infrastructural workers to shore up, and in the process shape, this ideologically dense but materially thin state. This prosthetic labor, I argue, must be understood as expert work.

In making these arguments, I draw on and extend recent theorizations of technopolitics. Timothy Mitchell (2000) has used the concept to track the emergence of new a rationality in the twentieth century that placed techno-science at its center. Gabrielle Hecht (2009, 2009, 2012), by contrast, has used the concept to explore how technological assemblages materialize political projects and aspirations, *and* the unexpected ways that workers have leveraged technopolitical regimes in making political claims. This scholarship has usefully highlighted both the materiality of politics and the materiality of political claims-making.

Building on these insights, anthropologist Antina von Schnitzler has moved away from large-scale technopolitical projects to explore the micro-technopolitical assemblages that are mediating the production of citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa. Von Schintzler demonstrates that in South Africa, a place where normative routes for popular participation in the

political process have historically been inaccessible to the majority, politics have taken residence “in often less visible locations and in often unfamiliar technical forms” (2016: 5; 2008; 2016). This scholarship has documented the unpredictable effects of technopolitical assemblages, demonstrating how technopolitics are reformed and remade as they move across space and are shaped by specific historical dynamics. The concept of technopolitics, then, usefully highlights the historical, geographic, and material contingency of the politics that assemble around technological systems and structures of knowledge.

And yet, scholars working with the concept of technopolitics take as their starting point technological assemblages that, while unpredictable in their effects, were both ideologically and materially robust. The technopolitical projects that I explore in the chapters to follow offer a different point of entry onto the relationship between technologies and politics. Kenya’s infrastructural assemblages, while ideologically dense, have been materially thin. As a result, the technopolitical ambitions of administrators and designers were always just that—hopeful aspirations that were routinely tempered by material constraints borne of long-standing policies of fiscal austerity.

Indeed, administrators and designers’ durable faith in the civilizing capacity of technological things notwithstanding, enacting infrastructures has always been complicated in material terms. In the chapters to follow, I argue that materiality mattered in at least two ways. First, administrators and technologists were forced to confront Eastern Africa as a unique material zone. Designers from various elsewhere came armed with visions of how these networks should work based on experiences and models developed abroad. These conditions could not be counted on in Eastern Africa. Sometimes, East Africa’s unique topography and meteorological conditions intervened (Chapter 4), at other times Kenya’s unique human geography, itself borne of policies of colonial austerity, meant that radio arrived not over the airwaves but along the motorways (Chapter 5). In yet another example, years of infrastructural neglect paved the way for digital financial services to act as infrastructural prosthetics, taking the place of brick-and-mortar banks whose reach was arterial at best (Chapter 6). In other words, expertise imported from abroad, while claiming global purchase, reached definite limits in practice. In both material and ideological terms, infrastructural plans and infrastructures themselves had to be modified as they were rescaled—“tropicalised” to use the

language *en vogue* in the postwar period—if they were going to become embedded in this particularly Kenyan milieu (Hunt 2016).⁵

Second, since the 1880s the infrastructural state in Kenya has been marked by conditions of austerity which perennially perforated the developmentalist aspirations of administrators and technologists.⁶ I realize that my use of the term austerity might appear to be an anachronism. This is a term that we typically associate with structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and through to the present. In this period, state indebtedness was reframed not as an investment, but as a problem. The solution: a retraction in public spending, and a reduction in wages, with the market left to fill in the gaps opened up by the state's withdrawal. Austerity on this framing is irruptive, applying to "situations where societies and individuals that formerly enjoyed a higher standard of consumption must now make do with less." Austerity, then, is not just an "economically constrained static circumstance" but reveals "dynamics of reversal and the ongoing responses to it" (Knight and Stewart 2016: 2). And this has implications for work. As Laura Bear argues, and critical for my purposes, policies associated with the austere state rescale risk down to workers. As policies of austerity changes workers' relationships with material infrastructures, workers are expected to do more with less (2015: 198).

Not all the conditions associated with austerity were obtaining in the space that is now called Kenya in the years covered in this dissertation, but some of the most crucial were. This has never been an ideologically austere state. If anything, the years typically associated with policies of austerity have been marked in Kenya, as in much of the global south, by an efflorescence in developmentalist thinking—though, and in keeping with austerity's principles, this work has been left to the robust and very lucrative development apparatus (Ferguson 1994; Redfield 2013). But even in the heyday of "social welfarist" ideology, the state was never able to mobilize the capital required to execute its visions for social betterment.

In this corner of Eastern Africa, in other words, conditions of austerity are not unique to the "neoliberal" present. From the dual vision of "commerce and civilisation" of the 1880s

⁵ Nancy Rose Hunt uses the term "milieu" to shed light on the total social world against which people experienced, and generated responses to, the biomedical and carceral impulses in of the "nervous state" in Congo. For my purposes, the term, with its roots in a notion of the intermediate, is a useful mid-level concept for a project concerned with the multiple and fought over politics of infrastructures as scale-making technologies.

⁶ I owe a great debt of gratitude to Joshua Grace for pointing to the durability of austerity-thinking when it came to infrastructures in colonial East Africa.

(Chapter 1), to the postwar push for “social welfare” (Chapter 4, 5), to contemporary emancipatory visions of “value at the bottom of the pyramid” in the present (Chapter 6), the infrastructural state has been characterized by paucity. Durable policies of fiscal austerity produced a disjunctive mismatch between ideology and material capacity, critically shaping the forms that infrastructures were able to take, and guiding decision-making regarding how infrastructures and their services were distributed. And these limits shaped popular perceptions of infrastructures as networks putatively constructed for the public good.

Put differently, if the public in whose name infrastructures were constructed was bifurcated, so too were the infrastructures themselves characterized by incomplete and uneven coverage, and were perennially subject to breakdown, thus requiring stop-gap solutions. The putative ‘failure’ of the state to realize its technopolitical aspirations did not, however, depoliticize infrastructures. But it did shape the technopolitical dynamics of claims-making. Specifically, people demanded infrastructural inclusion not as generic subjects, but as linguistically, culturally, and vocationally specific constituencies.

In experiential terms, conditions of austerity ensured that people apprehended the extension of new infrastructures and technologies as moments of “reversal” or at the very least contradiction. From the famines that rode on the rails of new road infrastructures and new regimes of labor and taxation in the 1890s (Chapter 1), to the quashed dreams of would-be lorry owners in the 1940s (Chapter 2), to people's aspirations to “become digital” in the context of increased informalization in the present (Chapter 7), people's experiences of this austere infrastructural state have been riven by “dynamics of reversal and ongoing responses to it.”

Critically, incomplete networking and perennial breakdown—the materialization of the austere state—have had important implications for work. In particular, material austerity has produced a context wherein making things “hang together” has critically relied on the mobilization of African expertise, all the while relegating it mere labor (Mol 2004). This, I argue, is a form of rescaling critical to the operations of the austere infrastructural state. And understanding the long history of austerity in the region gives us critical analytic purchase.

First, undertaken under durable conditions of austerity, projects of infrastructural expansion, and thus the projects of development in whose name they were constructed, have always been entangled in projects of marketization. In other words, public austerity over the longer term has opened up possibilities for private accumulation, with private investments and

capital being enrolled to make up for limited state budgets. In what is today Kenya, "the market" has *always* been the critical third term mediating relations between subjects and the state through infrastructures (Chapters 1, 5, 6).

Tracing out these histories over the longer term helps us understand infrastructural politics in the present. As the opening vignette suggests, today debates over infrastructures and their markets turn on the popular sense that they are not for the 'public,' nor the 'public good.' In what follows I argue that a vision of infrastructures as 'public goods' has always been truncated as concerns over market-making and private gain mitigated against the materialization of infrastructures as public investments to which all should have access (Chapters 1, 5, 6). In Kenya, these contradictions were compounded because the category of 'public' itself was refracted through hierarchies of race, and more recently class and ethnicity. These histories have critically informed how people understand how their relationships with the state are mediated through infrastructures. Understanding these processes over the longer term clarifies why infrastructures in Kenya have repeatedly emerged as the terrain where battles over the politics of inclusion have played out. This is not to say, though, that a vision of infrastructures as a kind of a commons does not do work in the world. To the contrary, people have repeatedly mobilized visions of infrastructures as 'public goods' in demanding their inclusion within the infrastructural networks of the Kenyan state (Chapters 2, 4, 6).

Second, if the state called on 'the market' to do prosthetic work—to close the gap between the aspirations of the state for a kind of capillary reach and material realities that rendered the state's presence arterial at best—African knowledge workers and experts were asked to do the rest. As Bear argues: "austerity capitalism...proceeds through the devaluation of labor; decentralized speculative planning; and improvised low-tech investments" (2015:31). Over the course of the histories narrated in the chapters to follow, "low-tech investments" have required the dynamic infrastructural work of African knowledge workers and experts. As I argue (Chapters 1, 5, 6), these knowledge workers and experts have routinely been asked to engage in *prosthetic work*. That is, they have routinely been called upon to fill the gap between the developmentalist aspirations of the state, and material realities that have been characterized by the interruption of unforeseen materialities, partial knowledge, and limitations in financing. This work, moreover, while constituting forms of expertise, has been routinely devalued—both materially and conceptually—as mere labor, even as people were asked to do more with less.

But this did not render it unimportant. To the contrary, conditions of fiscal austerity, in tandem with incomplete networking, ensured that this work was centrally important to making infrastructures ‘work’ such as they have (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7). These dynamics, moreover, did not end with independence. Indeed, today this infrastructural work is essential to generating the knowledge upon which new markets are being assembled (Chapters 6, 7). And this prosthetic work was (and is) not generic but was (and is) constitutive and transformative of this developmentally austere infrastructural state.

A word on prosthetics. Today, developmentalist market-makers are explicit in naming African work with digital infrastructures prosthetic labor, referring to people like Nyawira (Chapter 6) who take charge of M-PESA kiosks as "Human-ATMs." Half-human, half-machine, it is the job of these people to take the place of a largely absent banking infrastructure, thereby enabling the digital money-transfer system to work. This framing of human action is troubling. However, I think that we can gain some political and analytic traction by taking the claims embedded in this framing seriously.

As conventionally defined, a prosthetic is characterized as an addition, application, or attachment. On this framing, a prosthetic merely executes the task of a missing limb, its labors leaving the whole more or less unchanged. This aspiration seems inbuilt to the designation of M-PESA agents as Human-ATMs. Drawing on feminist science studies, in the chapters that follow I argue that we think of prosthetics not simply as replacements that execute the functions and daily tasks of the missing parts but as a "fundamental category for understanding" (Haraway 1991: 249, n. 7). Infrastructural prosthetics, and prosthetic work, I argue, are extensions that fundamentally transform the systems to which they are attached, sometimes irrevocably changing them, at other times putting them to uses unrecognizable to designers. As it pertains to technopolitics in now postcolonial Kenya, a focus on prosthetics and prosthetic work enables us to reframe our understanding of large-scale technological networks by placing the work of making them "hang together," and the transformative effects of this work, front and center.

Accessing this expertise is difficult. Indeed, the very partial visibility of these experts in many of the archives with which historians work is a result of pernicious representational practices that frames Africa as a place without technologies, as a place without technological experts. Exploring the labor of assembling and enacting new infrastructures—focusing on infrastructures ‘in the making,’ in other words—partially remedies this, for the more seamlessly

an infrastructure ‘works,’ the more invisible the labor of making things “hang together” becomes (Mol 2004). Focusing on the difficulty of making infrastructures hang together, and looking to the breach that divided aspiration from reality, thus opens up new histories of work and new histories of expertise.

In the early years of road-building, for example, African expertise regarding topography and geography critically shaped the communications network of what became the Kenya colony (Chapter 1). In the 1940s and 1950s, radio technologists and knowledge workers were forced to learn on the fly as they confronted the material stuff of broadcasting executed by an austere state (Chapter 4, 5). Today, M-PESA agents act as critical lay ethnographers whose work is essential to generating the data upon which Safaricom both locates new markets and generates new services (Chapter 6). In other instances, still, this expertise has come in the form of the everyday strategies of poor Kenyans, those at the “bottom of the pyramid” who will never be a part of formal labor markets (Chapter 6, 7). But in all instances the representational practices of technologists and market-makers have relegated this expertise as banal, making it appear to be *merely* prosthetic—Nyawira, industry insiders tell us, is simply a Human-ATM. Chapters 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7, in particular, push against this tendency by re-centering African infrastructural work, demonstrating that, far from being generic or banal, this was (and is) creative work that constituted (and constitutes) a kind of unrecognized and under-remunerated expertise.

This long-angle view also helps us understand how it has come to pass that African expertise has routinely, and through to the present, been elided; important forms of creative work relegated *mere* labor.¹² This, in turn, is essential to understanding the repetitions that guide the workings of techno-capitalism in the present—enthusiasts’ claims to rupture notwithstanding—and the types of inequalities that it shores up. Proponents of contemporary developmentalist thinking claim that capitalism in an ‘altruistic’ register can ameliorate the lives of the poor by locating “value at the bottom of the pyramid.” This contemporary form of extraction, I argue, builds on long-standing practices.

Since the 1880s, engineers, designers, and technologists have routinely appropriated and scaled-up African knowledge and expertise as sources of *value*, all the while eliding the centrally important role they have played not only in enacting infrastructures (Chapter 1, 5, 7) but in generating new markets (Chapter 4, 6, 7). In understanding these processes I move away from a vision of “people as infrastructure” (Simone 2004) to explore how it has come to pass that people

are asked to act *infrastructurally*. This distinction is important. The first naturalizes the material conditions under which people as infrastructures emerges as a phenomenon. The second, and the one pursued here, works to parse out those conditions as a mode of critique of the particular articulations of capitalism—both past and present—in Kenya and beyond.

A central argument advanced in the pages to follow, then, is that histories of technology and capitalism that take as their starting point this corner of Eastern Africa force us to confront a different genealogy of the history of technology and thus technopolitics. This genealogy must highlight the role played by austerity and place infrastructural work at the center of the story. In the process, invisibilized forms of expert work become visible.

As Hecht argues, in this regard, technopolitics generate “unpredictable power effects” through the “unintentional effects of the (re)distribution of agency that they enact” (2011: 3). In the chapters that follow, a focus on Kenya’s austere technopolitics and their redistributive effects enables me to work at three contiguous scales. First, it allows me to explore the ways in which designers and administrators imagined how infrastructures could materialize new economic and political orders. Second, it enables me to track the unforeseen ways that Kenya’s multiple publics mobilized infrastructural networks in staking out the domain of the political. Third, and critically, it allows me to track the role played by Kenya’s ordinary and extraordinary experts whose insights and work, while perennially undervalued, played a creative role in consolidating the infrastructural networks of this austere state.

Indeed, technologists’ aspirations notwithstanding, the shaping impulse of human action is always transformative. Erstwhile Human ATMs and their historical counterparts routinely transformed the networks of which they were a part into their own prosthetics. Sometimes people mobilized infrastructures to reconfigure existing gendered and generational hierarchies of authority and power (Chapter 1). Radio broadcasters in the 1950s used their position behind the microphone to call to order new audiences (Chapter 5). Nyawira, as we shall see, uses her practiced knowledge of M-PESA’s platform to ensure the loyalty of her customers (Chapters 6). Taken together, these histories are critical to understanding how infrastructures, ostensibly generic and universally applicable networks, become “tropicalised” and “peculiarly” Kenyan.

By focusing on infrastructures ‘in the making,’ and working across scales, in sum, “Infrastructural Attachments” excavates both the possibilities and limits of the technopolitics embedded in large-scale infrastructures. As I show, when administrators and

technologists sought to use infrastructures as scale-making technologies, they had to confront not only intransigent materialities (Chapter 1, 3), but also private interests (Chapters 1, 3, 5). Additionally, and critically, they had to confront the ideas, aspirations, and expertise of African communities (Chapter 1, 2), and the African knowledge workers and experts that made infrastructures ‘work’ in this now postcolonial space (Chapter 5, 6, 7). Taken together, the chapters to follow offer a series of stories about the cultural and material work of enacting infrastructures and the politics of scale-making (and unmaking) that they disclose.

If working across scales is one of my central goals in writing this dissertation, this was enabled by a method that was itself multi-scalar, and self-consciously so. The sources for this project, and the modes of reading them, were as heterodox as the processes over which I have tried to gain a handle. In reading between and across these sources I have worked to generate a thick description of the politics of infrastructures in colonial and postcolonial Kenya. National Archives were consulted in the UK, Kenya, and Uganda. Corporate archives—namely those of the Imperial British East Africa Company, the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Marconi Archives, and the Cable and Wireless archives—were consulted in the UK. I also had the opportunity to work with the small remaining collection of audio-files of early radio broadcasts housed at the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation. Mission archives also offered invaluable insights. In Kenya, I worked with the archives of the Anglican Church, and the papers of Leonard Beecher and Louis Leakey, all of which are housed in Nairobi. These archival materials were read alongside oral historical research undertaken in Kenya. For me, conducting oral histories with old drivers and radio men was critical to understanding both the cultural politics of infrastructures and their complex poetics. This is important in its own historical right, but it was also central to getting a handle on the complex cultural politics of Kenya in the present, *and* for enabling an understanding of the consistency with which African expertise had been sidelined in the archives with which we construct our histories.

While in the pages that follow I work across multiple scales, Central Kenya and the Rift Valley, and the cultural and technical work of Kikuyu speakers, feature heavily. The reasons for this are historical. As the street preacher suggested, those from the center of the country often accessed infrastructures before, and sometimes to the exclusion of, other regions and communities. In the present, this is popularly associated with the dispensations that are held to be

the result of connections to the center of administrative power. In the colonial period, by contrast, infrastructural densities in these regions reflected not only the presence of white settlers in the area, but also the intensity of commodity production, and proximity to Nairobi. What is today framed as an unfair advantage, in other words, was in the colonial period experienced as the state's over-zealous incursions into the lifeworlds of the region's African communities. These formations, in tandem with a self-identified "entrepreneurialism" amongst Kikuyu speakers, helps us understand why debates over infrastructures and their markets not only played out between the state and its subjects, but also at the more intimate scale of community with greater intensity in this part of the country. Understanding the particularities of infrastructural politics among Kikuyu speakers was augmented by my exploration of the cultural productions of some of Kenya's intellectuals. Often writing in the vernacular—Kikuyu—these polemical writings thickened my understanding of the complex cultural politics of infrastructures in the region.

The importance of telling these stories of sidelined expertise, insofar as I was able, was heightened by the ethnographic component of my research, which mainly involved working and chatting with Nyawira at her small M-PESA kiosk, and working with the *matatu* men and hawkers that people the bus stage by the Fig Tree Market outside of Nairobi's Central Business District. It was here that I learned about Nyawira's work, and the work of those like her, as well as about the struggles and aspirations of the social juniors of the *matatu* sector as they try to parlay their labor into valuable work and adult status. For what has become the final section of the dissertation, I also conducted interviews with digital technologists and industry experts. Their perspectives and insights were coupled with the anonymous voices that make themselves heard on Kenya's lively blogosphere, and communications captured and preserved by WikiLeaks—this is, after all, and at least in part, a history of the digital in Kenya. These insights, in tandem with everyday talk, formed the foundations of much of the third section of the dissertation.

This unorthodox method has, I think, been a boon rather than a liability. Moving between these source bases alerted me to the importance of being as concerned with locating continuities and repetitions as I was with understanding ruptures and change over time. While this is certainly a story about transformation, claims to change do a good deal of work in the world, especially as regards infrastructures and technologies. Keeping an eye on these claims to rupture is important

to be sure. But sometimes narratives of rupture obscure more than they reveal. In this instance, the ways in which infrastructures' long history as public goods in the region has always been crosscut by the aspirations of capital markets; or the ways that infrastructural work has repeatedly been rendered mere labor; or the fought-over processes by which infrastructures have been enrolled to enact competing social and political goals. It is by bringing these scales together that I hope to have done justice to the characters and processes that animate these pages, generating a series of infrastructural tales that are three dimensional in their scope.

Chapter 1

Roads as the Routes of “Commerce and Civilisation”: Labor, Value, and the Politics of Mobility

In September 2014, I had the occasion to speak to Elias Mutahi for the first time. Born in 1948 in Nyeri, in Kenya’s Central Province, Mutahi had been in the business of vehicles since the early days of independence. Having left Nyeri for Embu, Mutahi again took to the road in the 1960s, traveling to Nairobi where he began working as a car wash attendant, a position that allowed him to learn how to drive, eventuating in him getting a license in 1970 and buying a vehicle of his own a decade later.¹ He undertook these moves, he told me, so he would not become a “failure of my tribe.” Mobility, even in Mutahi’s own framing, though, was not an unmitigated social good. Indeed, mobility as both a strategy of success and as evidence of moral failure would be a central theme in my conversation with Mutahi and the many other drivers I interviewed during my research.

Mutahi easily moved between a description of his own morally upright itinerary to outlining the dangers of irresponsible mobility, the latter of which, I have come to understand, is defined by comparison to its inverse: notions of complete personhood that are rooted down, down into the soil, down into the land. We had been discussing the bad luck, or curse, that comes to those who sell the land they have inherited from their fathers. It was, of course, desirable to expand your holdings, to buy new plots of land that you could, then, leave to your sons (and increasingly to your daughters). But to sell your father’s plot was off limits. It was tantamount to disavowing his *wiathi*, or self-mastery and civic virtue, central tenets of what we might call a Gikuyu epistemology of individual and collective maturation, or “development.”² It was, in no small measure, tantamount to selling your father himself, so close is the relationship between people and land. This, then, is an epistemology of both culture and personhood within which

¹ Interview with Elias Mutahi, 10 September 2014.

² John Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty, and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought,” in *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*, by B. Berman and J. Lonsdale 315-468, (London: James Currey, 1992).

persons—dead or alive—who have been uprooted from the land, or find themselves without a plot to call their own, are lost. Without labor on the land, there is no *wiathi*. This is an existential problem for men.³ Absent access to land they will interminably remain children, social outcasts who will not be remembered.

My conversations with Mutahi and other drivers I interviewed pivoted around my efforts to parse out the moral ambivalence that surrounds mobility. Specifically, I was trying to understand the ambiguity that surrounds the infrastructure of roads, the automotive technologies that call the road home, and the practices of those persons, conspicuously young persons, “on the road.” Indeed, in contemporary Kenya, “the road” is routinely invoked *both* as a core symbol of “development” *and* of destruction.

That there would be ambivalence surrounding roads in Kenya today is not altogether surprising. Politicians routinely mobilize roads as concrete evidence that they are, in fact, doing the work of governance as they provision for their constituencies—Thika Super Highway, for example, is popularly linked to the legacy of Mwai Kibaki, who, as opposition leader Raila Odinga noted with no small measure of irritation, is known as the “father of modern roads in Kenya.”⁴ On the other hand, in Kenya today roads are, quite literally, the site of death, with over 10,000 people per year estimated to die along Kenya’s lumpy road network.⁵ But, as my research with drivers such as Mutahi was revealing, this ambivalence is not limited to the present. Nor is it limited to Kikuyu men.

Labani Kiliru, a Luhya man who was 71 when we spoke, and who hails from Vihiga, in Western Kenya, was more explicit on this point, telling me matter-of-factly: “[the] vehicle [is] death, land [is] life.”⁶ In this one sentence, Labani clarified the knotty place of roads in the popular imaginary. For the diverse communities of Western Kenya, like Kikuyu communities of Central Kenya and the Rift Valley, cultured land is the site where futurity is established. It is on one’s *shamba* that families are imagined to be properly raised, and that burial happens. It is through this process that one is able to extend oneself down through the generations as a

³ Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), 11.

⁴ Mariko Muchiri, “Why Raila is ‘the Father’ of Thika Superhighway.” N.D. Available online at: <https://www.kenyans.co.ke/news/why-raila-father-thika-superhighway-0>

⁵ World Health Organization (WHO). “Mortality: Distribution of Road Traffic Deaths by Road User.” *Global Health Observatory Data Repository*. 2012. Last accessed 18 May 2017 <<http://apps.who.int/gho/data/?vid=51312>>

⁶ Interview with Labani Kiliru, 9 March 2014.

venerated ancestor.⁷ This is a landed vision of moral personhood, a vision for which mobility, while a routinely and historically salient practice of maturation by other means in both communities, constitutes an existential threat. The vehicle is thus a symbol of a limited vision of futurity; it is future truncated, it is mobility as a denial of work on the land, or *wiathi*, in Kikuyu. Social life and the materiality of landed labor cannot be separated here. As its inverse, then, the vehicle's ambivalent moral standing must, too, be apprehended in both social and material terms. And yet, automobility is also a sign of having made it. As many of the drivers I interviewed told me, by virtue of their car ownership they were respected, "feared."

If the road is both a sign of youthful deviance and development, its terminus, Nairobi, is also both a key symbol of the "modern" and a site of the threatening forms of cultural disillusion historically associated both with the road and with new the patterns of mobility it enabled. These men, men in their 70s and 80s when I was doing my research, were not alone in linking what is now the hub of the continent's so-called "Silicon Savannah" with technologies of mobility.⁸ Indeed, Nairobi's very existence was enabled by the construction of the Uganda Railway. Based on what we might today refer to as eminent domain, the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC), the corporation that would provide the template for colonial governance, hungrily claimed for itself the land that is now Nairobi, so that what Maasai *laibons*, or seers, referred to as the "great serpent," and what Kikuyu seers referred to as the "iron snake," might make its way from the port at Mombasa to its terminus at Lake Victoria.⁹

This and the chapter to follow are companion chapters that together offer a wide-angle view of the politics of mobility in Kenya.¹⁰ Beginning in the late nineteenth century, I argue that the contradictions of "the road" were embedded in the very logic underwriting early road-building projects. The British had interests in the region but were unwilling to outlay the resources required to stake their claim in material terms. And so, in 1888, the Crown granted the Imperial

⁷ For a discussion of how cultural architects worked to bring into being a unified notion of Luhya-ness through the active work of territorializing "identity," see Julie MacArthur, *Cartography and the Political Imagination: Mapping Community in Colonial Kenya*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

⁸ David Smith, "Kenya Building a Digital Future in Africa's Silicon Savannah," 30 October 2012, *The Guardian*, Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/30/kenya-silicon-savannah-digital-technology>

⁹ John Ainsworth, "East Africa 'Kenya' Reminiscences" MSS. Afr. s. 380, Bodleian Library, Oxford; Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 137.

¹⁰ I borrow the term "politics of mobility" from Timothy Cresswell. Timothy Cresswell, "Towards a Politics of Mobility," *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, Vol. 28 (2010): 17-31.

British East Africa Company (IBEA) a Charter granting the Company the right to formalize its presence in the region as a proxy for the state. In so doing, the state hoped to use the IBEA as a prosthetic, authorizing the Company to both administer the region and enact new markets. These entangled projects came together in new infrastructural networks. Indeed, both the Crown and the IBEA imagined roads as being the infrastructural basis for enacting the empire through the creation of new markets, *and* as core materializations of “civilisation.” In this, new infrastructures were to ensure both private gain *and* provision for the commonweal. The IBEA was a “franchise state,” and one born of austerity.¹¹ This twinning of the public and the private was no accident, but formed the core of the corporation as a legal entity. And this dual mandate underwrote early developmentalist thinking. This was the mandate of “civilisation and commerce.”

The corporation’s “amphibian” identity, while not unique to the IBEA, did produce contradictions.¹² What were the parameters of the commonweal? Who were its beneficiaries? And how were the prerogatives of the public good and the bottom line of capital gains to be balanced? While road construction turned on assembling violent labor regimes, in ideological terms these contradictions were ‘resolved’ by a vision of the civilizing effect of roads and road labor. Infrastructures as materializations of the public good, in other words, were underwritten by economies of violence. And this did not end with the collapse of the IBEA but was inherited by the early colonial state.

If roads, like the railway, were evidence of the “civilisation” of Britons, the engineers and company administrators tasked with extending new road networks into the interior confronted people who brought their own ideas regarding “civilization,” work, and the proper organization of space to bear. And these dual visions of civilization and work shaped dynamics at the “interface.”¹³ In the early years, engineers leaned heavily on the expertise of African interlocutors. This prosthetic work was transformative, as African experts advised as to the best routes to follow, often arguing that newly cut roads should mirror the itineraries laid out by “native paths” and existing caravan routes. The impact of these local regimes of valuation were

¹¹ David Ciepley, “Beyond Public and Private: Toward a Political Theory of the Corporation,” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 107, No. 1 (February 2013), 151.

¹² Ciepley, “Beyond Public and Private: Toward a Political Theory of the Corporation,” 156.

¹³ Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004), 5-9.

not limited to visions of space, but also critically shaped the types of work people were disposed to perform as agricultural rhythms intervened, shaping people's willingness to engage in the strenuous but dull labor of road building. And with the road came both death and new markers of prestige, as communities' increased implication in new capital markets both made them vulnerable to drought and epizootic disaster, and enabled new forms of accumulation.

With the formalization of state control over the region came new regimes of taxation designed to offset the debts inherited from the IBEA. The treasury would not, in this period, accept state indebtedness as an investment. Instead, this burden was taken up by African laborers in the form of taxation, which both forced men into emergent labor markets *and* funded the expansion of the infrastructural state. And so, the austere state was given its second lease on life. People were not invited to enjoy the fruits of this labor, though, and controlled mobility and the unequal provisioning of road networks became a key frame through which they interpreted the "colonial situation."¹⁴

By the mid-1920s, people debated the merits of the wage labor economy, and the mobility and forms of accumulation that it enabled, against long-standing visions of *wiathi* that held that labor for oneself, and on the land, was the only valorized form of work. These were, at base, arguments about the appropriate scale of belonging, which generated conflict that was structured in both generational and gendered terms as successive generations of landed elite effaced their own histories of mobility, all the while castigating the irresponsible and unproductive movement of their sons and daughters.

The first part of this chapter, then, excavates the contradictory role of infrastructures that began their lives in the hands of a corporation. This early history provides a critical foundation for our understanding of the contradictory place of infrastructures as "public goods" in Kenya, themes that subtend the arguments developed throughout the dissertation. As I argue in the second part of this chapter, the dual vision of roads as bearers of "commerce and civilisation" articulated with existing epistemologies as those living in the region interpreted these new infrastructures and labor regimes as against prevailing visions of space and work. The third section works at the juncture of these entangled processes to elucidate how, by the 1920s, the

¹⁴ Georges Balandier, "The Colonial Situation: A Theoretical Approach (1951)," in *Social Change: The Colonial Situation*, ed. Immanuel Wallerstein (New York: Wiley, 1966), 34-61.

road and technologies of mobility emerged as potent and durable metaphors for youthful disobedience and cultural disillusion.

Of Corporate Beginnings: Roads as the Routes of “Civilisation” and Commerce

In September 1888, Queen Victoria granted a Royal Charter to the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) with William Mackinnon, a Scots shipping magnate, as President of its Court of Directors. The British were concerned about German, among other, interests in Eastern Africa. Unwilling to spend funds directly, the Crown gave the IBEAC the mandate, as a “private enterprise,” to take up the task of “acquiring and administering new territory in the name of the Crown.”¹⁵ Here, the state sought to outsource the risk of a venture from which it nevertheless stood to profit. These were the foundations of what was to become the austere state. Working at the behest of the Crown, the corporation’s goals were threefold: to “open up this unknown region,” *and* to usher in *both* “commerce and civilisation.”¹⁶

The origins of Britain’s presence in Eastern Africa, then, were corporate in character. On one reading, the IBEAC’s role in effecting “commerce and civilisation” in the region is familiar. Indeed, today, a tension between these two motives stands at the heart of contemporary debates regarding the “public good.” While market makers hold that it is the private sector, not governments, that can most efficiently provision for the lives of citizens, their opponents posit that ensuring the welfare of the public ought to be the special purview of the state, arguing that the bottom line of capital gains will erode a commitment to an undifferentiated social good. These categories—the private on the one hand, and the public on the other—are today framed as being oppositional. But the appearance of this conceptual and material separation in the present is an ideological effect of legal reforms of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Prior to this, the idea that the public and private, the corporation and the state, markets and government were discrete domains would have made little sense. And, as contemporary anxieties regarding the blurring of the lines

¹⁵ J. Forbes Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire: Sir William Mackinnon and His Business Network, 1823-93*. (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2003), 408.

¹⁶ P.L. McDermott, *British East Africa or IBEAC: A History of the Formation and Work of the Imperial British East Africa Company*, (London: Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1895), 392.

¹⁷ David Ciepley, “Beyond Public and Private: Toward a Political Theory of the Corporation.”

between the corporation and the state in contemporary politics attest, it perhaps does not make sense to assume that these are discrete domains in the present either.

And yet, this ostensible division does work in the world. In spaces where the union of public and private, or state and corporate, are common, such as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, these entities fall under the moniker “parastatal.” In Africa, parastatals emerged in significant numbers in the 1970s and 1980s under pressure from foreign donors such as the IMF and the World Bank as a response to the supposed *incapacity* of governments to provision for their citizens, the partial privatization of state assets an effort to reign in “mismanagement” and “corruption.” The term parastatal, then, and in reference to this part of the world, is a contemporary metonym for ‘dysfunctional’ states. This is, in part, because parastatals actively and explicitly transgress boundaries that are *ideologically* held to be distinct. But what is named in much of contemporary Africa today is simply an explicit acknowledgement of what is increasingly commonplace—or at least what is recognized as being increasingly commonplace—everywhere.

And while the existence of parastatals might appear to be unique to a neoliberal world order, this dual identity is not, in fact, aberrant; it is, rather, historically constitutive, leading political scientist David Ciepley to argue that the corporation has *never* been wholly private nor wholly public, but is an “amphibian” legal form.¹⁸ This boundary crossing, in other words, is no accident, nor is it unique to the present, but sits at the very center of the corporation and, in the case of Kenya, sits at the very center of the (post)colonial state.

Exploring these origins is critical to understanding how it came to pass that the Company, and later the Foreign Office, undertook infrastructural development in the region as a means to pursue *both* “commerce and civilisation.”¹⁹ This, in turn, is an important foundation for our understanding of the dynamics of capital and state-building in this region, not least because it demonstrates how the private has always underwritten the ostensible public, this blurring being not an aberration, but constitutive to colonial statecraft and the contradictions it produced. These twin impulses, though not conceptually dissonant in the nineteenth century, often tugged in different directions. This was development on a shoestring, austerity underwriting the

¹⁸ Ciepley, “Beyond Public and Private,” 156.

¹⁹ P.L. McDermott, *British East Africa or Ibea a history of the formation and work of the Imperial British East Africa Company*, 392.

commonweal. And this tension persisted throughout the colonial period. At this juncture, African work and expertise, undervalued and often woefully under-remunerated, if remunerated at all, was called to the task of acting as infrastructural prosthetics—Africans' knowledge of the region became the foundations of road-networks themselves, their taxation the engine of infrastructural expansion. And it is here that we can locate the contradictory place of the public at the heart of visions of infrastructures as “common goods.”

When the IBEA first cut its teeth, Britons would not have apprehended the corporation as a private entity, *per se*. The existence of corporations turned the receipt of government charters.²⁰ For this reason, governments routinely called upon corporations to engage in projects that we might now deem public works, such as the building of dams and new roads. And yet, legally, corporations were not conceived of as being wholly public either. The capital backing them, the interests underwriting their ventures, and their owners were not *the public*, writ large, but were private individuals—shareholders and financiers. This distinction is important. While the corporation was responsible to the sovereign as a representative of the public, it was *not* responsible to the *public* itself, and certainly not to the workers upon whose labor the public good was secured.²¹ And yet, while the corporation was not responsible to the public, except in the very narrowest of senses, its rights, protected by charter, allowed it to *act like a state*. Historically, as a legal entity, a corporation's sanctions were broad. As Ciepley writes, the primary rights of a corporation were threefold:

(1) the right to own property, make contracts, and sue and be sued, as a unitary entity (a legal ‘person’); (2) the right to centralized management of this property; and (3) the right to establish and enforce rules within its jurisdiction beyond those of the laws of the land.²²

In the case of the IBEA, the blurring of the lines between the corporation and the state were reproduced within the company at the symbolic level, the company’s internal structure mimicking the logic of nineteenth-century governance. As noted by J. Forbes Munro:

The company radiated an aura of late Victorian respectability. With a Court rather than a Board, a President rather than a Chairman, its own specifically-commissioned flag [and its own currency] ...it created for itself an image as an

²⁰ Ciepley, “Beyond Public and Private,” 139.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

²² *Ibid.*, 141.

organisation that was closer to government than to...ordinary business...it contributed to the general perception that the company's purposes were more 'governmental' than commercial in character.²³

This was matched by its legal rights. The 1888 Charter was as broad as it was vague, granting the Company the right to:

raise taxes, impose customs dues, administer justice, make treaties, and generally assume the powers of government within a specified area without rendering themselves liable, as individuals, to prosecution in British courts for arbitrary acts which only governments may perform.²⁴

In the framing of its rights, then, the private persons backing the corporation were effaced—shareholders and financiers, managers and administrators would not, as individuals, be liable to prosecution.

These rights functionally sanctioned the corporation to act as the reigning sovereign in the region. The IBEA, like other corporations in the period, was a "franchise state."²⁵ But in what would become the East African Protectorate, this would not be a state within a state, so to speak. By virtue of the Crown's Charter, for all intents and purposes the IBEA was the governing authority in the region until the Foreign Office took over in 1895. With state-like powers came state-like responsibilities. In keeping with the dual mandate of "commerce and civilisation," the Crown granted the IBEA's Charter on the basis of a twofold promise: the corporation would ensure the commonweal on the one hand, and secure capital gains on the other. In both domains infrastructures would have a central role to play.

As a de facto private entity, though, the corporation was not technically accountable to the public, writ large, but to shareholders as a differentiated subset of the public. Discursively, this contradiction was in part remedied by the fact that the corporation received sanction from the sovereign as representative of the people. In a roundabout way, then, the sovereign's Charter ensured that corporations *did* remain accountable to the public writ large. In material terms, public works projects, such as roads and dams, were critical to maintaining this vision. The construction of infrastructures in the name of the commonweal would deliver the benefits of this

²³ Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire*, 422.

²⁴ Roland Oliver, "Some Factors in the British Occupation of East Africa, 1884-1894," *Uganda Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1951): 56.

²⁵ Ciepley, "Beyond Public and Private," 151.

public-private partnership, to invoke a financial anachronism, to an undifferentiated public. Both the corporation and the state stood to benefit from these relations of intimacy: the corporation mainly in economic terms, the state mainly in administrative terms.

But this resolution, such as it was, worked out differently in the colonies. In Eastern Africa public works projects, such as infrastructures, were of value to shareholders in the form of dividends, the Crown in the form of extended territorial control, and Britons in the form of monies partially relocated to state coffers through the taxation of commodities.²⁶ And incrementally in these years this British public was expanding as the government extended the franchise.²⁷ This is important. At precisely the same moment that “the public” was expanding across much of Europe, in Eastern Africa, and under the mandate of the IBEA, it was taken for granted that the communities living in the region would not be fully folded into this growing public. Here, securing the commonweal in the UK turned on mobilizing new forms of coercion in Eastern Africa, while bringing to those same communities “commerce and civilisation.”

So where did this leave East African populations? And how did administrators conceive of them in relation to the commonweal ostensibly embedded in this marriage of the public and private and materialized in the form of the infrastructures constructed on their lands? The answer was as odd as it was convenient. Africans living in the region were to benefit from the existence of new infrastructures *and* the new regimes of labor required to build them, both of which were held to have a civilizing effect on both persons and the landscapes they called home. These contradictions would not end when the Foreign Office took over the administration of the region, but instead became the foundational logic of the early colonial state itself. Commerce and civilization, civilization and commerce.

Enacting the benefits of both commerce and civilization required securing pools of labor by extending new relations of indebtedness, which took the administrative form of direct taxation. In the East African Protectorate infrastructures as a stand-in for the common good were, then, underwritten by economies of coercion that forced people to take to the road, entering the wage-labor economy—often the Public Works Department—in order to “find their tax.” These

²⁶ See Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire*, 436-439, for a discussion of the difficulty the IBEA faced in securing shareholders.

²⁷ Leigh A. Gardner, *Taxing Colonial Africa: The Political Economy of British Imperialism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

monies, in turn, as we shall see, became the engine for infrastructural expansion and state-building. A focus on new regimes of taxation, in other words, helps clarify the contradictory twinning of commerce and civilization in their specific relationship to infrastructures.

These attachments produced violent contradictions, leading to conflict not simply between people and the corporation nor, later, between people and the state, but also at the scale of community and household as old and new metrics of valuation, especially as they pertained to work, jostled for dominance. The ambivalent space of “the road” in contemporary Kenya, I argue, emerges out of these histories at the conjuncture. What follows, then, is one history of the present.

Culturing Space in Two Registers

The Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) had been active in the region for over a decade when it first received its charter in 1888. Administrators viewed new infrastructural networks as being critical to extending the reach of *both* “commerce and civilisation” for, as one company administrator noted, without “better facilities of communication and transport...the development of the country could not be carried far.”²⁸ “Development” here had both economic and altruistic valences. Indeed, the IBEAC routinely argued that the creation of new road networks would aid in the fight to end the slave trade, with newly cut roads bisecting the existing caravan routes along which slave raiders marched slaves from the interior to the coast.²⁹ But the IBEAC’s ambitions were broader. Like discussions of radio broadcasting that would crop up some 50 years in the future (see Chapter 3), IBEAC administrators hoped that the construction of new road networks would enact not the colony, but first the region, and then the empire.

The corporation tasked IBEAC engineers with constructing road networks as the major arteries of commerce, enabling the movement of the vast natural wealth of the region from the interior to the ports of the Swahili Coast. But company administrators did not hold the goals of commerce to be distinct from the goals of civilization, the public/private nature of this venture

²⁸ McDermott, *British East Africa*, 396.

²⁹ N.A. May 1877, Box 64, File 3, Imperial British East Africa Co. [Hereafter IBEAC Co.], School of Oriental and African Studies [Hereafter SOAS].

ensuring their entanglement. And these twin projects were explicitly linked to the extension of new road networks. One 1878 memorandum titled “The Road from Dar-es-Salaam East Africa, towards the Northern end of Lake Nyanza” recounted this dual vision. Updates on the new road would be of wide interest, the author wrote, but would be of “special interest for all who are looking to the not too distant civilisation of East Africa, and the development of its vast natural wealth.”³⁰ The scale at which these men operated was not, evidently, that of the colony. Their aspirations were for commercial, rather than administrative control. This had a different spatial logic, one better suited to the region. And yet, roads were not simply disenchanting routes of market-making. In the minds of these company administrators, new road networks were freighted with ideology, their very materiality capable of serving both a critical pedagogic and an essential material function—civilizational uplift and market-making two sides of the same coin.

But not all paths were considered equal. The “East African Road” was described as “resembling a vast and beautiful avenue stretching in a straight line through the forest.”³¹ Right angles, wide road reserves, clean lines, proper grading, all were essential if the road, both as a material form and as a concept, was to have these civilizing effects. Road infrastructures were capable not only of moving people through space, then, but of literally bringing people forward in civilizational time. From their status of immaturity, the communities who came into contact with these new infrastructures would become civilizationally mature. The road, in other words, would civilize both space and persons. This epistemology would not have been altogether illegible to many of the communities living in the region, for whom both maturity and culture were defined by the modification of the natural world through the exertion of human labor. For administrators, though, it was the road, like the railway, that was “civilisation” made manifest.

These European hopefuls were not alone in linking new infrastructural networks to desirable social and material transformations. On May 3, 1879, Barghash Bin Said, then Sultan of Zanzibar, responded to a request from MacKinnon for aid in constructing new road networks:

As regards your asking our assistance in... joining you in your program of making roads in our country, we shall be glad to offer you any assistance in our power. From our heart we say, that we are desirous of helping anyone, who takes the trouble and feels interest in promoting the cause of civilisation, and commerce in

³⁰ “Memorandum: The Road from Dar-es-Salaam East Africa, towards the Northern end of Lake Nyanza” 20 September, 1878, Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

³¹ “Memorandum: The Road from Dar-es-Salaam East Africa, towards the Northern end of Lake Nyanza” 20 September, 1878, Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

these countries. We fully appreciate...[the] advantages resulting to a country from good roads.³²

Bin Said was himself something of an infrastructural fetishist, launching vast public works projects in Stone Town during his tenure as Sultan. As the sovereign power on the Coast, Bin Said stood to benefit from an increase in trade. But he also held shares in the IBEA, and in his capacity as shareholder was wooed by the promised dividends.³³ Bin Said's interests in the IBEA's infrastructural projects, then, were complicated, located as he was at the nexus of the twin logics of commerce and civilization, the corporation and the state, sovereignty and marketization.

Infrastructural enthusiasts, such as Bin Said, did not simply appropriate new technologies and infrastructures—and the ideological baggage that they bore—*tout court*. The Swahili Coast was a cosmopolitan space of pastiche and mixture, a space where people routinely “domesticated” objects, technologies, and infrastructures that found their supposed origins abroad, firmly rescaling them such that they could be embedded in Zanzibari social processes and cultural universes.³⁴

And the Sultan was not alone in demonstrating a desire for roads. As W. Beardall wrote to MacKinnon: “the natives I met with all seem very pleased about the prospect of the road passing through their country.”³⁵ This desire for roads, though, was not indiscriminate. Like the Sultan, people brought to bear their own notions regarding the relationship between space and authority as they evaluated the relative merits of the new infrastructures passing through their lands. On the Coast, people refused to give the Company permission to construct routes through their areas without the sanction of the Sultan.³⁶ Others demanded payment from Company engineers wishing to pass through their communities, this in keeping with long-standing expectations that caravans pay tribute to leaders as an acknowledgement of their authority.³⁷

³² Barghosh Bin Saeed to William MacKinnon, 3 May, 1879. Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

³³ Fahad Ahmad Bishara, *A Sea of Debt: Law and Economic Life in the Western Indian Ocean, 1780-1950*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 157.

³⁴ Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), esp Chapter 4. For his discussion of Bin Said, 105-115.

³⁵ W. Beardall to William MacKinnon, August 14, 1879, Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS; W. Mayes to Kirk, September 1877, Box. 64, File 4, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

³⁶ N.D., Box 64, IBEA Co. File 3, MacKinnon Papers, SOAS.

³⁷ Ven. J.P. Farler, “Native Routes in East Africa from Pangani to the Masai Country and the Victoria Nyanza,” *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*, Vol. 4, No 12 (1882): 732.

Here the IBEA was forced to confront existing frameworks of sovereignty that laid out, in their own terms, a vision of the relationship between space and authority.³⁸

Indeed, and of course, in pursuing these projects of infrastructural expansion as a means of both generating new markets and generating civilization, company administrators were confronting lived and cultured spaces. Eastern Africa, Company administrators well understood, was not a *tabula rasa* as the prevailing trope of the “Dark Continent” might have had it, but a lively and changing social topography. And people brought their own ideas regarding the relationship between human exertion and the production of cultured spaces to bear as they interpreted IBEA infrastructures. If these epistemologies shared a vision of culture as nature reformed, however, their goals in culturing space, and the spaces subject to this cultural work, were often out of sync. To get at these other visions of space we need to move away from the Coast into the interior. We will begin in Machakos, and with a man whom we shall meet again, John Ainsworth.

On the occasion of Kenya’s Jubilee, John Ainsworth put to the page some of his reflections on the early days of the Company’s administration of the region. In 1884, Ainsworth was tasked with spreading Britain’s sphere of influence through the IBEA.³⁹ This position placed him under the authority of Mackinnon. By 1890, Ainsworth was managing the company’s transport and supply department. In 1892, he was selected to oversee the company’s post at Machakos.⁴⁰ If the corporation and the state, the private and the public, were deeply entangled in the region, men like Ainsworth joined men like Bin Said in quite literally engaging in boundary-crossing work. When the Foreign Office took over the administration of the region, Ainsworth took up a position in the new government, from whence he became the colony’s first Native Commissioner in 1918, a position from which, perhaps predictably, and as we shall see, he advocated for the cultivation of new consumer desires in the region as a means of extending not simply commerce, but civilization as well.⁴¹ But in the days before the IBEA’s collapse, Ainsworth was responsible

³⁸ For competing visions of sovereignty on in Zanzibar Swahili Coast, see James Brennon, “Loving the Sultan’s Flag: Sovereignty and Decolonization in Coastal Kenya,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (2008), Vol. 50, No. 4: 831-861.

³⁹ Robert M. Maxon, *John Ainsworth and the Making of Kenya*. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1980), 1.

⁴⁰ Maxon, *John Ainsworth and the Making of Kenya*, 11.

⁴¹ John Ainsworth, “East Africa ‘Kenya’ Reminiscences,” MSS. Afr. s. 380, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford; Maxon, *John Ainsworth and the Making of Kenya*, 335.

for extending the Company's interests throughout the territories that Kamba, Maasai, and Kikuyu communities called home.

A close reading of Ainsworth's papers reveals how African communities living in the area inscribed existing social relationships in space. "Wherever possible," Ainsworth wrote, "the different communities left considerable strips of land unoccupied between themselves, in certain cases these strips were many miles wide, e.g. the Athi and Kapte plains, in places up to 30 miles in width, divided the A'Kamba from the A'Kikuyu."⁴² Ainsworth presented these as being unplanned spaces. Continuing, he wrote: "These neutral zones were never the result of any mutual arrangement, they came about through the natural hostility of one people to another."⁴³ Here Ainsworth conformed to a prevailing trope of the region as one that was characterized by the 'brutality' of warring "tribes"—which was also the justification for foreign incursions. However, and unlike the supposedly empty and homogenous space of capital, not all spaces were equally open to human intervention.⁴⁴

As Ainsworth himself noted at the end of the report: "[t]hese areas were in no way looked upon as lands belonging to any of the tribes concerned."⁴⁵ These zones, it appears, were popularly held to be spaces that fell outside of proprietary claims, but this is not tantamount to their being asocial. If company administrators imagined roads as lines of communication, these empty spaces, too, were zones of communication; spaces that were set out and protected in a bid to ensure the cordial relations *among* people—to ensure that lines of communication were not crossed. These empty spaces, in other words, were socialized. Indeed, as Ainsworth himself noted, these zones were routinely crisscrossed materially and ideationally by both robust networks of trade and durable practices of kinshipping. Writing in his treatise on land tenure, Ainsworth noted that: "It should be borne in mind that native law and custom usually provides for natives of any other tribe being received into and adopted by another tribe on the stranger

⁴² John Ainsworth to Chairman, Kenya Land Enquiry Commission, Nairobi. September 1931. MSS. Afr. S. 381 (2), Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

⁴³ John Ainsworth to Chairman, Kenya Land Enquiry Commission, Nairobi. September 1931. MSS. Afr. S. 381 (2), Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

⁴⁴ See Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), especially Chapter 1.

⁴⁵ John Ainsworth to Chairman, Kenya Land Enquiry Commission, Nairobi. September 1931. MSS. Afr. S. 381 (2), Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

complying with certain formalities and paying his footing.”⁴⁶ These zones, in other words, were deliberative but permeable gaps.

And these spaces were not always empty. Shifting alliances, the ebbs and flows of seasons, and periodic drought, famine, and disease meant that sometimes these spaces were peopled, at other times left empty.⁴⁷ Such was the case of the zone dividing what would come to be called Ukambani and Maasailand.

The road from the shangi to the Wambikati passes [through] open and fairly easy country. The natives say that it was once densely populated, and the whole had been cleared and cultivated with good success until the time of the great famine which devastated and depopulated Ukambani some seven years ago. After this it was again peopled by a large influx of Masai during the period of the cattle disease. . . . These Masai however proved to be friendly, and an appreciable number have settled down to cultivation with the Wakamba. I have met them, and [find] them to be quite reconciled to the change. Though they still retain the superior characteristics of their race, and are very discernable from the Wakamba. They are in communication with their own tribe and act as middle-men in procuring supplies for it.⁴⁸

Administrative representational practices notwithstanding, self-identification was, in this period, defined by mode of production, experience, expertise, and the virtues ascribed to them, not by some abstract notion of “tribe.”⁴⁹ These epistemologies of space—both shifting and durable—would, as we shall see, shape people’s willingness to engage in road work.

Administrators’ representational practices throughout the colonial period downplayed the critically important role played by African knowledge and expertise when it came to technologies and infrastructures. In this, administrators of various stripes drew on pernicious but durable visions of Africa as a place without technologies, as Africa as a place without technological expertise. These tendencies notwithstanding, people’s knowledge of, and commitments to, existing spatializations of social life and networks of communication routinely

⁴⁶ John Ainsworth “Kenya Land Enquiry Commission: Replies to Points dealt with in the Terms of Reference,” MSS. Afr. S. 381 (2), Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

⁴⁷ George Wilson to EA Scottish Mission, 26 August 1892, Box 70, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

⁴⁸ George Wilson to EA Scottish Mission, 26 August 1892, Box 70, IBEA Co, SOAS.

⁴⁹ For the construction of the Kamba through their labor over the *longue duree* see Myles Osborne, *Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya: Loyalty and Martial Race among the Kamba, c. 1800 to the Present*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); for a discussion in the case of the Kikuyu, see Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu* for “ethnicity” prior to 1900; for a discussion of the case of Kikuyu self-articulation as a “tribe,” see John Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty, and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought.”

informed the siting of early roads. Uganda might have been the goal of IBEA administrators, but to get there the company's engineers had to design roadways and recruit labor as they moved through these various cultured zones.

The input of African interlocutors critically shaped the emergent infrastructural topography of the region. IBEA engineers' mobilization of "native knowledge" ensured that new roads often followed the tracks laid out by "native paths" and existing caravan routes.⁵⁰ As Ainsworth recalled:

For some months previous to the Government's taking over the administration of East Africa a party of Royal Engineers under Capt. Sclater had been clearing a track suitable for animal and wheel transport from Kiwezi on towards Uganda...By Number 1895 the Road party was nearing the Kikuyu forest. The new road lay...to the West of the Nzawi on the old safari track which was not possible for wheel transport.⁵¹

Old paths were followed, though new technologies of mobility required widened routes that were differently graded and surfaced, and so new roads were often sited at a distance from, though parallel to, their older siblings.

In making their recommendations, African interlocutors demonstrated their preference for retaining existing spatializations of social and material life. As W. Beardall was to report to G. Waller: "All the natives here are anxious that the road should follow the Wanyamioze route to the Kinagani...so they are all prepared to swear that every other route is bad or impassible."⁵² Beardall resisted complying with the recommendations of these men, arguing that it would take the road down towards the soft, "muddy" soils of the Kingani river.⁵³ Other routes were proposed, but "from all native accounts," Beardall reported to MacKinnon, "a course between these two routes would be impracticable, as most of the country is uninhabited the people having been driven out by...raids."⁵⁴ And so MacKinnon instructed the engineers to concede and survey

⁵⁰ C. Crawford (Gulu Gulu) to G.S. Mackenzie, November 1888, Box 63, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS; Imperial British East Africa Co. [Hereafter IBEAC] Zanzibar to Lt. R.E. Swayne, October 1888, Box 63, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS; G.S. Mackenzie to F.J. Jackson, 10 November 1888, Box 63. Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

⁵¹ John Ainsworth, "East Africa 'Kenya' Reminiscences," MSS. Afr. s. 380, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

⁵² Beardall to Waller, 12 Jan 1880, Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS; Note that the Kingani [Ruvu] River is in present day Tanzania, and was adjacent to Bagamoyo an essential trade entrepot in the region.

⁵³ Beardall to Waller, 12 Jan 1880, Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS; Beardall to W. Mackinnon, 14 August, 1879, Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS; Beardall to Mackinnon 10 October 1879, Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

⁵⁴ Beardall to W. Mackinnon, 14 August, 1879, Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

the Kingani river route, which ran adjacent to a “native path,” a path that wound “about a good deal.”⁵⁵ These parallel routes would reflect a preference for angularity, with Beardall reporting that he would follow the route of the path but would “keep a straighter course with the road.”⁵⁶ The IBEA’s decision to overlay existing paths with company roads was a scalar move. As “native knowledge” was appropriated, communications networks were rebranded: from native path to IBEA road, from Safari track to Sclater’s road, from footpath to route of “commerce and civilisation.” In the process, the critical roles played by African interlocutors, like the paths themselves, were effaced.

While administrative representational practices sidelined their reliance on African expertise, engineers were dependent on the input of these men to fill in the vast blank spots in their knowledge of the territories and its people. But these topographical experts did not simply enable the laying down of already existing plans. Instead, as the above suggests, they drew on their knowledge of the terrain, as well as their preferences for the relationship between the production of space and the organization of social life, as they made their recommendations.

This prosthetic work, then, while framed as banal, was a critical source of expertise that fundamentally shaped the topography of the region. And their position as critical intermediaries enabled these advisors to retain some measure of control, their role in the siting of new roads ensuring the partial maintenance of existing spatializations of social life. These topographical and social preferences extended beyond these knowledge workers’ insistent recommendations that new roads follow old paths. Indeed, people routinely refused to engage in cutting new paths that contravened reigning organizations of space at the behest of the IBEA. In the 1890s, George Wilson wrote to MacKinnon on the progress of a track that African workers were cutting through Ukambani west towards Maasai territory:

This is to give you early intelligence that 22 miles of road were finished on the 23rd ... Quite two miles have been completed since then and tomorrow I will cross the Masai road so much referred to. I am still ahead of my estimate of June...if the

⁵⁵ Beardall to W. Mackinnon, 14 August, 1879, Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

⁵⁶ Beardall to MacKinnon, 14 August 1879; Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS; For discussions of the importance of the politics of angular aesthetics see Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Man: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Rudolf Mrazek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); William Cunningham Bissell, *Urban Design, Chaos, and Colonial Power in Zanzibar*, (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2011).

Wakamba will be induced to cross their border...Only the Masai Road bars their progress.⁵⁷

Some days later, Wilson sent an update: “I greatly fear that the Masai Road is an insuperable bar to the further progress of the Wakamba with us. The dread of this road becomes magnified as we approach it...They see both myself and my men almost daily in the vicinity of the road but they’re not to be influenced by this.”⁵⁸ This partial archive does not disclose the significance of the Maasai road for the Wakamba men that had been induced to work on the IBEA route. It seems likely, however, that it was a “route” that this “warlike tribe”—the Maasai—used “when raiding coastwards.”⁵⁹ This “Masai Road,” then, was likely the terminus of the semi-permeable empty zones that crisscrossed the territory. In this instance, and no doubt under duress, these Wakamba men crossed the Maasai Road. As Wilson reported on August 29, 1892: “I have to report having carried the New Road across the Masai Road without unusual incident. It is most satisfactory to state that the Wakamba took their share of the work.”⁶⁰

Suffice it to say, early road networks were critically shaped by the input of Africans knowledgeable of the region. IBEA engineers routinely elided these contributions and, in the process, rendered this knowledge banal, all the while deploying it as the infrastructural foundation upon which the Company pursued its ambitious project of enacting “civilisation and commerce.” But existing epistemologies of the relationship between authority and space were not the only ones with which IBEA administrators had to contend. So, too, did African communities living in the region bring their own ideas regarding culture and work to bear as they debated the merits of laboring on Company roads.

⁵⁷ William Mackinnon to George Wilson, 26 August 1892, Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

⁵⁸ George Wilson to Secretary, EA Scottish Mission, 26 August 1892, Box 70, File 2, IBEA Co., SOAS.

⁵⁹ Sir James Ronald Leslie Macdonald, *Soldiering and Surveying in British East Africa, 1891-1894*, (London: Publisher to the India Office, 1897), 26&35.

⁶⁰ George Wilson to Secretary, EA Scottish Mission, 26 August 1892, Box 70, File 2, IBEA Co. SOAS.

The Virtues of Labor in Two Registers

“After some persuasion we got the native Elders, their headmen and people to take an interest in clearing tracks...We laid out the lines and the natives did the work.”⁶¹ In the early days, people exchanged their work for goods: namely brass wire, beads, muskets, and *merekani* cloth, all of which were in high demand by the 1840s.⁶² Company administrators were well aware that they needed to be alive to the changing tastes of the communities living in the region as they solicited them for favors, requested permission to cut new roads, and asked local leaders to call people up for work.⁶³ As one report noted: “I had a very pleasing shauri with...[Wakamba men] at which they fell in at once with my wishes for their cooperation on the road. If my supplies could have stood the strain I could have engaged hundreds here without trouble.”⁶⁴

Administrators unreflexively linked a willingness to engage in roads-work to the relative civilizational status of the people who they worked to induce to labor on these routes. But it was not simply one’s willingness to appreciate the civilizational sign value of the road that was evidence of civilizational maturity. Administrators held that the labor itself would be generative of civilization. “With regard to the Wakamba, as workmen, I have the honor to report satisfactorily...They are cheerful, and can be led.”⁶⁵ This capacity to “be led” was linked to the future. As the report continued: “with a more extended experience they should become a useful factor in the native labor question.”⁶⁶ As another report noted: “The progress [on the road] has been much more rapid than I at first anticipated and the beneficial influence on the natives of the discipline of the work has been most marked.”⁶⁷ Administrators framed the materiality of road labor itself as having pedagogic value. “I believe that the mere influence of the work itself would

⁶¹ John Ainsworth, “East Africa ‘Kenya’ Reminiscences” MSS. Afr. s. 380, Bodleian Library.

⁶² H. Leakey, “Kenya Land Commission, *Evidence*, 1865 as cited in Ambler, 126. On beads as stores of value, see Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*, 74; G.S. Mackenzie wrote to the Secretary of the IBEA reporting on the delivery of the gift of maxim guns to the Sultan, G.S. Mackenzie to Hon. Secretary IBEA Co., 3 December 1888, Box 63, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

⁶³ G.S. Mackenzie, Zanzibar to Lt. Swanye, Oct. 1888, Box 63, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS. For a wonderful discussion of the importance of consumer “taste” in Eastern Africa and how it shaped global markets in commodities for consumption, see Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*.

⁶⁴ George Wilson to Secretary, EA Scottish Mission, 26 August 1892, Box 70, File 2, IBEA Co., SOAS.

⁶⁵ George Wilson to Secretary, EA Scottish Mission, 26 August 1892, Box 70, File 2, IBEA Co., SOAS.

⁶⁶ George Wilson to Secretary, EA Scottish Mission, 26 August 1892, Box 70, File 2, IBEA Co., SOAS.

⁶⁷ George Wilson to Secretary, EA Scottish Mission, 26 August 1892, Box 70, File 2, IBEA Co., SOAS.

do more good than any number of mere wordy negotiations.”⁶⁸ But this would take time and the cultivation of new rhythms, rhythms that would transform work into labor: “It has to be remembered that this is their first experience in working for hire, other than that gained in, at times, carrying a few loads for Swahilis, when an exorbitant figure is demanded.”⁶⁹

By the 1840s, as Myles Osborne argues, working the Caravan routes was one means by which Wakamba men secured adult masculinity, analogous as it was to large game hunting. Like hunting, time spent with the caravan not only held out the possibility for travel, but also promised large, consolidated returns.⁷⁰ The rhythm of the IBEA’s new labor regime was somewhat different.

Unlike the excitement and prestige of long-distance work along the caravan routes, where young men could mobilize their skills as warriors, labor on roads was banal, routine, without interruption, and remuneration was incremental. And so, people were resistant to these patterns of labor, which took them to parts of the territory a great distance from their communities for long periods of time, and offered small returns. As Wilson acknowledged, Wakamba road laborers were now “working miles away from their homes.” And while for Wilson this brought them “under the useful discipline of the Camp,” he conceded that it “caused no small measure of resistance.” “Naturally” this new labor regime, he wrote, caused “extreme anxiety,” the Wakamba:

being like so many children; each waft of wind turns them from point to point like a weather-cock. Their free and carefullness [sic] life has unfitted them for steady toil and makes them impatient of control, and they require more tact and patience than four times their number of Swahili.⁷¹

Infrastructural work was, in other words, central to the “franchise state’s” efforts to create a pool of laborers, which itself required reformulating people’s apprehension of time. Wilson’s condescension, though, was premised on a misrecognition.

Wakamba men's ethos surrounding time and work reflected a sensibility. The nineteenth century had been seen the outbreak of periodic drought, famine, and disease.⁷² People drew on

⁶⁸ George Wilson to William Mackinnon, 26 August 1892, Box 70, File 41, IBEA Co., SOAS.

⁶⁹ George Wilson to Secretary, EA Scottish Mission, 26 August 1892, Box 70, File 2, IBEA Co., SOAS.

⁷⁰ Osborne, *Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya*, 22-23;

⁷¹ George Wilson to Secretary, EA Scottish Mission, 26 August 1892, Box 70, File 2, IBEA Co., SOAS.

⁷² Charles H. Ambler, *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism: The Central Region in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900*.

their experiences of the famines of the 1870s, 1880s, and early 1890s, as well as the rinderpest outbreak of 1890 and the year following, when they considered engaging in roads work. These experiences placed a premium on people's being attentive to the capriciousness of the rains.⁷³ Attention to the "waft of wind," in other words, was essential to ensuring people's *own* capacities to cut culture out of nature. Like the land itself, time was not empty and homogenous, and attending to its lively character marked the pivot between harvest and dearth, between life and death. And so, the moments of greatest frustration came with the planting seasons, when divergent visions of cutting culture out of nature came to the fore.

Administrators conceded that labor alone would not "civilise" persons into new rhythms of work. What was needed was a medium that could act as an attachment, tying people to new regimes of labor. Administrators saw in the money economy one such attachment. In the early days, wrote Ainsworth, "Money as a medium of exchange was unknown among the natives of the interior, the buying of food, any payment for services etc. was done by way of barter."⁷⁴ Soon after the IBEA established the station at Machakos, the Company introduced IBEA-minted rupees.⁷⁵ Joining the Company flag, company-issued currencies suggest the state-like functions of the corporation. Administrators hoped that the new currency would dislodge the Indian rupee. The circulation of IBEA rupees is best understood, then, as a struggle over sovereignty, the IBEA hoping that a monopoly over the means of payment and measure of value would secure its position as a "franchise state."⁷⁶

Some people came to accept Company coins as legitimate stores of value. As Ainsworth wrote: "Money came to be readily accepted by the natives living in the areas adjacent to the Administration centres and the Railway line, and so there came about the change from the barter system to one of cash payment."⁷⁷ While the company—and its currency—would 'fail,' establishing a standardized currency was part and parcel of efforts to gain control of the territory. Once taxation was established in the early years of the twentieth century, having a monopoly

⁷³ For Wakamba people livestock was the measure of wealth. This, though, was a shift from a land-based vision of authority and wealth wrought by the famine of the late nineteenth century, to which we shall return. See Osborne, *Ethnicity and Empire*, 45-46.

⁷⁴ John Ainsworth, "East Africa 'Kenya' Reminiscences," MSS. Afr. s. 380, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

⁷⁵ John Ainsworth, "East Africa 'Kenya' Reminiscences," MSS. Afr. s. 380, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

⁷⁶ Wambui Mwangi, "Of Coins and Conquest: The East African Currency Board, the Rupee Crisis, and the Problem of Colonialism in the East African Protectorate," *Comparative Study of Society and History* (2001): 771.

⁷⁷ John Ainsworth, "East Africa 'Kenya' Reminiscences," MSS. Afr. s. 380, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

over currency ensured that payments for labor could not be made in kind, but in government sanctioned currencies alone. Until 1919, the Indian rupee would remain ascendant.⁷⁸ And so, and as we shall see, colonial currencies were critical to consolidating a labor market. But at this stage, there was no monopoly over the medium of exchange, with multiple currencies and stores of value jostling for authority.⁷⁹

The consolidation of labor markets quickly, though unevenly, created consumer markets. As “time went on other people became quite keen,” Ainsworth wrote, in the new markets to which roads and road work gave rise. Having roads run through one’s area in some instances marked these spaces as ones of prestige, leading to “one location competing with another.”⁸⁰ For this competition, people were rewarded, with “energetic headmen” being “given bicycles.” These new markers of prestige, these new symbols of newly emergent hierarchies, these new vehicles of cultural capital, “subsequently became quite the fashion.” And this incentivized both an increase in “trade and a desire to maintain good tracks.”⁸¹ Technologies of mobility and emergent markets joined new currencies in generating infrastructural attachments, attachments that bound people to the road.

For many, though, the promise of payments in cash or otherwise was not a sufficient inducement to “civilise” the territory by constructing its road networks. Indeed, company employees routinely lamented the difficulties of recruiting and maintaining labor. As Beardall wrote to Waller in 1879: “You must understand” that the delays in construction have been considerable:

The progress made since I last wrote is small, though this is principally owing to our having been unable to get day labourers the numbers of which have varied from about 6 to 25 during the past month. All the men that I had got together last September many working continuously and regularly, are now scattered up and down the country, some busy on their own shambas, others india-rubber hunting,

⁷⁸ Mwangi, “Of Coins and Conquest,” 763.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 771.

⁸⁰ John Ainsworth, “East Africa ‘Kenya’ Reminiscences,” MSS. Afr. s. 380, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

⁸¹ John Ainsworth, “East Africa ‘Kenya’ Reminiscences,” MSS. Afr. s. 380, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford; For a discussion of the role of “colonial things” in establishing new sensibilities, See Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon: Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) esp. Chapter 4; For another example, See Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, & Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

or gone on journeys, or at the coast and as yet they don't seem inclined to return to work.⁸²

Work, as this suggests, was by no means generic. Wakamba brought their own systems of valuation—systems which held that, for men, it was mobility and hunting that brought prestige—to bear as they considered working on new infrastructures.

And often, as the above suggests, these difficulties in recruitment neatly mapped onto the agricultural rhythms of the region.⁸³ “During the past month,” one report noted:

I have been proceeding with the cleaning and widening of the road, which requires more labour and expense than I anticipated during the first fortnight of the month I could not get as many daily laborers as I could wish...at this season of the year the people are busily engaged in cleaning and planting their own Shambas.⁸⁴

As another correspondence noted: “Many are now engaged in getting in their own crops at this season...and labor is [as a result] somewhat scarce.”⁸⁵ These correspondences were written in February immediately preceding the long rains that, ideally, would run from March through June. These months were the time of planting. While these epistemologies of civilization shared a vision of the need to expend human labor in order to turn nature into culture, the rhythm of the road was somewhat different from the rhythm of the seasons. And missing the time of planting could prove to be disastrous not only in the short term, but in the long term as well.

It quickly became clear, though, that these new infrastructures were part and parcel of administrative efforts to create new “fiscal subjects” by enforcing new regimes of taxation.⁸⁶ For the franchise state road work was, in other words, shaped not only by the desire to tap new

⁸² Beardall to Waller 11 Dec, 1879, Box 77, File 61, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

⁸³ See E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism.” *Past and Present*. Vol. 38, No. 1 (1967): 85; Thompson’s ideas surrounding time have been crucial to scholars of Africa, see Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), esp. 181; See also Phyllis M. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Kaletso Atkins, works with a concept akin to E.P. Thompson’s notion of “moral economy” in her discussion of incommensurate visions of work and time. See Kaletso Atkins *The Moon is Dead ! Give Us Our Money*, (Oxford: James Currey, 1995). For a discussion of the limits of the concept, see Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888*, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), who argues that the concept assumes internal homogeneity, which not only elides structures of power but leaves little room for an exploration of conflict or change.

⁸⁴ N.A. to William Mackinnon. 27 February 1879, Box 77, File 61. Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

⁸⁵ Beardall to MacKinnon, 16 June 1879, File 59, Box 76, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

⁸⁶ Janet Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa*, (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

markets but to create a taxable base and thus a revenue pool for the Company. But what, exactly, were people being taxed for? In theory, they were being taxed because they would now have access to a “common good”—a road—which would in turn enable their entry into new markets. While this was taken to be common sense, administrators acknowledged that “the market” was not a self-evident good, but a culturally constituted form. And so, seizure in the form of taxation would have to be incremental.

I am inclined to think myself that the creation of a Native road might advantageously be the preliminary step to more elaborate work, and although I am not prepared at present to actually lay down a positive opinion regarding the levying of taxes on shambas situated along the road contemplated in your dispatch I am afraid that this would offer considerable difficulty. The Natives already inhabiting the track through which the road is intended to run would probably in their present undeveloped state, fail to recognize in it such advantages as would warrant in their eyes the levying of a tax from them, and it appears doubtful whether the presence of the road would induce others to settle in its vicinity when they became aware that this situation entailed taxation.⁸⁷

One can imagine how communities would have apprehended this proposal. If anyone ought to have been the beneficiaries of these emergent proximities, it was the communities living in the areas through which IBEA infrastructures ran. It should have been the corporation, in other words, who paid its “footing” for being granted the privilege of this proximity; this in line with long-standing spatial practices. And so, people needed to be eased into their new status. “In regard to the toll to be charged over the road it is suggested by my Directors that this should not be imposed until the road is somewhat actively used by the natives, who having once appreciated its utility, would be more likely to pay the toll cordially.”⁸⁸ While the IBEA largely failed in its efforts to fund its operations through exacting what administrators variously referred to as a toll, a tax, a levy from communities, this aspiration would be taken up, formalized, and extended by the nascent state.

By 1892, the IBEA was functionally bankrupt, and retrenchment in investments began as soon as the Foreign Office took over in 1895. As Bruce Berman notes, the company’s failure “showed that private capital would be unable to cope with metropolitan strategic and economic

⁸⁷ Ernest J.L. Berkeley to Sec. London, 28 January 1892, Box 72, File 49, Mackinnon Papers, SOAS.

⁸⁸ Ernest L. Bentley, Acting Secretary to Admin Mombasa, 22 April, 1892, Box 72, File 49, BIEA Co., SOAS.

interests without public subsidy or, eventually, a massive public investment in a railway.”⁸⁹ The Treasury was primarily concerned with recovering the 6.6 million pounds it had sunk into the railway.⁹⁰ The British government, for its part, had little interest in asking Britons to help fund the colony. Capital sunk into the railroad emerged in this period not as an investment but as a problem. The monies required to offset state indebtedness would have to come from other sources, namely African communities. This would be experienced by communities living in the region as a period of acute “reversal,” a period wherein people were expected to do much more with much less.

The new administration, in the meantime, really did not know how to administer the territory and was largely dependent on company officials, many of whom, like Ainsworth, were absorbed into the nascent apparatus of the state.⁹¹ It was not simply people that trafficked across the boundary dividing the (private) corporation from the (public) state. When the Foreign Office finally took over the administration of the region, the policies of fiscal austerity initiated by the corporation not only persisted but became more pronounced, with African communities left to offset the costs of this ideologically dense but materially thin austere state. In other words, policies that grew out of a public-private partnership, to use a financial anachronism, became the basic organizing logic of the colonial state. These administrative changes dovetailed with a period of calamitous ruin for Kenyan communities. And this ruin was firmly tethered to the road.

The Politics of Mobility in Two Registers

The first deaths on the road emerged at a troubling juncture. Over the course of the nineteenth century the region, in general, and what would come to be called Kenya’s Central Province, in particular—the location to which this story now pivots—had been wracked by periodic drought and epizootic epidemics. In 1892, rinderpest claimed the lives of approximately

⁸⁹ Bruce Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination*, (London: James Currey, 1990), 51.

⁹⁰ Berman, *Control and Crisis*, 51.

⁹¹ Berman, *Control and Crisis*, 51.

50 percent of the herds on the land. Then, in 1897 came drought, on the heels of which came famine.

Materiality here mattered in at least two interrelated ways. Not all were affected equally, with southern Kikuyuland significantly worse off than northern Kikuyuland. This had less to do with topography or variations in rainfall specific to the region than with the place of the south in relation to the increasingly robust infrastructural and administrative reach of this “franchise state.” Southern Kikuyuland had been a main grainstore for passing caravans heading west towards Uganda, surpassing the role of the Wakamba, which had peaked in the 1870s.⁹² These emergent markets of goods for grain had drained communities, leaving them vulnerable when the rains failed that year, and the year following.⁹³

But it was not death by famine that caused the bulk of the devastation; it was smallpox.⁹⁴ Unlike famine, which emerged at the intersection of drought and the consolidation of new markets, the latter demanded by new infrastructures, smallpox is a communicable disease, and while ‘naturally occurring,’ its history suggests it is a disease of empire and trade.⁹⁵ And it, too, was linked to new infrastructures in critical ways, the contagion spreading along the “profusion of [new] routes.”⁹⁶

Communities living in the region were savvy in connecting the devastation to external forces. “Traditional accounts of the famine years in Ulu,” writes Charles Ambler, “often described the period as *Yua ya Panuga*, ‘the famine of rice,’ or *Yua ya Maguina*, ‘the Gunny sack famine.’” These patterns of naming firmly linked the devastation to external forces. “The rice that was imported and distributed to the hungry by Europeans,” writes Ambler, “was then largely unfamiliar in central Kenya, as were the bags used to transport it. In a deeper sense, these and other new products were seen to have engendered the disequilibrium that led inexorably to catastrophe.”⁹⁷ For the communities of Central Kenya, in other words, there was nothing *natural* about this calamity, its loci were evident. And it was a calamity that had grave moral as well as material consequences.

⁹² Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 14; Muriuki, 136.

⁹³ Charles Ambler, *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism*, 126 and 123-24.

⁹⁴ Charles Ambler, *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism*, 141.

⁹⁵ Donald R. Hopkins, *The Greatest Killer: Smallpox in History*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁹⁶ Ambler, *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism*, 141.

⁹⁷ Ambler, *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism*, 137; for a discussion of this in relation to Wakamba communities, see Osborne, 43-51; esp. 45.

Missionaries and government agents alike reported on the scale of the death, which according to American missionaries claimed the lives of 49,000 people in the south.⁹⁸ It was impossible to ignore the devastation, with corpses lying on paths, large and small, as well as new roads and the rail-line. Missionaries of the African Inland Mission (AIM) reported that: “shambas and paths are literally strewn with corpses and thousands have died and scores are dying daily and there seems to be little help for them.”⁹⁹ AIM missionaries were not alone in remarking on the conspicuous visibility of these deaths. A British resident recalled that “no matter where one went corpses [were] strewed [on] the tracks.”¹⁰⁰ As a settler recalled: “when I went up to the line, I could not get quite as far as Limuru. The railway line was a mass of corpses.”¹⁰¹ This archive does not disclose how these bodies made their way to these new arteries of “civilisation and commerce.” Perhaps people hoped that it would be along these networks that they might gain some reprieve. In this, they would not, perhaps, have been wrong. Food relief programs were initiated at the coast by the government in 1898, thereafter spreading inland.¹⁰²

And yet the placement of the bodies of the dead also mirrored popular understandings of the locus of death, and firmly situated IBEA infrastructures as uncultured, wild spaces. Kikuyu ideas regarding individual and collective wellbeing were intimately wrapped up in the painstaking work of clearing the forest, of cutting culture out of nature, of civilizing uncivilized zones. For these communities, the untamed forest was a cultureless and potentially corrupting space. In the past, the bodies of the dead had been placed in the forest, cordoning off the potentially polluting qualities of dead bodies from the confines of cultured life. The placement of the bodies of the dead during the famine suggests that, in this time of calamity, the road joined the forest as space outside the bounds of civilization. These placements, then, signified the road as a space of corruption, a cultureless place contrasted against the securely bounded *ithaka* or cultured land that householders sought to preserve and protect from death. If there was a kind of tragic poetics to how and where these deaths were made visible, then, they also offered a

⁹⁸ “History of the AIM, 1895-1913,” Box 17, J.W. Stauffacher, *Mission History*, African Inland Mission (AIM) as cited in Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 15.

⁹⁹ J.W. Stauffacher, “History of the AIM, 1895-1913,” Box 17, Mission History, 1895-1913. African Inland Mission Archives [AIM], Nairobi.

¹⁰⁰ Rachel S. Watt, *In the Heart of Savagedom*, 309, as cited in Ambler, *Kenyan Communities*, 128.

¹⁰¹ R. Blayden-Taylor, *Kenya Land Commission, Evidence*, 759, as cited in Ambler, *Kenyan Communities*, 128.

¹⁰² Ambler, *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism*, 139.

powerful political indictment of the respatialization of social and material life engendered by external forces.

For Kikuyu communities, the status of IBEA roads as spaces exterior to civilization, as sites of dangerous forms of disillusion, would have gained conceptual power by contrast against existing networks of mobility. Kikuyu conceptions of the paths of movement, like prevailing conceptions of space in general, were not generic but closely linked to their function. There was *njira ya agendi*, a ‘path of visitors,’ trod on foot from one part of the country to another. And there were others: *njira ya mukira*, side paths or diversions; *njira ya rûtîmo*, through paths, the way one sends a child to do an errand; *njira ya thama*, the way of migration, the path trod when one takes down one’s home and moves to another place.¹⁰³ These patterns of naming suggest that travel was vocational, part of a task. And the paths themselves were named to reflect their social function. These routes were the means by which the people engaged in the everyday work of maintaining social and cultural life, not generic means to some abstract end.

At this juncture, new infrastructures emerged as powerful symbols not of civilization but of destruction; new networks of communication not harbingers of wellbeing but of communicable diseases; new lines of commerce not the sign of enrichment but of scarcity. It is no surprise, then, that many associated the devastating famine of 1897 with new infrastructures.¹⁰⁴ And people worked to protect themselves against these external forces:

Families and communities sought to build barriers against disease by protecting themselves against the outsiders they saw as carriers. With appropriate rites, they purified the gates to their homesteads and the paths leading into their neighborhoods.¹⁰⁵

Older paths gained renewed salience as both vectors of disease and sites of potential fortification. Boundaries of identification became less permeable as people worked to insulate themselves from various others.¹⁰⁶ This pattern of death on the road would be repeated in the 1920s when those engaged in forced labor on the road were reportedly dying in no mean numbers. Again,

¹⁰³ Arthur Barlow, *English-Kikuyu Dictionary*, Thomas Godfrey Benson, ed (London: Clarendon Press, 1975), 334. I’m very grateful to Derek Peterson for sharing his notes on Kikuyu words for the routes of mobility, and for his insights regarding the connections Kikuyu-speakers drew between the paths they traversed and the social work their mobility was undertaken to secure.

¹⁰⁴ Ambler, *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism*, 124.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

their bodies were visible along the roads. Again, the road was a site not of civilization but of coercion and, in some instances, death.

The material devastation of the famine years was matched in scale by the moral crisis it engendered, and the generational politics through which it was framed. Deprivation brought the abrogation of social responsibility, as elders refused their obligations to dependents, being forced to cast them off the land in order to provision for ever more intimate circles of people. Starving wives and children were pawned to the wealthy men of Nyeri to the north. This was a social calamity, a “terrible failure of responsibility for fathers and husbands.”¹⁰⁷ This marked a critical rupture in generational relations, as social juniors used the evidence of their fathers’ generation’s moral failings during the famine to claim rightful authority for themselves. They called this new peaceable epoch *utheri*, and it was ushered in through *ituika*, a period of transition and cleansing, a way of “restoring social discipline.”¹⁰⁸

But some of the men of this new generation would have been beneficiaries of new trade relations. By the late 1890s, caravans routinely passed through southern Gikuyuland. Kiambu entrepreneurs would have supplied them with grain in exchange for beads, cloth, and brass wire, these new currencies posing a direct challenge to the authority of elders, whose wealth was measured in livestock. These mobile entrepreneurs, though, worked to domesticate this wealth by investing it in livestock, a way for men with “access to novel sources of wealth” to transform “their private property into a publicly recognized mark of virtue.”¹⁰⁹

In so doing, these men built on long-standing cultural practices. Mobility as a strategy of adaptation and differentiation has a durable history among communities that would come to think of themselves as Kikuyu. As the ridges that clans called home became crowded, people pressed on southward, clearing forest as they created newly cultured spaces.¹¹⁰ By the nineteenth century, it appears this work of expansion was linked to the acquisition of new forms of knowledge and access to new forms of value, and this was reflected in generational patterns of naming. These names, argues Derek Peterson, both marked economic transformations and incorporated them into Gikuyu historiography. *Cuma*, the “smelters;” *Nedmi*, the “cutters,”

¹⁰⁷ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 15.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹⁰ Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu*, 74.

clearers of the forest; and importantly *Mwangi*, “the restless ones.” These names attest to the incorporation and naturalization of economic transformations. Entrepreneurs sought to rescale and reframe new forms of wealth and expertise, effacing space and travel as the exogenous was reframed as endogenous. As Peterson argues, these patterns of naming were a means of registering “changing standards of economic, [among other forms], of value.”¹¹¹ This, in other words, was a means of domesticating skill and embedding new value-generating work into the Gikuyu order of things. It is against this vernacular historical sociology, Peterson argues, that we must see *ituika*, as “a way of assessing new measures of wealth.”¹¹²

These men’s criticisms of their fathers notwithstanding, it would have been these entrepreneurs that joined other new elites—often those with access to new sources of authority gained through proximity to missionaries and the government—as the winners of this calamity. Not everyone accepted these transformations. Some arguing that those who had gained power through suspect means had undermined the legitimacy of their claims to rightful authority.¹¹³

As for the colonial state, the period suggested that relations of dependency would enable the spread of the wage labor economy, which itself would be generative of new markets, as those who had avoided waged work rushed to growing sites of administrative control to provision for themselves and their families.¹¹⁴ There was nothing natural about this labor market, of course, nor of the starvation that made it visible.

If the famine had enabled new relations of dependency, fiscal reforms ensured these dynamics would continue once the rains eventually returned in 1899. The Hut Tax regulation of 1901 and the Poll Tax Ordinance of 1910 ensured that populations were forced to bear the brunt of the costs of administering the territory. These taxes concurrently enabled the administration of communities increasingly conceived of as populations, ensured African participation as laborers and tenant farmers in what was becoming a settler colony, and funded the expansion of the administrative apparatus of the state, including its infrastructures. Fiscal technologies, then, were also always political technologies.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 16.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹³ Ambler, *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism*, 149.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 138-39.

¹¹⁵ For a discussion of the role of taxation as both a fiscal and political technology, see Charles Tilly, *Coercion Capital and European States AD 990-1990*, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1990), 49. Brenda Chalfin takes this

New tax regimes were coupled with another form of seizure—the partial enclosure of lands. Building on IBEA practices, the Land Acquisition Act of 1896 “allowed the administration to acquire land compulsorily for the railway, for government buildings and for other *public* purposes.”¹¹⁶ The following year, new land regulations opened land for white settlement, with settlers holding 99 year leases. By 1903, this was taking place on a large scale.¹¹⁷ In 1915, the Crown Lands Ordinance rendered Africans tenants of the Crown. But it was debt, debt in the form of taxation, not the simple fact of lands’ partial enclosure, that ensured people’s participation in the wage economy.

In the colonies—by contrast to the metropolises from whence histories of capitalism are usually narrated—wholly alienating people from their lands was not desirable. Leaving people in partial control over the means of production allowed settlers and the state to employ people at lower rates of pay, people at home taking up the affective and material slack of social reproduction. But if people retained a measure of control over the means of production, how were they to be forced into emergent labor markets? The question, then, was how to make people dependent on cash. Taxation was a means of doing this, but it was essential that this take the form of direct taxation. Had administrators settled on income tax, for example, only those already implicated in the money economy would have been beholden to wage labor. Forms of direct taxation like Hut and Poll tax, by contrast, could be extracted from all able-bodied men.

This fiscal and administrative regime was crucial to forging early infrastructural attachments. Exacted in colonial currencies, direct taxation was the pivot that forced people into the wage-labor economy, all the while funding the expansion of the infrastructural state. Direct taxation, then, was a form of primitive accumulation, which obviated the need for wholesale dispossession while still forcing people to submit to the “freedom” of wage labor.¹¹⁸ This mode

up in her study of customs duties in Ghana. See Brenda Chalfin, *Neoliberal Frontiers: An Ethnography of Sovereignty in West Africa*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 25.

¹¹⁶ E.S. Atieno-Odhiambo, “The Colonial Government, the Settlers and the ‘Trust’ Principle in Kenya 1939,” *Transafrican Journal of History* (1972) Vol. 2, No. 1 97: 94-113.

¹¹⁷ Atieno-Odhiambo, “The Colonial Government,” 97; Gavin Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya: The Making of an African Petite Bourgeoisie, 1905-1970*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 213

¹¹⁸ Sara Berry, “Hegemony on a Shoestring: Indirect Rule and Access to Agricultural Land,” *Africa*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (1992): 327-355; Mathew Forstater, “Taxation and Primitive Accumulation: The Case of Colonial Africa,” in *Research in Political Economy*, 51-64, ed. Paul Zarembka (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 2005); Nigel Dodd, *The Social Life of Money*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 63.

of seizure operated as a critical infrastructural attachment, firmly binding people and their futures to the road, new paths taken as young men struck out to “find their tax.”

This was a more pronounced form of seizure than even that imagined by the IBEA, which had proposed taxing people for their proximity to the road and the access to markets this ostensibly held out. With the formalization of colonial rule, the state would deploy direct taxation to subsidize its efforts to bring infrastructures to the region as the materialization of civilization. The notion of the common good as embedded in road networks, in other words, became more, rather than less, attenuated when the Foreign Office took over the administration of the region.

The efficacy of this regime, which placed seizure at the center of infrastructural expansion, is evident in the numbers. In 1923, government revenue was 1.8 million pounds sterling, half a million pounds sterling, or about a third, being garnered through the taxation of African men. Only 10 percent of the taxes collected in African areas, though, were reinvested locally, and this was predominantly devoted to paying the costs of future tax collection and the costs of administration. The other 90 percent was taken out of African districts and redirected to other locations, making it “quite clear that the severity of African taxation was a direct consequence of the financial needs of...European infrastructure.”¹¹⁹ Taxation, in this period, was a means of extracting value without making any contribution to the “public good,” generically conceived. This was a fiscally austere rentier state.

If African taxation was to fund the expansion of infrastructures designed to serve a growing settler population, much of this tax-generating labor was, itself, infrastructural. On the eve of the First World War, over 10 percent of those employed in wage labor were working for either the railroad or for the Public Works Department.¹²⁰ In Central Province, in 1915, acting District Commissioner of Fort Hall, E. L. Pearson, reported that the majority of laborers were employed on Public Works projects, specifically on road building projects, for which they labored for 5Ksh and rations.¹²¹ Infrastructural labor was both the prerequisite for new markets, creating the circulatory system upon which commodity export depended, *and* a means of

¹¹⁹ R.M.A. van Zwanenberg, *Colonial Capitalism and Labour in Kenya, 1919-1939*, (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1975), 77.

¹²⁰ Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya & Africa – Book One: State and Class*, (London: James Currey, 1992), 107.

¹²¹ “For Hall District Record Book,” 1919, Kenya National Archives [hereafter KNA] PC/CP/1/7/1

generating a capital pool through taxation. And the balance between these two imperatives was rarely clear-cut.

In regions where wage labor was not readily available, local administrators often proposed, and were granted, permission for road development projects on the promise that the funds so expended would return to the colonial state in the form of tax revenues. Provincial Commissioner of Rift Valley Province, D. L. Morgan, made this prerogative clear in his request to the Public Works Department (PWD) and the Secretariat for the construction of a road from Kabarnet to Baringo District.

I would...point out that this year large numbers of able bodied moran have not paid their tax, due to their inability to find employment on European farms, and I do not think I exaggerate in maintaining that at least 60% - probably more of the money paid as wages to the construction gang would return to the Government in the form of tax.

The “immediate justification for the road,” he continued, “would be its undoubted administrative value [providing] the means whereby large numbers of young men can find their tax.”¹²² But the monies, in this instance, one wherein the road promised “the development of this backward district,” would not come from state coffers, but instead from the Local Native Council (LNC). In other words, and in this particular case, 60 percent of the monies doled out by the LNC in the form of wages would be redirected to the state through taxation. If taxation was to act as an infrastructural attachment, a means of getting young men on the road and into new labor markets, administrators played a central role in ensuring that these attachments stuck.

But not in all cases was roads work remunerated. Indeed, if it was argued (as it often was) that a prospective road would mainly benefit African populations (a claim that was often questionable), the state, through local headman, could legally call upon compulsory labor. This practice was formalized in the 1912 Native Authority Ordinance, which provided the legal framework for the government’s use of coercion to raise labor for infrastructural projects without remuneration.¹²³

Through an impressive feat of ideological acrobatics, these violent regimes of labor and taxation did not detract from a vision of roads as vectors of civilization. Indeed, for administrators such as Morgan, the pedagogic value of labor and the ideology of civilizational

¹²² “Track to Tambach,” 23 January 1933, KNA PC/RVP.GA/8/1

¹²³ Berman and Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley, Book One*, 110-11.

advancement were intimately related—the road would lead to “the development of this backward district” and its people. Roads not only modernized landscapes but produced modern subjects. Indeed, one of the main arguments justifying the use of forced labor on road works hinged on the instructional value such labor afforded. Colonial officials argued that coerced labor, particularly on the extension of road networks, which were for “the common good,” and would lead to the cultivation of patriotic colonial subjects.¹²⁴ In other words, these policies of extreme and often contradictory austerity notwithstanding, infrastructures remained firmly embedded in a vision of the social, in a vision of the “common good.” Not limited to the postwar period typically associated with state-directed social welfarism, then, the roots of this discourse of development find their origins in a series of couplings: the public and the private; government and markets; the state and the corporation, that shared as their object infrastructures. It was at this intersection that commerce and civilization, civilization and commerce, appeared to be two sides of the same coin.

These arrangements, though, were bound to produce contradictions. As the District Commissioner of Machakos summed up in a rare moment of clarity: “The native labourer look[s]...on the road, through his particular portion of the country, as a never ending source of hard work which seldom grows less but rather tends to increase.”¹²⁵ Labor was not the dominant frustration, he conceded. Rather, at issue was the asymmetry in the types of roads to which people were given access, with people highlighting the difference in the quality of roads serving settled farms versus those serving African areas. Conceding the point, he concluded: “It seems very unfair that quite large sums of money are voted annually for roads which often only serve a very few occupied farms, when not a penny is available for one which taps the majority of a Native Reserve with a vast population.”¹²⁶ When we look at how monies gained through taxation were reinvested, the point is well taken. “The common good” was a striated category in colonial spaces, but that did not detract from its rhetorical power. To the contrary, and as the above suggests, these contradictions became something over which people could argue.

¹²⁴ N.A. “A Note on the Principle of Paid Labour as Against Free Labour on Roads,” 1924, KNA PC/CENT/2/4/1 (1913-27) “Roads in Native Reserves.”

¹²⁵ Assistant District Commissioner, Machakos, N.D. KNA PC/CENT/2/4/1, (1913-27) “Roads in Native Reserves.”

¹²⁶ Assistant District Commissioner, Machakos, to the Chief Native Commissioner. N.D. KNA PC/CENT/2/4/1, (1913-27) “Roads in Native Reserves.”

The desire for roads was popularly linked in the colonial imagination to the relative development of the populations. This was in line with the civilizational side of the commerce and civilization dyad, the material and conceptual strands that underpinned colonial logics. And yet the material investments were rarely available to underwrite these ‘common-sense’ conceptual connections. Policies of colonial austerity ensured this would be the case. And people were well aware, it seems, of this as a kind of technopolitics, premised not on technical intervention but its inverse, infrastructural absence.

If, for administrators, roads were to be the arteries of “commerce and civilisation,” they were popularly experienced as spaces of blockage and civilization interrupted. The Natives Ordinance of 1915, implemented in 1918, required every African over the age of 15 to be registered and fingerprinted. These registration certificates, or *kipandes*, were to be worn around the neck in metal frames and could be demanded at any time. Within two years, 194,750 certificates had been issued. By 1924, this number had climbed to 519,056, rising to 1,197,467 by 1931.¹²⁷ Any African found outside their reserve who was unable to produce the document was punished with hard labor, often road labor. By 1937, people reported that police were demanding money as well as the *kipande* as they stopped people, arresting their movements along the road.¹²⁸ If taxation was a means of ensuring the movement of men as labor, the *kipande* was a means of controlling how and where people moved.

This, then, was the central contradiction of mobility in the region. Maintaining roads as the arteries of “civilisation and commerce” turned on truncating the movement of Africans. And people were well aware of how the state deployed the techniques of immobility to shore up this highly stratified racial order. The evidence was everywhere. From the uneven distribution of road networks across the landscape of the Kenya colony, to the different materials used to construct roads in settler areas versus reserves, to the everyday experiences of being stopped along these arteries, the road, for most, operated as a core symbol of the highly racialized social and economic order of the Kenya colony.

Labor practices on the road would have heightened people’s experiences of these emergent networks as sites of violence. In the early 1920s provincial administrators were called

¹²⁷ Berman, *Control and Crisis*, 147.

¹²⁸ “Race Relations Papers, 1937-38, KNA, MSS/3/215.

to the task of joining labor recruiters in procuring workers for settler farms and public works projects.¹²⁹ The goal here was not simply to ameliorate a labor shortage, though. It was a means of addressing the dearth of tax revenue. These twin concerns were given full legal sanction at the local level by the Native Authority Amendment Ordinance, which empowered chiefs to compel people to work for up to 60 days per annum, at a pay rate below the wages of “voluntary” workers in instances where the labor required was for “state purposes,” including portage and rail and road projects.¹³⁰

This Ordinance ensured that the politics of mobility would not only articulate relations between the people and the state, but would play out at the scale of communities. No longer solely in the hands of a faceless administration, local chiefs used the legal sanction of the Ordinance to settle old scores with local foes.¹³¹ And the punishments were severe.¹³² Those called up on roads work were tied together and forced to march from one district to another along the administrative routes of the colony.¹³³ These forced marches must have been humiliating for persons for whom self-possessed labor was the most valorized form of work. But it was not, of course, merely in a symbolic register that this work was violent. Sometimes the conditions of this labor led to the end of biological life as well.

In the mid-1910s, settlers living in Central Province wrote a flurry of complaints to the District Commissioner, protesting the sight of Africans lying dead along main roads. A letter signed by four settlers requested that:

the police authorities...look into the matter and the manner of death of Kikuyus who are continually to be seen dying or dead in the ditches by the Nairobi Road between the Chania Falls and Nairobi. We, the undersigned, have known of or seen five (5) bodies rotting at the same time in different points of the road...Surely this public disgrace should be removed.¹³⁴

As the correspondence between settlers protesting this “disgrace” and the District Commissioner continued, the acting DC admitted that those dying were engaged in forced labor, and that their deaths were a consequence of malnutrition. The road again emerged in this period not as a

¹²⁹ Berman, *Control and Crisis*, 145.

¹³⁰ Berman, *Control and Crisis*, 146.

¹³¹ Van Zwanenberg, *Colonial Capitalism*, 111.

¹³² Brett Shadle, *“Girl Cases”: Marriage and Colonialism in Gusiiland, Kenya, 1890-1970*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006), 89.

¹³³ Van Zwanenberg, *Colonial Capitalism*, 111.

¹³⁴ ‘Political Records Book - A Protest,’ “Kikuyu District Political Record,” KNA PC/CP1/4/1.

symbol of civilization but of debasement, not a symbol of commerce but of dearth, not a sign of mobility but of irrevocable immobility: of death. In each of these registers these deaths “on the road” would have chillingly echoed the devastations of the 1890s. Both conceptually and in material terms, then, for African communities roads were not spaces of movement but of stasis. If we could think of this as a form of (infra)structural violence, the nature of this violence was anything but invisible.

Mobility and the Politics of Gender and Generation in Two Registers

For many, the early colonial period was one marked by immobility along the road. For some, this placed a premium on accessing those technologies of mobility that called the road home. From the perspective of administrators, this would not have been out of step with the mandate of commerce and civilization, with the construction of consumer markets emerging as another means by which the administration could bequeath to African communities this hybrid ‘gift.’

Perhaps it is no surprise that the most forceful advocate for the cultivation of new markets of consumers was none other than John Ainsworth, who, as we will recall, had gotten his start in the region as an official of the IBEA. In 1918, he was appointed the colony’s first Chief Native Commissioner. According to Ainsworth, the desire for commodities was not only evidence of the relative advancement of populations, but, equally, was critical to implicating Africans in the wage-labor economy. As we have seen, taxation was critical to the functioning of the colonial economy. But, for Ainsworth, it was Africans' desires for material goods, affected through “educating them to the wants of Western civilisation” that would lead Africans to seek out employment, rendering coercion unnecessary and thereby ensuring the reproduction of a laboring force.¹³⁵ He was emphatic on this point, writing:

In all the Reserves trade must be encouraged in every possible way; the greater the freedom and the wider the distribution the better. Trade is one of the great factors in teaching people to want.

¹³⁵ van Zwanenberg, *Colonial Capitalism and Labour in Kenya*, 112.

For Ainsworth, desire would lead people into the wage labor economy. As he continued: “Each and every native in a Reserve must be encouraged to want something which he does not produce himself, and in order to obtain it he must be taught to earn money.”¹³⁶ Commerce *as* civilization was the argument here.

This was the framework against which colonial officials (despite their anxieties) viewed the desire for technologies of mobility alongside demands for roads servicing native reserves, as evidence *both* of the relative development of individuals and communities, and of colonials’ relative success as civilizers. However, linking the desire for these commodities and infrastructures of mobility to the emergence of civilization would have unexpected consequences.

Africans in increasing numbers either owned vehicles or fixed their energies on acquiring them by the late teens.¹³⁷ By 1924, colonial officers were reporting African car ownership, which, when in the right hands, was reflexively linked to the civilization status of individual owners. The District Commissioner of Fort Hall reported the following by way of indexing colonial achievements in the district:

Before leaving the subject of the Social and Economic development of the Native area, mention should be made of the fact that the two most enterprising chiefs of the district, Njiri and Muriranja, have bought motor cars, they being the first to do so in the district.¹³⁸

Two years later, the District commissioner more directly linked civilization to the desire for technologies of mobility. In 1926, he reported:

I have been struck with the general loyalty and desire for co-operation in the great majority of cases. Many of the chiefs are giving an excellent lead to their peoples in things like the purchase of ploughes and motor lorries and work on roads has been pursued with considerable energy and enthusiasm.

In a self-congratulatory tone, he concluded by noting that there were now 14 native-owned lorries in the district.¹³⁹ Symbols of British superiority, if carefully doled out, would ensure the

¹³⁶ John Ainsworth, “The Question of Segregation,” N.D. MSS. Afr. s. 380, Bodleian Library, Oxford

¹³⁷ Luise White notes that by 1928 there were approximately five thousand cars in the colony, the majority of which were located in Nairobi and all of which were owned by Europeans or Indians. Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 74.

¹³⁸ “Fort Hall Record Book, 1924,” KNA DC/FH1/4.

¹³⁹ “Fort Hall Record Book, 1926,” KNA DC/FH1/6.

colonial hierarchy was reproduced while reinforcing supposed native “awe” in the face of technological evidence of British power. This theory did not unfold unproblematically, however. Africans did not simply desire technologies of mobility as markers of prestige. These objects were, for many, emblematic of the kinds of movement that the colonial state, through its local proxies, denied. The materiality of these “colonial things,” their capacity to move people through space, in other words and as we shall see, was critical to people’s evaluation of technologies of mobility. And as Africans in increasing numbers possessed technologies of mobility, they challenged Britons monopoly over quintessential symbols of modernity. The relationship between object and meaning, sign and signifier, the administration was learning, was difficult to stabilize and even more difficult to police.

In 1925, the DC reported with anxiety that Mission education had produced a generation of young men who fancied themselves “literary types” and therefore regarded themselves as being above manual labor.¹⁴⁰ That these mission-educated men had developed their own ideas about the place of technologies of mobility in articulating their status as “readers” should not be surprising. The ideology connecting knowledge over, and possession of, technologies of mobility was one engendered in the teachings of Anglican missionaries. A quiz produced by Anglican missionaries in the postwar period, for example, led with the following question: “1. Name a modern transport which begins with L.” The answer, “lorry.” From this initial benchmark, students were asked three further questions related to their knowledge of technologies of mobility, down to some of their basic mechanics.

Question 7, for example, read: “Part of a Motor-car beginning with C. (clutch, carburettor) [*sic*].”

Question 8, “Part of a Motor-car beginning with W.? (Wheel, wiper)”¹⁴¹

Taken individually, the items on this test, assembled and preserved in the papers of Reverend Leonard Beecher do, indeed, appear to be “sundry matters.” However, these questions were set alongside questions of a decidedly more theological nature, questions regarding “modern” domesticity, and questions regarding world geography. Reading the list in full, then, suggests the complicated means by which various threads of discourse were brought together, cross-

¹⁴⁰ “Fort Hall Record Book, 1926,” KNA DC/FH1/6.

¹⁴¹ Reverend J.L. Beecher, “Sundry Matters.” Folio 10, GSSB, Nairobi National Museum.

referentially producing a robust image of civilization that placed technologies of mobility at its center. As Rudolf Marzek writes of late-colonial Dutch rule in the Indies: “the power of colonial culture... was in trivialities.”¹⁴² In mission schools, automotive technologies—heretofore out of the reach of many Africans—were intimately bound up with the ideology of civilization.

And by the 1920s, Africans were, indeed, consuming things that they “could not produce” as they entered the cash economy, but the types of subjectivities, the forms of self-fashioning, that these modes of consumption enabled could not be controlled. It is, then, perhaps not surprising that the DC of Fort Hall made the following observation in 1926 regarding the “danger” of educated men. The population of “readers,” he argued:

constitute a potential danger as, being averse to unskilled manual labour and lacking employment, they... tend to sell the ranks of the discontented and seditious. Some of them, the best of them, become teachers at Missions School or traders but a large number of them rest on their cars and do nothing.¹⁴³

Lindsey Green-Simms has argued that “technological objects articulated the place that different bodies would hold on the colonial hierarchy and acted as agents in reproducing social orders that were constructed on ideals of difference and exclusion.” But these technologies and the authority and prestige associated with them could not be wholly protected against appropriation. Colonial officials were unable to monitor the purchasing power of Africans whose status as consumers was, in part, a consequence of the state’s desire to implicate them in the wage-labor economy. And for colonial administrators, this produced contradictions, as the popular desire for technologies of mobility were at once evidence of the “success” of the civilizing mission *and* evidence of the emergence of threatening forms of insubordination, with the young seemingly poised to reject the racial hierarchies upon which the colonial economy was premised.

But to narrate this story as one that was produced at the conjuncture of the contradictory colonial ideology of commerce and civilization, of a truncated vision of the public, and thus the public good, would only get us part of the way to understanding Elias Mutahi and Labani Kiliru’s ambivalence surrounding roads, the technologies that populate them, and those people that worked and work on the road. To get to this vexed space we need to turn to other histories of

¹⁴² Rudolf Mrazek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony*, 69-70.

¹⁴³ “Fort Hall Record Book, 1927,” KNA DC/FH1/7

valuation, other conflicts over work, and other cultural politics that hinged on the question of mobility.

For administrators, the road was a symbol of the civilization that they imagined themselves to be bequeathing to African communities. Whether as a cultural form or as a result of labor, roads were imagined to have a pedagogic function, ushering the colony and its people forward in civilizational time. Within a Gikuyu epistemology, however, self-possessed labor was landed, requiring the painstaking work of removing stumps and roots from one's plot, of cutting culture out of nature. This was an epistemology of work as culture premised on verticality, a logic that rooted people in place by rooting them down into the earth. Wage labor, by contrast, was premised on a logic of horizontality, with young men seeking out opportunities for capital acquisition along new routes, and often in the city.

But forced mobility was not the only kind of movement at play in this period, the strictures of taxation and the *kipande* system notwithstanding. And capital, while increasingly lauded over juniors by landed elite, was not the *primary* promised reward for labor on the land, though it was naturalized as evidence that the promised reward, or *wiathi*, had been achieved. Waged work was denigrated within this framework. While it promised returns in the form of cash, elders claimed it did not enable the cultivation of *wiathi*, or self-mastery. It was disparaged, instead, as *githukumo*, or work subject to another. This the inverse of *wira*, or “purposeful toil within a web of obligations.”¹⁴⁴

Castigations of *githukumo* did not, however, stop young people from traveling along these horizontal pathways in search of capital. And these young people did not only move into labor markets to pay their taxes, government aspirations notwithstanding. Instead, young people chose the road as a route to achieve *wiathi* by other means, hoping to use the capital so gained through horizontal movements as a means of rooting down vertically. In this, they worked to bring together two ideologies of work, two ideologies of civilization. For these men, and at this stage in their individual maturation, these visions of civilization appeared to work in tandem. As John Lonsdale writes:

Young people...wanted work for many reasons. Many had lost kin and stock in the great hunger; some had lost land to settlers; all had to pay tax. But the incentive

¹⁴⁴ Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 360.

for young men is best seen in the paradox that Kikuyu farm exports grew steadily, checked only by drought and disease, throughout the colonial era. To farm was household work. Men controlled no land before marriage; bachelor labour profited fathers. Elders invested livestock in their own next marriage or their sons'. Formerly, young men had been able to raid stock for their own bridewealth. Male competition for capital now forced young men out to work. The evidence is thin, but of ten Kikuyu workers asked by a commission of enquiry in 1912, seven said that they were working in order to buy goats and marry...In short, most youths wanted wages so as to earn the civic virtue of domestic production sooner than their fathers might have allowed. Wages financed entry to the married business of farming.¹⁴⁵

But the aspirations of these young people were not without contest, their itineraries generating generational conflict by the late teens. In 1919, the District Commissioner of Fort Hall reported that intergenerational struggles dominated discussions at barazas throughout the district, pitting native authorities against young, educated, and mobile men. "Youth" demanded a generational changing of the guard. In framing their claims, they mobilized a binary that drew powerfully on British notions of modernity. Elders, they argued, were mired in "superstition" and "tradition," which not only rendered the young who "had the benefit of greater knowledge of the European...powerless to carry out the Government orders of progression," but was used by elders to justify the unfair demands being exacted from communities. Elders, in turn, defended their right to retain leadership, arguing that they had paid large sums of money to "buy the country." The current generation of young men, they argued, had been "spoilt" by virtue of their movement. This impeded the existing generation of fathers from recouping the losses of their initial investment.¹⁴⁶

Young men vociferously rejected this claim, arguing that by virtue of their broader experience and education, they were in a better position to hold the reins of power. Changed circumstances, they contended, had rendered the wisdom of their elders obsolete. Rhetorically, mobility was at the center of these young men's claims, which they mobilized to contrast themselves, a younger generation that "wished to march with the times," against the immobility and stagnation of elders.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 356.

¹⁴⁶ "Political Record Book, 1919," KNA PC/CP/1/7/1.

Mobility emerged at the nexus of these generational conflicts. If for administrators, the road was a core symbol of civilization—though they, too, were highly anxious about “youth” on the road and in the city—in the pages of *Mwigwithania*, a different epistemology of mobility and work becomes visible. On these pages, discussions of technologies of mobility and road infrastructures became an occasion for people to debate the moral and material implications of young people’s entry into new markets. Circulating between 1928 and 1931, *Mwigwithania* was the first vernacular-language publication in Eastern Africa, with Johnstone (later Jomo) Kenyatta as its editor. And it is here that we can locate ambivalence surrounding the road as a dangerous path leading not to progress but to uncultured life in the city, the road joining urban space as a potent symbol not of civilization but of cultural disillusion. But it was also a site of aspiration for young people, a space of consumption and play, and for some, in a hopeful register, a means of achieving *wiathi* by other means. For these reasons, and through to the present, Nairobi has occupied an awkward space, one of both desire and disdain, a space of both possibility and the threat of disillusion.

The men whose words populated the pages of *Mwigwithania* had an interest in denigrating the new generation of young men and women on the move. But if mobility was a core node of critique for these writers, many of these men had, themselves, cut their teeth on the move. Kenyatta founded *Mwigwithania*, the journal of the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) of which he was General Secretary, in 1928 at the age of 35. Having worked for the Nairobi Water Board, Kenyatta was familiar with life in the city. He was a “man about town.”¹⁴⁷ As Lonsdale writes, Kenyatta like other “young Christians had...taken the lead in the selfish disobedience of migrant wage labor and, when married, pursued another, rural capitalism, even while sensing that such differentiation threatened to alienate a community larger and other than class.”¹⁴⁸

Kenyatta was a “runway orphan” and a Christian *muthomi* (pl. *athomi*), or “reader.”¹⁴⁹ These *athomi* found for themselves and their audiences an apt analog in the parable of the prodigal son who pursued reckless ways abroad only to return home and be forgiven. It was as though the parable was a narration of Kenyatta’s own life. Having left home, he was only

¹⁴⁷ Bruce J. Berman and John M. Lonsdale. “The Labors of ‘Mwigwithania’: Jomo Kenyatta as Author, 1928-45,” *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring 1998), 17.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

“reconciled” when he returned with cash and a blanket in hand “after years of truancy.”¹⁵⁰ *Mwigwithania*, on one reading, then, was an effort to domesticate this itinerary. This turned on valorizing certain elements of these men’s trajectories—such as mission education and literacy—while effacing the very mobility that was their condition of possibility. In this regard, the paper was truly designed to perform the work of *Mwigwithania*, it was to act as “the reconciler.”¹⁵¹ And this was a scalar move. Kenyatta strove to use the paper as a space where he could domesticate his experiences among “foreigners,” and the accumulation of wealth that they had enabled, making both amenable to the incremental path to maturation of which Kenyatta and his social kin promised to be the new guardians.

Mobility had rent culture asunder, leaving the Kikuyu “scattered,” George Kirongothi Nedgwa “of the Maina generation” wrote. “My people, it is a matter of great grief that the Kikuyu are scattered like goats without a shepherd.” Instead of working as a people, each man, he lamented, was “taking his own road.” This path, fecklessly pursued, had led to separation, and “therefore our affairs do not make progress.”¹⁵² The road, here, was not a symbol of development but of disillusion. And while mobilized as a metaphor, as we shall see, the road had a definite set of material coordinates in the cultural imaginations of these men.

The potency of the road as a metaphor and material site of cultural loss gained its salience through contrast against its supposed other, productive labor on the land. As G. Karimu, of Kahuhia location wrote, the ancestors had bequeathed to the Kikuyu first the “land...[then] the digging pole, the digging stick, the bush-cutting knife, the axe.” These tools were required to cut culture out of nature. From this newly cut plot, one could pursue “the home.” The garden was the site of social and cultural work. It was here that men started homesteads and that their wives raised children.

Social and material reproduction were indissolubly linked in this framing. As Kenyatta himself warned in these pages: “Trouble at home is also trouble in the field.” And it was a logic the held at the scale of the family, but like concentric circles, it was also held at the scale of the community and at the scale of *the Kikuyu*, an emergent category of identification. Mobility, of

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵² George Kirongothi Nedgwa of the Maina Generation, *Mwigwithania*, KNA DC/MKS.10B/13/1.

which the road was a symbol, was the disavowal of the material *qua* cultural inheritance underwriting *wiathi*. In taking their “own road” the new generation had become “scattered,” a state of untethered personhood that led to forgetting. “These things...are those which were blessed to our forefathers by the Ancestor, Kikuyu, and it is these we ought to discuss lest they be forgotten.”¹⁵³

As the inclusion of agricultural technologies suggests, work was at the center of this supposedly primordial cultural and material inheritance. As one anonymous writer from Karura, a location in southern Kikuyuland, chastised: “cease to despise... work.” Work was the gift of god, the special inheritance of the Kikuyu. The “work he does today is given him by God, and He gives him the strength to do it.” To avoid this labor was disastrous, not only for the individual but for the collective. This rhetorical idler, the writer continued, would be “harming his country, for if he has no work, what is he to eat? And as for clothes, where will he get them?” The disavowal of work would lead to moral as well as material ruin. “Do you not see that (such) a person will go on until he becomes a thief?” Wealth was a sign of civic virtue, poverty was delinquent; a moral as much as a material failing.¹⁵⁴

But not all work, as this writer revealed, was considered equal. Indeed, “the man who will not work is unable to even work for himself”¹⁵⁵ To work for oneself was the only form of labor that could lead to complete self-actualization. As an anonymous writer wrote: “First, I greet you very much indeed...I thank you very very heartily because of the way in which you weary yourselves and refrain from doing work for pay.” Socially sanctioned visions of labor as cultural work were contrasted against entry into the wage-labor economy. Working for wages was *githukumo*, labor for others. This might bring capital but it would not, these writers warned, bring respectable maturity. There was only one path to *wiathi*, and this required labor on the land. “Know that there is no other business (trade) so capable of advancing the country as agriculture (business of the field),” one writer wrote. Another echoed this sentiment, writing: “No other kind of work will bring good to us...except (the cultivation of) the field.”

If these men presented the *shamba* as the site of the (re)productive work of both society and culture, urban space was the site of cultural disillusion. Town was a place of “evils (vices),”

¹⁵³ G. Karimu, Kahuhia, *Mwigwithania*, KNA DC/MKS.10B/13/1.

¹⁵⁴ Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau,”

¹⁵⁵ One from Karura (Southern Kikuyu), *Mwigwithania*, KNA DC/MKS.10B/13/1.

which untethered people from both the land and culture. Contact with “foreigners,” *thukumo*, was the central culprit in this declension narrative of cultural loss, but “foreign” languages were not far behind. As an anonymous writer penned under the title “Kikuyu Time”:

Rinse out your mouths with water, you people today...[Note. Rinsing out the mouth with water or beer is done ceremonially amongst the Kikuyu as a sign of ridding oneself of evil in the heart.] Mark well that it appears to me that our former habits of speech will become forgotten...listen to the...we greet one another in speaking; I hear nothing but the jargon of foreigners...Unless you think about it quickly, your ways of speaking will become changed and you will become Swahilis. And you are Kikuyu pure and simple.¹⁵⁶

Language was, in these men’s framing, culture. Cultural loss was thus indexed by the learning of foreign languages, linked as it was to learning foreign ways. These men themselves were, of course, speakers of English.

If speaking in foreign tongues indexed cultural abandonment in the town, it was mirrored in material terms by patterns of investment. The allure of town, many acknowledged, was a problem. “Do not incline to be drawn away (enticed) by the attractions...of other places.” This was a refrain that Kenyatta would repeat. But many had been “drawn away,” as these men, Kenyatta among them, knew from experience. “Those who are away at work forget that one returns to the place one came from...Many of them become Swahilis and forget their own homes; many become Mission people and forget that one returns to one’s home.”

Generational deviance was at the center of this destructive but patterned mobility:

When a Young Man has been circumcised, after remaining for a space of about twelve years he goes and says to his Father, ‘I want you to give me some goats to sell, because I wish to go to Mombasa’ or to some other place like that. When he has been given them and has sold them he goes off to wherever he wants, and on arriving in that country he establishes himself and becomes *like a man* who has reached the base or original source...of his own country. This road is the beginning...of willful ways (‘things of disobedience’).¹⁵⁷

These were stories of normative paths to maturity started but derailed by the irresponsible peripatetic movement of youth. This could only lead to deformed persons, producing persons, like these sojourners, who merely acted “like a man.” But, as this letter suggests, these would-be elders were naming an existential threat that had a material counterpart: circumcised men were,

¹⁵⁶ “Kikuyu Time,” *Mwigwithania*, KNA DC/MKS.10B/13/1.

¹⁵⁷ N.A., *Mwigwithania*, KNA DC/MKS.10B/13/1.

in fact, achieving adulthood by other means, and on the road. They would know. They had done so themselves. But they hoped to retain a monopoly over how and what would and could be domesticated. These writers, in other words, as a hopeful generation of would-be elders, feared that they were losing control over how adulthood was defined, over its metrics and the means of attaining them. And so, they warned that maturation, that *wiathi*, could only happen at home. “Realise that he who goes to be circumcised at someone else’s village has it said of him that he is...afraid...also that ‘at the village of another (i.e., away from home) there is circumcising, but no healing.’”¹⁵⁸

But all was not lost. These waywards could be redeemed, as Kenyatta had himself been redeemed. Mobility had to be acknowledged as a fact of this supposedly changed environment. The deviance of horizontal movement could be rectified if the gains so made were socialized; doing so was their central responsibility as men. The locations of investments were critical to this work of socialization. Money made in the wage-labor economy must be invested at home. “Let everyone who is conscious that he is a Kikuyu, although he may be in employment at a distance, try very diligently to discover...where he came from, and build, if only a booth like that in a garden.” As another wrote: “What I say is that if they worked and when a man had got some money he [then]...returned and built a nice home, himself remaining at work, it is the houses of these people which would now be models (to others).” Money made elsewhere could, evidently, be domesticated. But to remove the taint of mobility one had to ensure that investments were made at home, and in the land, and in the community. We will recall Kenyatta again here, when he reminded readers of the Kikuyu proverb: “‘Trouble at home’...is also ‘trouble in the field.’” This was generational trouble, but as this proverb suggests, it was also gender trouble.

If the land was the space of morally upright production *and* social reproduction, perhaps it is no surprise that market women on the move were routinely accused of engaging in antisocial, because non-agrarian, forms of production. These women on the move were routinely accused of being “prostitutes.” As one letter, titled: “The Trading of Girls and Women in Potatoes and other things in Nairobi,” recounted: “The trading in all these things mentioned above is a danger to the girls and newly-married women, being (produce which is) not from their

¹⁵⁸ *Mwigwithania*, KNA DC/MKS.10B/13/1.

own gardens. For frequently it is the road to the beginning of PROSTITUTION.”¹⁵⁹ It is worth paying attention here. As a trope, the market woman as prostitute was morally suspect not because of her sexual behavior primarily, but because she sold vegetables that she had not grown. In other words, the accusation here was that she was not working for herself, was not engaged in self-possessed work, but in capital generating labor for others, for *thukumu*.

As another writer warned, entry into the money economy had led women to burn “their MODESTY LIKE FIREWOOD.” Moving outside of the sphere of domestic production was also to move out of the site of social reproduction, the work of homesteading happening in the garden. Instead, these women worked for strangers, and on the road. What better metaphor to express the damage done to this twinned vision of production and reproduction than the prostitute, a figure for whom production is divorced from the goal of reproduction. While it is impossible to ascertain whether sex-work among market-women was on the rise, it is evident that some women were choosing town life over life in the reserves.¹⁶⁰

In 1931, the Local Native Council (LNC), Nyeri rejected a proposal to provide funds for the Lady Griggs home for women in Pumwani. The reason, they explained, was that the women:

most assisted by the home were Kikuyu women who had run away from their own husbands in the Kikuyu reserve and joined up with detribalized natives in Nairobi and lived with them. When they visited the home they found several Kikuyu women there who would not give their father’s or brother’s name: they said they were *Nairobi people* and it was obvious that they had run away from their husbands in the reserve.¹⁶¹

These women chose to strike out on their own, becoming “Nairobi people,” the freedom of city life offering welcome reprieve, perhaps, from the daily work of life in the reserves.¹⁶² The administration, evidently, shared with rural elders fear of the de-culturing effects of life in the city, “foreign ways” and “detribalization” being two sides of the same coin.

¹⁵⁹ *Mwigwithania*, KNA DC/MKS.10B/13/1.

¹⁶⁰ For a discussion of women traders, see Claire Robertson, *Trouble Showed the Way: Women, Men, and Trade in the Nairobi Area, 1890-1990*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); For a discussion of prostitution in Nairobi and patterns of female mobility, see Luise White, *The Comforts of Home*.

¹⁶¹ Nyeri, Local Native Council (LNC), 1931-37, Dec, 1931, KNA VQ1/28/34 or PC/Central/2/1/6 –

¹⁶² Office of the Municipal Native Affairs Officer, District Commissioner’s Office, Nairobi. 20 Feb, 1941, Anglican Church of Kenya Archives [hereafter ACKA] /ET/AEC/1 – African Education Council, 1920-1956. By 1941, it appears that Pumwani was still the main site of prostitution in Nairobi. Reserves. For an involved discussion of the geography of female settlement in Nairobi, see White, *The Comforts of Home*.

Elders and males claimed that this youthful female deviance was evident in new patterns of dress. In the pages of *Mwigwithania*, Kenyatta argued that market women ought to wear not simply a “cloth,” but a “long (Kikuyu) robe.”¹⁶³ New modes of sartorial self-fashioning were routinely mobilized as evidence that women were adopting “foreign” ways. Here they might have found themselves at odds with administrators and missionaries for whom modes of comportment (and consumption) were sure-fire evidence that the civilizational project was moving along.

This was not, though, the vision of civilization that these men set themselves the task of protecting. At an LNC meeting held in 1935, one Benedetto argued that they were confronting a new and troubling pattern, which he blamed on the publication “Mambo Leo,” a periodical “about women”:

In 1929, the European women wore short skirts and later fashion changed again and they wore long ones. The Kikuyu girls followed these fashions and wear short clothes. The Elders must stop the girls becoming whores.

Women, in this framing, were squandering their reproductive capacities. But, for Benedetto, women’s choice of dress not only threatened cultural disillusion, but material ruin as well. Indeed, it was due to women’s deviance that the community had been “punished in 1930 by locusts and in 1933 by dry weather.” Unbridled, female sexuality would lead to both moral and material ruin. Patterns of dress must be reformed, and this must be enforced. “What I want is for girls, if they wear European clothes to have them down to their ankles” so that they did not appear “like Akamba.” Another writer offered a different solution: the return to putatively traditional Kikuyu aesthetics. “If they wear shukas they should also wear leather aprons.”¹⁶⁴ These forms of deviance had definite spatial coordinates in the minds of these men: roads and the urban wildernesses to which they led. These days one found “a girl or a woman...in the road...[talking] to a strange (a man she did not know), or to a man of another tribe.” If new patterns of dress led women to occupy conceptual elsewhere, the road was the route that materialized their journey, leading women to “cohabitating with the Kavirondo and Somalis.”

If new patterns of labor, indexed by new types of clothing, were symbols of troubling insubordination, the harbinger for cultural and moral collapse, new technologies of mobility were

¹⁶³ Jomo Kenyatta, “Bearing Up (Supporting the kikuyu Nation),” *Mwigwithania*, KNA DC/MKS.10B/13/1.

¹⁶⁴ Nyeri, Local Native Council (LNC), 1931-37, VQ1/28/34 or PC/Central/2/1/6

its engine. Indeed, vehicles occupied a central place in these narratives of anxiety. As one writer penned: “Riding in Motorcars: Girls and women riding in motorcars without any reason is one way in which their heads are turned...we know in some degrees that since Motorcars began to come on (this?) side of Thika, though perhaps [sic] only a short while ago...many girls and women now abound IN PROSTITUTION IN NAIROBI.” In this framing, the motorcar itself appears to have an agency, leading women to pursue the path of moral decline. Prostitution may have simply been a metaphor born of masculine anxiety. Nevertheless, as District Commissioners in Central Kenya could attest, these vehicles of ill-repute were on the road, and in greater numbers, in these years.

Conclusion

Suffice it to say, by the 1930s the road and technologies of mobility occupied an ambivalent space in both the minds of colonial administrators and landed elders, and this would only increase in the post-WWII period. And this ambivalence had a history that was both material and ideological. The terms of the IBEA’s Charter in the region set the stage for durable policies of colonial austerity, which would form the background against which the state pursued the mandate of “civilisation and commerce.” If austerity ensured that this mandate’s materialization was contradictory, infrastructures were imagined by some as being capable of suturing together these two goals, of papering over the contradictions of these networks as engines of both commerce *and* the foundations of the commonweal.

But ensuring the commonweal in extraterritorial, and soon to be colonial, spaces turned on mobilizing regimes of seizure and violence. And yet, a vision of infrastructures as part and parcel of the commonweal remained strong in the minds of administrators. It would be through labor on new road networks, they argued, along with new regimes of taxation, that colonial communities would be “civilised.” But these notions of civilization were, from the outset, confronted with different epistemologies of space, different epistemologies of labor, and different epistemologies of civilizational maturity and how it was to be attained. In the early years, it was these visions that guided the siting of new infrastructures, as African experts were called upon to advise as to the best paths for new roads to follow. Colonial representational

practices rendered this labor banal, eliding what it really was: expertise.

The notion of the “common good” embedded in infrastructures become more, rather than less, attenuated with the formalization of colonial rule, as new temporalities of work strove to transform work into labor. And this confronted no small measure of resistance, as African communities called upon to recognize the civilizational value of new infrastructures drew on their own visions of work and value as they considered these new infrastructural networks. Concurrent to these labors of revaluation came drought, and with it came famine.

When the rains returned in 1899, it was clear that the new infrastructures were not only the pathways of infectious disease, but vectors of new coercive measures designed to revalue work. Seizure first in the form of taxation, and later, land alienation, forced men onto the road, often as infrastructural laborers, to “find their tax.” But new forms of mobility emerged out of this regime of violence, as young men took to the road in order to secure new sources of wealth that they could translate into adult status. As access to land tightened with white settlement, in tandem with the consolidation of power by the putative winners of the famine, mobility held out the possibility of using cash gained on the road to leverage their positions in social hierarchies. Technologies of mobility entered into these debates. They were desired both because of the ideological gloss they bore as signs of civilization achieved, and because social youth hoped to translate them into *wiathi*. But in this, they did not go unchallenged, as would-be elders, whose claim to power was itself borne of mobility, and the landed elite sought to wrest from them that which they sought: *wiathi* and civic virtue. Kenyatta was at the fore of leading this charge as he and his social kin castigated the next generation as unproductive, as those that worked for *githukumo*, and thus as failures “of their tribe.”

It is at the “interface” that we have begun to unravel the dual vision of roads as concurrently sites of aspiration and sites of decline and death. Materiality and meaning here came together to produce the road, and the technologies and the people that called it home, as contested cultural objects. The cultural politics of the road would crop up again, and with greater intensity, in the postwar period. It is to these debates to which we now turn.

Chapter 2

“The Vehicle is Death, the Land is Life”: Vehicles, Value, and Domesticating Wealth in Postwar Kenya

The Second World War unalterably shifted the scales against which people imagined their social and political worlds, and their prospective futures. Existing issues were not displaced, but their coordinates were reconfigured as people read them against broader social, political, and spatial topographies. This widened field of experience had been the government’s promise for those that fought in the war, a message spread over the region’s uneven road networks by the Mobile Propaganda Van—a multimedia unit upon which the colony’s single Mobile Information Unit was modeled (see Chapter 5). These tours aimed to convince people of the benefits of military service.¹ In this, the administration walked a fine line, aware as it was that people would simply not attend shows if they viewed the tours as being geared towards conscription.²

When asked about their earliest memories of radio, many of the older people I spoke to recalled hearing of the battles in Burma and the feats of their compatriot men being projected over the loudspeakers. If rural communities came into contact with the war through new mediated technologies, for those that did enlist, entry into the military often meant travel to places far afield as Kenyan askaris joined and fought alongside people from across the colonial world. The number of men on the move in these years was not insignificant. By the war’s end over 100,000 Kenyans had served, with Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru men comprising the largest proportion.³ The experiences of these men during the war and in its aftermath were in turn profoundly leveling and critically distilled the racial, economic, and technological hierarchies

¹ A. G. Dickson, Captain, General Staff Intelligence, “First Mobile Propaganda Unit’s Safari in Tanganyika” Kenya National Archives [Hereafter KNA] AHC/10/88 – Mobile Propaganda Unit; see also PC/NZA/3/15/159 – General (1944-45)

² A. G. Dickson, Captain, General Staff Intelligence, “First Mobile Propaganda Unit’s Safari in Tanganyika” Kenya National Archives [Hereafter KNA] AHC/10/88 – Mobile Propaganda Unit; see also PC/NZA/3/15/159 – General (1944-45)

³ Myles Osborne, *Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya: Loyalty and Martial Race among the Kamba, c. 1800 to the Present*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 136; Timothy H. Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File: Social Implications of Military Service in the King’s African Rifles, 1902-1964*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999), 89.

that shaped everyday life. It was first time, I was told on more than one occasion, that people understood that whites could be killed.⁴

In a more quotidian—though no less important—way, the military offered new avenues for individual transformation. People received technical training and gained new skills, many being trained as mechanics and drivers, making salaries for the first time as compensation for their services.⁵ Salaries, along with technical training, were two of the great promises offered would-be askaris.⁶ For these men, futures premised on their capacity to mobilize both their training and their hard-earned capital when they returned to civilian life were a central concern.

As this chapter argues, in the postwar period, technologies of mobility, and the markets with which they were popularly associated, became central nodes of political disputation between returning askaris and the state, *and* among an aspiring class of Kikuyu traders, the landed elite, and the land poor. As askaris set their sights on attaining vehicles, rights to access became a key frame through which these servicemen evaluated whether the colonial state was recognizing their wartime contributions. Importantly, these demands were not premised on an abstract notion of service to the empire, nor the sacrifices of life and limb. Instead, this was a vocational politics that placed skill at their center. This was particularly true of Kikuyu askaris, many whom did not see combat but served in the service corps.⁷ Upon their return, these ex-servicemen found their aspirations frustrated, as the administration sought a return to the racialized economic and technological hierarchy that structured the Kenya colony before the war. Many returning askaris thus experienced the postwar years as a period of reversal, where promises made before and during the war had been broken, and their hopes to parlay newfound skills as drivers were dashed. Colonial administrators, however, could not contain the politics of these critiques, nor their coordinates. By the 1950s, drivers rescaled these everyday discontents, linking access to vehicle and trade licenses to the very politics of immobility—emblemized in the *kipande* system—upon which the highly racialized colonial economy was premised.

⁴ Interview with Ambrose Wakaria, 22 June 2015. Timothy Parsons has demonstrated how the pervasive sense of rupture generated by WWII is as much a product of postcolonial labors of nation-building as a reflection of empirics. See: Timothy Parsons, “Mau Mau’s Army of Clerks: Colonial Military Service and the Kenya Land Freedom Army in Kenya’s National Imagination,” *Journal of African History*, Vol 58, No. 2 (2017): 285-309.

⁵ Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 88-89.

⁶ Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 243-44.

⁷ Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 88-89

These would-be traders, however, were not simply trying to use their newfound skills and wealth to leverage their position within the highly racialized colonial economic order of things. They concurrently hoped that access to new markets in trade would enable them to leverage capital accumulated on the road into “a publicly recognized mark of virtue” and adult status.⁸ Indeed, not all ex-servicemen experienced these years as a period of reversal; a lucky few had benefitted from the boom of the war years. These men, in spite of having made strides in economic terms, were facing a threat significantly more existential than exclusion from new markets in trade. At the scale of community and household, these men of new wealth found themselves excluded from hierarchies framed in terms of *wiathi*, or self-mastery, as the landed elites, following in the footsteps of rural patriarchs of the 1920s and 1930s, castigated the wayward itineraries of these men, the nature of their work, and the morality of their money made on the road.

These aspiring traders located unlikely allies in squatters who also found themselves excluded from achieving *wiathi*. These men and women, by contrast to the emergent trading elite, were excluded from social adulthood by virtue of their poverty rather than in spite of their wealth. Together, this group questioned the morality of rural elites within a frame of disputation offered by a Gikuyu epistemology of “civic virtue.”⁹ What came to be called Mau Mau was the result. These conflicts, again, were contestations over valuation, that turned on the means and metrics by which social adulthood could be claimed in changed material circumstances. But this alliance was not without conflict. As new forms of accumulation led to new possibilities of investment for the lucky few, the morality of these investments was something over which people could argue. It would be among Kikuyu communities that the density and the stakes of these contests would become visible. In what follows, then, I examine the multiple coordinates that shaped the politics of vehicle ownership and mobility in the postwar period.

⁸ Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), 17.

⁹ John Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty, and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought,” in *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*, by B. Berman and J. Lonsdale (London: James Currey, 1992), 315-468.

“Our Sole Object of Employment is to be Able to Retire as...Lorry Owners”: Askaris, Aspiration, and the Politics of Mobility as the Politics of Vocation

The deeper entrenchment of the cash economy had been one of the first goals of the administration. But with the war the Colonial Office became concerned as to the dislocating effects of cash in large quantities circulating in the region. “The natives are being exhorted to invest their savings,” wrote a member of the Overseas Planning Committee, “but are not sufficiently convinced of the wisdom of doing so.” The specific concern? The “savings of the askaris” were being spent “by...families at home,” leading authorities to forecast the “resentment” this would “arouse when the troops return[ed] to their villages.”¹⁰ In this, administrators registered an apprehension that it would be at the scale of community and household that newfound wealth would lead to conflict. It was, perhaps, in an effort to manage this threat that askaris’ wages were funneled back to the colony through the Post Office Savings Bank (POSB).¹¹ This provision concurrently ensured that money’s movement was steady but incremental so as to slow the rate of rural inflation.¹² And it had the added advantage of drawing shillings out from the roofs of homes and the bottoms of mattresses.¹³

Ensuring money was in circulation had, as we have seen, been one of the guiding principles since the earliest days of the administration. This was, indeed, one of the motivations for implicating people in the wage-labor economy and for the exacting regime of direct taxation to which they were subject. But it was difficult to control popular perceptions of security, and harder still to control what people set their desires on attaining. As early as 1924, Arthur Champion, of whom we shall learn more (see Chapters 3 & 5), had reported an increase in trade in South Nyeri. The scale of this trade was impossible to surmise, he reported with frustration, as:

¹⁰ Overseas Planning Committee: Plan of Propaganda to British East Africa (Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda, Zanzibar, N. Rhodesia & Nyasaland,” 2 July, 1943, British National Archives [Hereafter BNA], Public Records Office [Hereafter PRO], Colonial Office [Hereafter CO] 875/9/21, “Propaganda: East Africa Plan”

¹¹ Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 244.

¹² Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 237.

¹³ Parker Shipton, *Credit Between Cultures: Farmers, Financiers, and Misunderstanding in Africa*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 6. For a wonderful discussion of the premium put on circulation and being banked as against the premium put on keeping money out of circulation and out of the bank based on reading the African ethnographic record see Gustav Peebles, “Rehabilitating the Hoard: The Social Dynamics of Unbanking in Africa and Beyond,” *Africa*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (2014): 595-613.

the Kikuyu buys so little from the local shops. It appears to me that they still prefer to put their superfluous cash into goats and sheep [rather] than into their banks or other home comforts. The fact is to be deplored but I see no immediate remedy.¹⁴

The colonial state was perennially hopeful that wages would be funneled back into markets as people engaged in new patterns of consumption. But, as Champion's comments indicate, people had other plans for how and where to invest their cash. Indeed, though it was set up in 1910-11, the Post Office Savings Bank had secured fewer than 1000 people designated "native" or "African" by 1927.¹⁵

And while cash circulated in greater quantities during the war years, people remained skeptical as the wisdom of entrusting their hard-earned money to the system of savings on offer through the POSB. As the DC of Nyeri reported in 1944:

It takes time to get the average Africans to understand the advantage of putting his savings in the Post Office Savings Bank. There is no doubt that much of this may be traced to the many minor irritations he experienced in the earlier days especially when he wished to draw his money out.¹⁶

The solution, and one which "philanthropic" market-makers pursued again in the aughts: bring the bank to the people (see Chapter 6).

The DC noted that a van had been posted to Nyeri District, and every effort had been made "through the Native Authorities, to urge the African to deposit at least part of his savings. Taking everything into consideration the response has not been bad but there...[was] room for very great improvement, which will only come about through propaganda and a proper" approach. The mobilization of "local" knowledge was necessary. Of particular import was the "Clerk in Charge of the Van." This position was key, and the "personal touch" could not be "too strongly emphasized." As the report continued: "The attachment of a African Propagandist to the Van is of a great assistance." And the "present propagandist, a native of the District," had "carried out his duties conscientiously."¹⁷ As we shall see with greater clarity in the chapters to come (see Chapters 4-7), designers, technologists, and administrators have routinely mobilized African knowledge workers and experts to generate attachments between Kenya's varied publics

¹⁴ A.M. Champion, DC. South Nyeri District Annual Report, 1924, KNA, DC/NYI/1/2

¹⁵ Shipton, *Credit Between Cultures*, 6.

¹⁶ South Nyeri District Kikuyu Province Annual Report, South Nyeri District Kikuyu Province Annual Report, 1930-48, KNA, DC/NYI/1/4.

¹⁷ South Nyeri District Kikuyu Province Annual Report, 1944, KNA, DC/NYI/1/4.

and new infrastructures; this a means of ensuring that infrastructures—foreign expertise, capital and all—become firmly embedded in the Kenyan milieu, concurrently tethering people to emergent markets.

But people remained suspicious of the new system of savings. And their reasons were well founded. Their experiences of the Post Office Savings Bank, like their experiences of road networks, was fundamentally structured by the racial hierarchies that animated everyday life in the Kenya colony. One complainant aired their grievances in *Habari*, noting the difficulties people faced in finding a “witness” to vouch for customers’ identities, a requisite in making withdrawals.¹⁸ Another argued that it was unfair that Africans should have to “give finger prints when withdrawing money from the Post Office Savings Bank,” claiming that this rule discouraged “many people from putting their money in the P.O.S.B.”¹⁹ The connections to the *kipande* would not have been lost on these would-be customers. And, indeed, administrators were forced to concede that: “The War Savings campaigns that were known to be in progress can have very little appeal to up-country Africans.”²⁰ This had material effects. Indeed, by 1947, over 34,000 of the 64,000 accounts opened for Kenyan askaris had been closed.²¹

People had other systems of valuation with which they worked to decide how and where to invest their capital. Many askaris, Timothy Parsons argues, “saw remittances as investments instead of family support payments and ordered their representatives to buy cattle or bury money in the ground.”²² Indeed, by and large, a premium was put on sinking monies into assets less divisible than commodities of consumption, and less divisible than cash, moving money out of circulation and investing it in more durable stores of value such as livestock and, as we shall see, in an interesting twist, lorries—land itself being by and large out of reach for most in the postwar period.²³

¹⁸ Elizabeth F. Leiblinger, *Mombo, Native Newspapers, Baraza etc. 1940-1951*, KNA, KA.1/5/19.

¹⁹ N.A. *Habari*, August 1, 1946, Information and Propaganda; 1945-48, KNA, HAKI/13/222 or CS/2/8/106.

²⁰ “Plan of Propaganda to British East Africa” 2 July 1943, PRO CO 875/9/21, “Propaganda: East Africa Plan.”

²¹ Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 245.

²² DC Nandi to PC RVP, 2 October 1943, KNA, DC NKU 2/29/2/317. Parsons, 172.

²³ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 166-167.

Investing in non-divisible forms had the advantage of enabling value generation in the long term.²⁴ Livestock could not only be put to the task of domestic production, but animals' reproductive capacities ensured that within a matter of years such an investment would be value generating, two animals becoming three. Capitalist expectations notwithstanding it was livestock, not capital, that was self-reproducing.

Rural communities and landed patriarchs would have seen these investments as a way of socializing cash by investing it in durable and future-oriented forms of value, and at home. Cash was the currency of mobility. But if invested in livestock, cash could be used to secure emergent relations among families as it was transformed into bridewealth. This was of no mean import. Those that invested in livestock, and the few that were able to invest in land, were investing in both their own maturation as well as in that of their communities. Investments of this sort, then, were a means of tethering men to their natal homes while retaining hierarchies of value more or less undisturbed.

But with askaris coming home flush with wages accumulated during the war, cash was ascendant. This led to generational discord, as young men, cash in hand, challenged the authority of rural elders.²⁵ These generational rifts had decidedly gendered overtones. Cash, so it seemed to rural elders, was a symbol of the indiscipline of the young, a means of untethering both men and women from rural patriarchs. This was particularly the case in the instance of ritual debts, such as the payments owed in the instance of unsanctioned pregnancies. As members of the Kiambu Local Native Council (LNC) lamented:

No penalty seemed to be imposed on members of other tribes who made Kikuyu girls pregnant and the elders of Native Tribunals seemed to have no power to insist on a penalty. No customary payment was ever made in stock and when found out young men paid in cash. [Members of the LNC] felt that it was necessary to insist on the customary payment by rams and goats. Chief Kibathi was in full agreement and stated that although judgement might be entered for a payment in stock

²⁴ For discussions of investments in livestock, see James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development,' Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Shipton, *Credit Between Cultures*; And for a synthetic view, see Peebles, "Rehabilitating the Hoard."

²⁵ Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 150.

the...[fine] was usually paid in cash. By insisting on the full customary penalty he felt that some amelioration of the situation could be obtained.²⁶

The threat of “foreign ways” was certainly on the table here. But in a more fundamental way, here the LNC registered its concern regarding who held the reigns of valuation. The ownership of livestock was a key symbol of adult masculinity. Young men, cash in hand, threatened to undermine not simply “custom,” then, but the authority underwriting livestock as socialized wealth.

Landed patriarchs and administrators were not only concerned with askaris, then, but with the increased circulation of cash in general that was enabled by the expansions of the wartime economy. Transporters and lorry owners joined commodity producers as the main beneficiaries of the war years.²⁷ Administrators’ concerns, for their part, turned on how the circulation of cash might adversely affect people’s willingness to engage in labor, this premised on the assumption that a decrease in commodities for consumption would simply lead to a decrease in laborers. Their concerns were premised on limited visions of both value and work, and the connection between the two. One report argued that since: “the African has no conception of wealth in terms of bonds or saving certificates, the supply of African labour to farms, plantations and mines and the production of native cash crops...will inevitably be adversely affected.”²⁸ This, though, should not be taken to mean that people were not, in fact, saving; that people were not, in fact, investing in their futures.

For would-be traders these futures were, of necessity, mobile. But people’s desire to enter the trading business was not simply animated by the possibilities of capital accumulation. By contrast to labor on farms, or work for the government, this work was not *githukumo*, but the self-possessed labor of working for oneself. The business of trade, then, would have enabled men to exercise their independence and “moral agency.”²⁹ And it was this prospect, so it seems, that caused anxiety for rural elders and administrators alike.

²⁶ Meeting Minutes of Local Native Council [Hereafter LNC], Kiambu, December 1944, KIAMBU LNC, 1944-1950, VQ1/28/41.

²⁷ Gavin Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya: The Making of an African Petite Bourgeoisie, 1905-1970*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 179.

²⁸ Overseas Planning Committee: Plan of Propaganda to British East Africa (Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda, Zanzibar, N. Rhodesia & Nyasaland,” 2 July 1943, BNA PRO CO 875/9/21 "Propaganda: East Africa Plan."

²⁹ Fred Hobson, “Freedom as Moral Agency: Wiathi and Mau Mau in Colonial Kenya,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2008): 456-470.

What administrators did get right was that the end of the war marked a turning point. As it pertained to askaris, the administration appreciated that veterans would experience a mismatch between their newfound forms of expertise and the more constrained futures on offer in their villages. "Africans are experiencing conditions utterly different from those to which they were accustomed before the war," remarked the Committee.

Those Africans who have been trained as tradesmen, e.g., mechanics and joiners, are unlikely to be content to resume their pre-war occupations or to find scope for the employment of their newly acquired craftsmanship in their up-country villages on their return from service; further, their presence will in some districts introduce competition between Africans and Indians as skilled workmen.³⁰

The speculation that returning askaris would find their ambitions frustrated by racial hierarchies, bisected as they were by vocation and skill, would prove to be prescient. But administrators were not alone in their concerns as to what the postwar world would look like. Young men, for their part, were similarly concerned about their futures. In particular, returning askaris were intent that they be able to parlay their newfound capital and technological skill into new and more desirable future realities.³¹ This would prove to be no easy task. And askaris were not alone in harboring anxieties about the future.³²

For many young men, their foreseeable futures appeared constrained, shaped as they were by the changes wrought during the war years. In Nyeri, landlords had continued to consolidate their properties, building on trends that had been at play since the 1930s.³³ In 1943 the Local Native Council ruled that land should be retained intact, and that only the eldest son should inherit. Wealthy householders and commodity farmers, for their part, had driven up the cost of bridewealth. This was their response to the threat posed by young men returning from the war flush with cash. But not all stores of value, as these young men knew, were held to be equivalent, and new measures of wealth often did not directly translate into adult status.

³⁰ Overseas Planning Committee: Plan of Propaganda to British East Africa (Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda, Zanzibar, N. Rhodesia & Nyasaland," 2 July 1943, BNA PRO CO 875/9/21 "Propaganda: East Africa Plan"

³¹ Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 231.

³² John Spencer, *James Beauttah, Freedom Fighter*, (Nairobi : Stellascope Pub., cop. 1983), 57; Bildad Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom, 1921-1963: The Autobiography of Bildad Kaggia*, (Nairobi : East African Pub. House, 1975), 46; Christiana Pugliese, *Author, Publisher and Gikuyu Nationalist: The Life and Writings of Gakaara wa Wanjau*, (Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, 1995), 36-40.

³³ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 166

While many were frustrated, in truth it was younger sons and tenants that were the most vulnerable.³⁴ As one young man lamented in a 1946 letter written to *Habari*, “the present system of high bride prices is not suitable to a civilized community...[as] paying it makes a young man poor.”³⁵ He was not wrong. For those earning 180 Ksh per year as farm workers, payments of 90 goats and 4 rams, investments totaling 1,190 Ksh in cash, were simply out of reach.³⁶ And the stakes were high. As we have seen, for Kikuyu men poverty was as much an existential as it was a material problem. People did not apprehend poverty in structural terms, but as evidence of a moral failing: poverty was delinquent. Kikuyu veterans sought to respond to this threat when they created the “Anti-Dowry Association.”³⁷

For Kikuyu men and women, though, poverty, was more than a personal problem, it was like a contagion. Poverty was delinquent, yes, but it was also held to produce mobile, youthful, and specifically urban forms of delinquency. Poverty, then, was at once cause, effect, and evidence of social dislocations. Writing to *Baraza*, one letter writer argued that while “it would be wrong to stop bride price completely...it should be reduced. The high bride price prevents people from marrying young which leads the young men to a life of crime in the towns, and the girls to prostitution.”³⁸ A life of wayward, unproductive mobility was the outcome of young men and women’s incapacity to root down in the land, and thus forward into the future. But hierarchies were becoming more rigid and the routes for attaining adult status attenuated by “greedy” elders who were eating too much; in some instances, this greed undermining their claims to have legitimately attained *wiathi*.³⁹

³⁴ Peterson *Creative Writing*, 166

³⁵ “African in a letter to *Habari*” 21 March 1946, Information and Propaganda, 1945-48 KNA HAKI/13/222.

³⁶ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 168.

³⁷ Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 150.

³⁸ “Correspondent in *Baraza* 22 June 1946, “Summary of Opinions on African Affairs Expressed in the Kenya Press,” Information and Propaganda, 1945-48, KNA HAKI/13/222. *Baraza*, while a government run paper, had a large following, claiming for itself 18,000 subscribers by 1943. Fay Gadedsen, “Wartime Propaganda in Kenya: The Kenya Information Office, 1939-1945,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1986), 407. It is worth noting that this was a generalizable problem in these years. A correspondent in *Omuhuyia* argued that “the time has come when parents should consider the question of paying so much money towards bride price. Today conditions of living differ greatly from those of the old Africans and in order that the young generation should fit in the present environment, some modifications must take place. Bride price should be reduced to a minimum which would enable young men to marry easily and make their life worth living.” “Summary of Opinions on African Affairs Expressed in the Kenya Press,” Information and Propaganda, 1945-48, KNA HAKI/13/222

³⁹ John Lonsdale, “Introduction,” in *Writing for Kenya: The Life and Works of Henry Muoria*, Derek Peterson, ed. (Boston: Brill, 2009), 5

And so, generational conflict was, perhaps, inevitable as social youth—some by virtue of status and wealth, others by virtue of status in spite of wealth—began experimenting with new means of attaining *wiathi* and social adulthood. As the DC of Nyeri reported:

As always the older men have a vested interest in Conservatism and the young are continually striving to get what they think they want without having to wait and work for it. It is among them that the most violent forms of anti-European and anti-Government feeling are found, and while it is far from the truth to imagine that the middle-aged are contented, they have certainly been more reasonable and have shown some sense of proportion. The high bride-price merely serves to widen the gap between young and old, and the result is shown in the great popularity of European dances and the complete inability of parents and Chiefs to stop them, despite the fact that all European dancing has been prohibited by the Local Native Council for some years.⁴⁰

New forms of investment, as we will see, joined European dances as categories where social juniors—namely returning askaris and would-be traders—began exploring new paths of maturation.

A close reading of a meeting staged between returning askaris and the “Director of Man Power” is instructive here. This meeting drew a large crowd who put their concerns to the “Director.” At the center of their desires sat technologies of mobility and access to markets; at the center of their critiques sat skill.⁴¹ As one askari from Fort Hall stated emphatically: “What we want are shops, licences, lorries and taxis.” The response of the government representative was not appreciated by the crowd:

The District Commissioner informed them that the Government has controlled licences throughout Kenya. Soldiers are still in the Army. In order to give everyone an equal chance, APPLICATIONS NOW RECEIVED ARE FILED,

⁴⁰ South Nyeri District Kikuyu Province Annual Report, 1948, South Nyeri District Kikuyu Province Annual Report, 1930-48, KNA DC/NYI/1/4.

⁴¹ E.M. Hyde-Clarke, Director of Man Power and Civil Reabsorption Officer, “Interim Report on African Demobilisation,” Kenya Information Office, AFRICAN Demobilisation and Reabsorption KNA AHC/30/4. Difficulty accessing cash placed in savings was a general problem. Why, one man asked, “do ex-Servicemen have to pay Sh. 2/- when withdrawing their balances from Post Office Savings Banks.” This was not a formal practice, the Director of Man Power claimed. Upon investigation, however, it “was discovered...that Post Office Clerks could not undertake to complete the usual application form for withdrawal for illiterate askaris owing to pressure of work, and they were being sent to an African scribe, who charged each man Sh. 2/-. This practice was stopped.” For those that had decided to put their money in the care of the bank rather than into livestock, this premium was the inverse of a good investment, which should gain value and expand over time.

AND WILL BE CONSIDERED LATER, with the help of a sub-committee of the Local Native Council.

There was oversaturation, the DC continued: “there are 300 licensed shops [in Fort Hall], and another 150 shops which have been built, but not yet licensed. What should he [the DC] do?” To this question, the crowd had a clear response: “License the 150 shops first, but give the ex-servicemen an allocation above that. As for lorries, give us a free hand.”⁴²

People had been made promises, and continued delays were the cause of no small measure of frustration. As one ex-servicemen from Fort Hall remarked, many of the men in attendance had “willingly joined the Army” and were owed their due. This had, indeed, been guaranteed. “In Burma General Fowkes, our Divisional Commander, told us that we had fought well, and that on our return our District Commissioners would meet all our requirements.” And their “requirements” were specific. “In the Army we were told that we would be able to purchase old Army lorries freely.” As the speaker continued, he demanded that accounting be done: “Where are all the surplus Army vehicles going to,” he asked. For some, it seemed that civilians, in general, were being given preferential treatment.

For others, this preferential treatment mapped onto the racialization of labor, occupation, and skill that had structured the colonial economy since its earliest days. One askari noted that people saw ex-military lorries “being sold to Indians in great quantities.” This particular accusation was sloughed off: “Vehicles sold...were not allowed to be licensed ‘as runners,’ but only to be broke up as spare parts. No Indian in his district has been recommended for an additional [Transport Licensing Board] T.L.B licence.”⁴³ People wanted explanations. As one letter writer expressed in *Mwalimu*, the “present methods of issuing permits to Africans to purchase ex-military motor vehicles” was flawed, claiming that “many D.C.s refuse applications, without giving any reasons.”⁴⁴

⁴² As another questioner asked: “Were civilians given preference over ex-Servicemen in obtaining licences, buying lorries, etc.?” The answer was negative, the Director of Man Power indicating that requests would be processed by the “appropriate local committees.” E.M. Hyde-Clarke, Director of Man Power and Civil Reabsorption Officer, “Interim Report on African Demobilisation” Kenya Information Office, AFRICAN Demobilisation and Reabsorption KNA AHC/30/4.

⁴³ E.M. Hyde-Clarke, Director of Man Power and Civil Reabsorption Officer, “Interim Report on African Demobilisation,”

Kenya Information Office, AFRICAN Demobilisation and Reabsorption KNA AHC/30/4.

⁴⁴ *Mwalimu* 10 September 1946, “Summary of Opinions on African Affairs Expressed in the Kenya Press,” Information and Propaganda, 1945-48, KNA HAKI/13/222.

Askaris were not alone in claiming that “Indians” were given preferential access to vehicles and parts.⁴⁵ As one African letter-writer wrote to the editors of the *East African Standard* in February of 1946, “Indians are here to exploit the native, and must be moved from the interior of the native lands.”⁴⁶ In the same year another aspiring trader was more specific in his demands, arguing that Indians should “gradually quit trading in the Reserves, and confine themselves to trading in the towns.” He was not calling for the expulsion of Indians from the colony, he assured readers, he was simply arguing that their occupation of space should mirror the ideal-typical economic organization of the colony, one wherein race and occupation had specific spatial coordinates.

Access to trade, and the technologies and infrastructures with which it was associated, were central to these critiques. And these discontents registered a nuanced understanding of how the racialization of space and bodies, occupation and skill, structured the colonial hierarchy. The men of the IBEA had encouraged South Asian merchants to set up *dukas* along the lines of new roads and the railway.⁴⁷ South Asians had subsequently established themselves as the dominant traders in the region. This structural position was protected by the colonial government, a means of structuring the colonial economy *and* mitigating against racial antagonisms framed by black and white.⁴⁸

At the center of these disputes, then, was not simply a sense that promises made had been broken, but perhaps the more troubling revelation that newly practiced forms of technical expertise had been cultivated for naught. As one questioner from Kangundu argued: “Many people did not wish to join the Army, and many had to. Of these, many were made to learn driving. Why are those of them now discharge[d], with good characters as First Class Drivers, made to pass a civilian driving test.” This, too, seemed racialized, as these men were forced to

⁴⁵ This was confirmed by others. On the issue of the differential distribution and problems accessing parts, “Chief Waruiru stated that the previous arrangement made for the purchase of Military salvage had broken down because very often people who had hired transport to go to Nairobi were refused admittance or found nothing to buy. Divisional Chief Josiah quoted an instance when he himself was told that there was nothing to purchase and yet while he was waiting an Indian contractor had been allowed to enter and buy whatever he wanted.” Meeting Minutes of Local Native Council [Hereafter LNC], Kiambu, December 1944, KIAMBU LNC, 1944-1950, VQ1/28/41.

⁴⁶ *East African Standard* February 1946 “Summary of Opinions on African Affairs Expressed in the Kenya Press,” Information and Propaganda, 1945-48, KNA HAKI/13/222.

⁴⁷ Wambui Mwangi, “Of Coins and Conquest: The East African Currency Board, the Rupee Crisis, and the Problem of Colonialism in the East African Protectorate,” *Comparative Study of Society and History* (2001).

⁴⁸ Sana Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 9.

“hire a lorry from an Indian to undergo such a test at a cost of Sh. 20/- a time.” The Director of Man Power responded, arguing that: “Peace time driving was different from war time driving.” Moreover, the men in the crowd were reminded that they were “now civilians, and had to comply with civilian Regulations.” Being a civilian, of course, was a highly striated social category in the Kenya colony.

At the core of these men’s frustrations, then, was the sense that their newfound status, their emergent vocations, would not be given full breadth as they transitioned into civilian life.⁴⁹ Skill was skill; capital was capital, they seemed to be saying. In this, they argued that their technical training was generic, easily transposed to the Kenya colony. These men were trying to forge infrastructural attachments, trying to bind themselves and their futures to the road and its markets, trying to naturalize their newfound skill in the Kenyan order of things. This was a scalar move. But of course, and from the outset, the idea that either technical competence or capital were generalized equivalents in terms of status had been off the table in what had become the Kenya colony. The dual mandate of commerce and civilization—and the tiered vision of ‘the public’ with which it arrived—ensured that this would be the case.

The administration’s response was banal and unsatisfying. It claimed that there were simply too many people with the right training, and simply too few vehicles to accommodate them all. As regarded the Machakos district one administrator noted that there were “3,000 Wakamba Drivers. If all had licences, who would drive the 50 or so lorries in the district? Each lorry could not have 6 or 7 drivers... Unlimited lorries were asked for, and the Director of Training explained the economics, as in the case of unlimited traders’ licences.” This problem extended to Kiambu. Accommodating askaris expertise would be a problem, for men returning to the area included “an enormous number of drivers, and it would be quite impossible to find that work for everyone [sic] of them when they returned to civilian life.”⁵⁰ These responses actively worked to depoliticize the critiques of returning askaris and others, the banality of numbers side-stepping the sticky issue of differential access to technologies of mobility, as well as the vocations and forms of accumulation that they made accessible. But the work of depoliticization was difficult. People’s futures were on the line.

⁴⁹ For a discussion, see Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 231.

⁵⁰ Meeting Minutes of LNC, Kiambu, August 1945, KIAMBU LNC, 1944-1950, KNA VQ1/28/41.

Indeed, here administrators missed the point. These men hoped to translate their newfound skills and capital into future wealth. It was the:

ambition of very large numbers of askari [sic] with accumulated funds, which were beyond their wildest dreams of wealth five years ago to either purchase a lorry or to set up trade as a means of increasing their resources. For the meantime both these ambitions must be restrained and lists of would-be vehicle owners are being compiled against the day when a partial fulfillment of their ambitions may be possible.⁵¹

In working to stake out this position for themselves, returning askaris were likely wooed by the vast wealth that transporters in the Reserves seem to have accrued during the war, since people retaining the few non-requisitioned lorries consolidated unprecedented wealth through the transport of commodities.⁵² What administrators saw as a shortsighted desire, then, askaris saw as an investment, a means of securing futurity. As one Fort Hall questioner put it:

When the training courses are finished, and we have, through employment as artisans or by any other means, accumulated our savings, how are we going to make use of them unless we can do so by trading or by driving lorries? Our sole object of employment is to be able to retire as shopkeepers or lorry owners.

The Director was scandalized by this admission. If each “man is thinking only of himself,” he wrote, if:

your heart is not in your work, how can you give of your best? It is alarming to learn that a man takes up work as a hospital dresser with the sole object of saving, so as to enable him to abandon his career and buy a shop. If this is the spirit generally to be found in the ex-Serviceman of today, than there is little hope for your country or your drive.⁵³

What local administrators saw in these desires was a connection between the emergence of troubling forms of individualism and vehicle ownership. Indeed, as early as 1941, the Provincial Commissioner of Central Province reported that the Kikuyu were developing a sense of individuality that, he argued, constituted a frightening threat to colonial authority. In bolstering

⁵¹ Annual Report, Kiambu District, 1945, KNA PC/CP.4/14/2.

⁵² Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya*, 179.

⁵³ From appendix “questions to Interim Report on African Demobilisation compiled by E.M. Hyde Clarke, Director of Man Power and Civil Reabsorption Officer. E.M. Hyde-Clarke, Director of Man Power and Civil Reabsorption Officer, “Interim Report on African Demobilisation,” Kenya Information Office, AFRICAN Demobilisation and Reabsorption KNA AHC/30/4.

this claim, the PC noted that Kikuyu communities were engaging in unsanctioned trade, writing: “a good deal of the export of commodities is done in Kikuyu-owner lorries.”⁵⁴

For would-be lorry owners, by contrast, access to new markets promised wealth, and with it social recognition. And these men were, evidently, savvy fundraisers. In 1945, the Nyeri DC reported that:

The problem of African Trade and Transport has become increasingly prominent and difficult to handle. A number of ambitious “Companies’ have been formed a few of which have been registered either under the old co-operative society Ordinance or as private companies. They are all strictly non-cooperative capitalist ventures and receive large scale financial support. Their aims are to dominate the wholesale African market as exporters and importers. Without skilled guidance their destiny seems certain.⁵⁵

The difficulty of securing vehicles in the postwar period evidently did not stop these would-be traders from working to get vehicles on the road. As one administrator noted: “There has been brisk demand for lorries for every conceivable trade; in view of the difficulties over tyres, spares and petrol applications have not been given except in essential cases.”⁵⁶ Absent government officials conceding to their requests, people got creative. “All sorts of old scrap iron that was once a box body car or a lorry have been retried in attempts to get them on the road.”⁵⁷

Suffice it to say that in the immediate war period, access to technologies of mobility became a key metric by which people measured their relationship to the colonial state. As returning askaris demanded the right to licenses as a means of entering new markets, they did not frame their claims in terms of a generic notion of service to empire; theirs was a decidedly more constrained and focused politics. In making their claims on the state, these aspiring lorry-men argued that they constituted a subsection of the public, a new class of technical experts. This was a form of claims-making premised on vocation, which turned on assertions that expertise and skill were portable and generic. To these men, the state’s response spoke volumes: their skill and training notwithstanding, they remained at the bottom of the racialized economic and technological hierarchy. But colonial administrators could not contain the politics of these critiques, nor their

⁵⁴ Annual Report, Kiambu District, 1942, KNA PC/CP.4/14/2.

⁵⁵ Annual Report, South Nyeri District, 1945, South Nyeri District Kikuyu Province Annual Report, 1930-48, KNA DC/NYI/1/4.

⁵⁶ Annual Report, Kiambu District, 1945, KNA PC/CP.4/14/2.

⁵⁷ Annual Report, Kiambu District, 1945, KNA PC/CP.4/14/2.

coordinates. Indeed, if the dearth of licenses led askaris, among others, to speculate as to the racial politics and economics underwriting the politics of mobility, the seeming proliferation of vehicles was also generative of rumor.

James Beuttah was born in Nyeri in 1888. He left home early due to conflict with his father's second wife, traveling to first to Fort Hall Town, and later to Nairobi, where he got a job working at the Post Office as a Telegraphist. He was also a member of this emergent class of African traders.⁵⁸ Recalling this period, he spoke of the aspirations of returning askaris who "returned with more money than they had ever had before." Men hoped to use this money, he argued, to build up a strong base in business, which they could parlay into political action. The government, threatened by these prospects, came up with a cruel plan. In his own words:

Everyone expected the economy of Kenya to boom after the war, and everyone knew that because of the six years without new motor vehicles millions of pounds were bound to be made in the transport business. Accordingly, with the encouragement of the Government, many of the ex-soldiers used all their money in the purchase of lorries, buses and motorcars.⁵⁹

This, he argued, was a government scheme designed to draw out askaris' shillings by convincing them to invest in lorries. These were poor investments, Beuttah argued, stores of wealth that would only depreciate in value. Beuttah claimed that he had:

read a Government circular directing the Administrators to remove the money the soldiers brought back with them. I knew that many who bought these vehicles had used up all their own money and then they borrowed more at a very high interest rate to pay for them. It seemed so obvious to me. The British were encouraging Africans to buy cars which they could not afford in order to reduce them to poverty and force them to continue to depend on the Government [as laborers].⁶⁰

Beuttah could not sit back and watch this active economic sabotage unfold. He tried, and failed, to campaign against this "wave of car buying," but people, he recalled, "like wealth more than they like advice."⁶¹ And people lost their savings, buying vehicles that they were "soon unable to maintain," vehicles that broke down long before their owners had paid for them. Whether or not the administration was actively sabotaging would-be traders, evidence does suggest that many lorry owners quickly faced economic collapse. Administrators reported that "vehicles (especially

⁵⁸ Keith Kyle, *The Politics of the Independence of Kenya*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 25-26.

⁵⁹ Spencer, *James Beuttah, Freedom Fighter*, 57.

⁶⁰ Spencer, *James Beuttah, Freedom Fighter*, 57.

⁶¹ Spencer, *James Beuttah, Freedom Fighter*, 57

ex-Army ones)” were “liable to break down and require[d] expensive maintenance and repairs.” Some owners had done quite well for themselves, but the “prospects of many” lay “wrecked with the hulks of their machines,” these “[d]ecaying vehicles” lying dormant in Nairobi’s garages.

It was perhaps in response to this rumored duplicity that Beuttah, then head of the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), formed the Kenya African Automobile Association as well as the Kenya African Traders Association immediately following the war.⁶² Officially, Beuttah’s ambition was to enlist all African lorry owners as members, thereby creating a uniform platform from which their interests could be advanced. In his semi-autobiographical recounting, though, Beuttah claimed that the capital generated through membership fees was used to finance “underground KCA activities.”⁶³ Beuttah, while more radical than Kenyatta, was as concerned as elders regarding the mobility of “youth” and their attenuated relationship to “traditional” authority.⁶⁴

Beuttah was not alone in linking automobility to politics. Francis Khamisi was born on the Coast, rising to notoriety as the editor of *Mwalimu*, a Kiswahili-language publication. In the immediate postwar years, he headed up a group “styling themselves the Thika Motor Drivers Association.”⁶⁵ Lorries and taxis, while often lumped together as nodes of subversion by the administration, appear to have been split along the lines of class. While Beuttah’s organization represented the interests of lorry owners, those in the taxi business, in many instances, did not get to own their vehicles but worked for *githukumo*.

In 1945, the DC of Thika wrote of labor unrest in the region, which was blamed on Khamisi’s group. The drivers complained that they were often brought up on charges related to the roadworthiness of vehicles that they did not own, arguing that it was not their responsibility to maintain the vehicles they drove, but the responsibility of the “mainly Indian” owners. It was on the basis of these grievances that Khamisi had approached the DC and asked for the association to be registered as a trade union.⁶⁶

In the coming months, the Association demanded that the government produce a list of offenses drivers could be held accountable for, “so that drivers know what is and what is not an

⁶² “Fort Hall Record Book, 1945,” KNA PC/CP.4/14/2

⁶³ Spencer, *James Beuttah, Freedom Fighter*, 36.

⁶⁴ John Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 422.

⁶⁵ Labour Commissioner to D.C., Thika, Labour Unrest, Thika, 1945, KNA PC/CP.20/1

⁶⁶ Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 422.

offence, as they complain of unjustified interference and persecution by the Police.”⁶⁷ The role of police in impeding movement, of course, had historical precedents. So, too, were people familiar with officers committing semi-official extortion along the colony’s arteries. Read against this longer history these statements become legible as a deep and enduring critique of a colonial system that operated unequally, and in racial terms, controlling people’s movements through space.

In the coming years, these taxi-men would explicitly map their access to vehicles and markets onto existing economic hierarchies, refracted as they were through hierarchies of race and expertise. Rumors circulating in *Mwalimu* in 1946 held that Africans were forbidden from plying for customers along the Machakos–Nairobi road. Indians, so went the claim, had a monopoly over this route, having paid a “large sum of money to bring this about.”⁶⁸ In November of that year another letter-writer claimed that a “European or Asian” was “granted permission” by the Transport Licencing Board (TLB) “straight away to purchase a motor vehicle, while an African has to pass through many channels.” This, the writer concluded, was “all wrong and unjust.” These were unfair “monopolies...[held by] Asians and Europeans.”⁶⁹ This sentiment was not limited to *Mwalimu*. A correspondent writing for *Baraza* similarly argued that the “several Africans” who had “purchased taxis” could not use them “on this road because the Indians have a monopoly.”⁷⁰ These men called on the administration to “rectify the mistake they are making in refusing to allow Africans to compete with others in this business.”⁷¹

Predating strategies that would again come up during the years of Mau Mau, African taxi-men called on Africans “to travel in taxis owned by Africans and not [those owned] by

⁶⁷ A.W. Riggs, Superintendent of Police, Central Province, Provincial Intelligence Report No. 2/47, March 1947, Labour Unrest, 1947, KNA Sec/1/12/8

⁶⁸ African letter, *Mwalimu* 27 February 1946, “Summary of Opinions on African Affairs Expressed in the Kenya Press,” Information and Propaganda, 1945-48, KNA HAKI/13/222.

⁶⁹ “Correspondent in *Baraza*, 2 November 1946, “Summary of Opinions on African Affairs Expressed in the Kenya Press,” Information and Propaganda, 1945-48, KNA HAKI/13/222.

⁷⁰ Correspondent in *Baraza* 2 November 1946, “Summary of Opinions on African Affairs Expressed in the Kenya Press,” Information and Propaganda, 1945-48, KNA HAKI/13/222.

⁷¹ Correspondent in *Baraza* 2 November 1946, “Summary of Opinions on African Affairs Expressed in the Kenya Press,” Information and Propaganda, 1945-48, KNA HAKI/13/222.

Indians.”⁷² As another editorialist wrote, the “three races in Kenya should work together...[but] Indian vehicles should [only] take Indians and African vehicles should [only] take Africans.”⁷³ For Khamisi and members of the Thika Drivers Association, these everyday issues related to ferrying passengers and access to routes were not unrelated to the broader politics of mobility in the Kenya colony. As his newspaper argued in a scathing critique:

We are glad to note in *Mwalimu*...H.E. The Governor's words that he should have impression of his finger prints taken in order to possess the card which is given to the Africans in Kenya. If it is true that he is going to get the Kipande then he must fulfill its regulations. First of all he must change his colour, he must become a Blackman and never again be a white man, because Kipande is for the Africans in Kenya only. He will be obliged to walk along the River Road for that is the proper road for Kipande people. He must halt, when is ordered by Police, in order to produce his Kipande to them when they require it. If possible when H.E. Gets his Kipande, he must let us see it, so that we can compare his with ours. The Governor must prove the following, Clan, Circumcision age, Nature of Work, Sub-locations, Location, Name of Employer, Rate of Wages, If posho given, Chief, etc.”⁷⁴

Those in possession of the *kipande* understood the system’s role in dictating which spaces they could occupy, and which roads they could move along. River Road, and we shall hear this refrain again, was the “proper road for Kipande people.” For Khamisi, in other words, the quotidian complaints of drivers could not easily be divorced from the politics of mobility writ large. These connections were made more explicit at a well-attended meeting of the Nairobi Taxi Drivers' Union, where Jomo Kenyatta was also in attendance. Several speakers argued that the Municipal Rules governing taxi-drivers were tantamount to slavery. As one Said from Mombasa put it: “unless the bye-laws [sic] were rejected they would be in slavery and that freedom could not be got as a gift from a friend but by blood.” A Somali man attacked the by-laws forcing taxi-drivers to wear badges. The badges, he argued, were like “dog collars,” arguing that African taxi-drivers “might just as well be called dogs.”

In making these claims these men were drawing on a broadly circulating critique as they tapped into new media technologies and put them to the purposes of local politics. Indeed, the

⁷² Correspondent in *Mwalimu*, 19 December 1946, “Summary of Opinions on African Affairs Expressed in the Kenya Press,” Information and Propaganda, 1945-48, KNA HAKI/13/222.

⁷³ Correspondent in *Baraza* 14 December 1946, “Summary of Opinions on African Affairs Expressed in the Kenya Press,” Information and Propaganda, 1945-48, KNA HAKI/13/222.

⁷⁴ “Prencious Kipande,” *Mwalimu*, December 1946, Native Registration Ordinance: Appointment of Sub-Committee – Kipande, KNA AG/35/35

invective metaphors used by Nairobi's striking taxi-men to describe the indignity of British colonialism in the 1950s likely began their life in one of Radio Cairo's broadcasts, beamed from Cairo to the Swahili Coast. On the day of the meeting, Nairobi's taxi-men joined Radio Cairo's Swahili-language program, the "Voice of Free Africa," and Zanzibaris' laments on the streets of Stone Town in arguing that British colonialism reduced Africans to the status of dogs. The politics of mobility evidently sprung from many vectors in this period. But if these men drew on invective tropes emanating from as far afield as Cairo in registering these critiques, this was, too, a politics that operated with arguably greater intensity at more intimate scales. It is to these scales to which this chapter now turns.

Domesticating Wealth in Postwar Kenya: Mobility, Labor, and the Politics of Masculinity

Politics in this period, like at all times and in all spaces, operated at multiple scales and had multiple coordinates. And whether or not those in the transport business were social juniors, elders and colonial administrators discursively framed them—taxi-men in particular—as unproductive members of society bent on leading others to socially unproductive life in the city.

Senior Chief Koinange and Chief Phillip briefly reported on a meeting which had been held with delegates from the Nairobi Advisory Council...It had become obvious that much parental control had been lost and even that of husbands over wives and that it was clear that the case of every woman going to Nairobi should be investigated...It was felt that if it is necessary to take produce into Nairobi this should be done by men and not by women and further that there should be much stricter control of taxi drivers plying between Kabete and the Municipality.⁷⁵

Building on discourses in circulation since the 1920s (Chapter 1), taxi men and lorry drivers were perennially vilified for leading young women to a life of debasement and immorality in the city.

These mobile entrepreneurs were vectors of contagion in both symbolic and material terms. Efforts to stamp out venereal disease, wrote a Medical Officer, would be for naught if "taxis continued to carry women to Nairobi."⁷⁶ There were but a few dissenting voices, but a few

⁷⁵ Meeting Minutes of LNC, Kiambu, 1944, KIAMBU LNC, 1944-1950, KNA VQ1/28/41.

⁷⁶ Meeting Minutes of LNC, Kiambu, 1944, KIAMBU LNC, 1944-1950, KNA VQ1/28/41.

people that argued that women might have reasons for taking to the road. As one letter sent to *Mwalimu* argued, “prostitution” was everyone’s problem, and it was “useless to blame any particular people, i.e. taxi drivers.”⁷⁷

While these men were an object of concern shared by rural patriarchs and colonial administrators, the coordinates of concern merely overlapped; a venn diagram a better metaphor than mirrored reflections. Administrators, for their part, saw these taxi and lorry men as a nuisance, theirs a politics that evidenced the threat of “detrribalization.” Elders likely saw things differently. For landed elites, these men were “time bandits” who, it seemed, were trying to leverage their fast wealth, their money made on the road with vehicles, into social respectability. And socializing private property, as we have seen, was always difficult. But people tried. Indeed, while the evidence is thin, it appears that would-be vehicle owners hoped that access to these new technologies would not only bring access to markets, but could operate as new sources of prestige; potential pathways to working for yourself, to self-possessed labor. In other words, vehicle ownership offered two components of *wiathi*: self-employment and the possibility of wealth. The question remained as to whether either could be domesticated. The answer: yes...and no.

Early vehicle owners, interviewees repeatedly told me, were “feared.”⁷⁸ These were men of both notoriety and fame. Indeed, all the men that I interviewed had vivid recollections of the first vehicles in their districts. To a one, these vehicles were described as lorries, but those marked for the transport of people were distinct, having a closed rather than open back.⁷⁹ But it was the people, not the technologies, that were most well remembered.

Charles Mwangi recalled the first owner in his district in Nyeri. His name was Thumbi, and he had run a passenger transport service popularly referred to as *Gikondi*.⁸⁰ Moses Gacheru Kahindi was born in 1947 in Kiambu.⁸¹ The first family to own a lorry that he recalled came on the scene in the 1950s. They were the Mumo’s, and so it was called “Mumo Bus.” Benson Ndegwa was born in Mukurweini, in Nyeri county, in 1941. The first driver he remembered was

⁷⁷ *Habari*, 11 July 1946, “Summary of Opinions on African Affairs Expressed in the Kenya Press,” Information and Propaganda, 1945-48, KNA HAKI/13/222.

⁷⁸ Interview with Moses Gacheru 18 July 2014; Interview with Wanyika Gatibi, 22 July 2014; Interview with Peter Ndirangu. 3 August 2014; Interview with Francis Njuguna Gathimba 8 November 2014.

⁷⁹ Interview with James Mbigi, 17 July 2014; Interview with Moses Gacheru 18 July 2014.

⁸⁰ Interview with Charles Mwangi, 13 October 2014

⁸¹ Interview with Moses Gacheru 18 July 2014

Kibuku. The bus was called *Murmuki*. James Muigai was born in 1950 in Kabete, Kiambu.⁸² He had a somewhat more intimate relationship with automotive technologies, his father having owned a lorry before he was born. This was the source of a good deal of pride for Muigai, who recalled the make and license plate of this vehicle: Austen, H4622. In the community, though, it was called “Jimmy’s Lorry” or *Muigai’s Lorry* or *Kirori kia Njimathi*, the “Lorry of James.” And there were others: *Haraka Bus* and the *Nakuru Express*.⁸³ Another was called: *Tonya Umbuke* or “Enter to Fly,” speed and mobility explicitly on offer here, the letters marching boldly along the side of the yellow vehicle.⁸⁴ Wanyika Gatibi, born in Nyeri in 1937, recalled that the first “bus” in his area was owned by a man called Waigera.⁸⁵ The vehicle, he recalled, was called *Mwomboko*, the name of a dance done by circumcised men. This form of naming, as we shall see, might have been an effort to socialize questionable wealth. It might have been a way of domesticating efforts to “fly,” making them amenable to the incremental process of social maturation laid out in the concept of *wiathi*.

The notoriety of these early vehicle owners was a function of novelty. People recalled very few vehicles in African areas in the postwar period. Ownership marked these men as unique. Correspondingly, travel in these days was by and large limited to “footing,” today a Kenyan shorthand for walking that is firmly tethered to poverty. Owners were men of wealth and power. Those with cars were “coming up well.” They were “developed” people of the city.⁸⁶ This changed status was marked sartorially. Drivers and owners were traveled, as evidenced by their clothes: military boots, khaki pants, white shirts, watches, caps.⁸⁷ These guys were dressed “superb,” wearing striped shirts, nice shoes, and baseball caps.⁸⁸ People contrasted this urban aesthetic people against forms of dress typical in the countryside. Those in the village wore shorts, Mbigi told me, while these men wore long pants.⁸⁹ When most people were dressing in

⁸² Interview with James Muigai, 26 August 2014

⁸³ Interview with John Kaime Kamau, Summer 2014

⁸⁴ Interview with Joseph Mungai Muchugu, Summer 2014

⁸⁵ Interview with Wanyika Gatibi, 22 July 2014.

⁸⁶ Interview with James Mbigi, 17 July 2014. James used the word “developed” to reflect on how early drivers were received by their communities.

⁸⁷ Interview with James Mbigi, 17 July 2014.

⁸⁸ Interview with Moses Gacheru 18 July 2014

⁸⁹ Interview with James Mbigi, 17 July 2014.

“sheets,” Ndegwa explained, these men were wearing “modern clothes.”⁹⁰ These forms of dress recall the earlier forms of cultural distinction of those associated with the missions.⁹¹

If status within one’s natal village was one of the things on offer to these lorry-men, what did their passengers pursue on the road? In 1945, it was noted that: “The freight sought after [by lorry-men] is ostensibly fuel, vegetables or charcoal but it is in practice the much higher-paying human being.”⁹² This administrator had trouble understanding the desires for mobility of these would-be passengers.

The Kikuyu do not seem to understand the saying 'is your journey really necessary? And think nothing of paying a Shs/4 – lorry fare to sell Shs 3/- worth of vegetables or eggs and see the sights of Nairobi.’⁹³

But markets were not the only thing that people sought access to in making their moves. The city, as we have seen, was a vexed place in the Gikuyu cultural imagination. How could it be otherwise, since Nairobi was structured by the same racialized spatial logic that governed infrastructural distribution in general. As Dr. E. Boedeker recalled with no small measure of nostalgia in an article published by *The Sunday Post*: “With regard to the earliest commercial development, which began in 1900, the Railway had allocated a part of their land towards the swamp side for business shops and surveyed several plots in Victoria Street for Europeans only.”⁹⁴ Like the roads along which these vehicles traveled, Nairobi as a space was a condensed node of the racialized economic and social logics that governed the colony more generally. Nairobi was a space of desire because it was a space denied. But as we have seen, within a Gikuyu epistemology of space and labor, the city was also a place of cultural loss, of youthful disobedience, of unproductive labor, of truncated adulthood. For these reasons, Nairobi occupied an awkward space, one of both desire and disdain, a space of both possibility and the threat of disillusion in the cultural imagination of men and women. But Nairobi was, and continues to be,

⁹⁰ Interview with Benson Ndegwa, Summer 2014

⁹¹ Lonsdale, “Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 360; For a discussion of this in Southern Africa, see Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 1: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁹² Annual Report, Kiambu District, 1945, KNA PC/CP.4/14/2.

⁹³ Annual Report, Kiambu District, 1945, KNA PC/CP.4/14/2.

⁹⁴ Dr. E. Boedeker “The Early History of Nairobi Township,” *The Sunday Post*, 1 July, 1945. Preserved in John Ainsworth, Papers Early Days in Kenya: Machakos, “Kenya’s Jubilee.” MSS Afr. S. 381, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

a place of possibility for the young. Many of the city's harshest critics would have known this, the city being a key site of social transformation in their own itineraries.

This doubled status was at the forefront of my interlocutors' descriptions of Nairobi as well. James Mbigi recalled that for people in the village, Nairobi was a world away. For Mbigi, Nairobi was the site of the "modern." He recalled hearing of the "wonders" of the city, stories that, mirroring proscriptions on Africans in town, mainly featured Asians and whites.⁹⁵ Despite this conceptual and spatial distance, many emphasized that they thought Nairobi must be a good place, a place of great wealth, because those that went returned with nice clothing.⁹⁶ Seeing new things mapped onto new modes of comportment—and a facility with new ways of being in the world—and new modes of consumption. Francis Njuguna Gathimba told me that people thought that Nairobi must be the place of very clean people, people wearing shoes, because those returning from Nairobi were marked as distinct by the shoes on their feet.⁹⁷ Sometimes this was desirable. As Mbigi recalled, when people heard you had traveled to Nairobi, they respected you because you had seen the world. Among the well-traveled were lorry owners who, as we have seen, were marked as unique by their modes of comportment. By all accounts, then, Nairobi was a space of consumption and wealth; a site of novelty and a point of access to wider worlds. For young people in particular, then, Nairobi was an aspirational space. For some, it represented an escape from home, which at least one interlocutor recalled was a space of "slavery."⁹⁸

But it was not an untroubled space. Many of my interlocutors noted that people rarely ventured to Nairobi because of the restrictive spatial logic embedded in the *kipande* system. Authorization to come to the city, documented in this "passport," was a necessity.⁹⁹ Without permission, those caught were arrested. And most did not come in lorries, but on foot. And they did not come on the main arteries of the colony but had to walk in the "bushes." For Charles Mwangi, this racialization of movement was alive in the very substances with which roads were made. Joseph Mungai Muchuga confirmed this, recalling that there were two roads leading from

⁹⁵ Interview with James Mbigi, 17 July 2014.

⁹⁶ Interview with Moses Gacheru 18 July 2014

⁹⁷ Interview with Francis Njuguna Gathimba 8 November 2014; Joseph Mwaura also emphasized the perceived cleanliness of Nairobi. Interview with Joseph Mwaura 11 August 2014; Isabelle M de Rezende, "Visuality and Colonialism in the Congo: From the "Arab War" to Patrice Lumumba, 1880s to 1961," (Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2015), esp. Chapter 3.

⁹⁸ Interview with James Muigai, 26 August 2014.

⁹⁹ Interview with Joseph Mwaura 11 August 2014.

Nakuru to Nairobi. The first, forged of murrum, was for blacks only. The second, smoothly tarmacked, was for whites only. The two routes, in his recollection, ran parallel to one another. Being caught on the whites-only road would lead to a charge of trespassing. In the memories of these men, road infrastructures emerged as core symbols of the highly stratified social and racial order that structured everyday life in the Kenya colony.

And so, people journeyed along different routes. Some of these paths were called *Njira ya Mikira*, a shortcut taken to cross valleys and rivers. This was contrasted against *Njira ya Mbathi*, the “road for buses.” Others recalled these para-networks as: *Njira ya agendi*, or the “path of visitors.”¹⁰⁰ Others still came to town along the footpaths that moved through Karua forest, routes they referred to as *Njira cia Mikara*.¹⁰¹ And there were others, especially during Mau Mau. These routes were *Ngungo* “secret or unknown,” or *Njira cia Mukira*, “side paths or diversions.”¹⁰² As these names suggest, the racialization of the spatial life of the colony was deeply felt, shaping not only practice but also creating durable imprints in the memories of young people. These alternative circulatory systems were both symbols of and responses to the truncated movement that structured people’s experiences of colonial road infrastructures. And many of these paths had longer genealogies, these being the names given to the precolonial circulatory systems along which people moved (see Chapter 1).

If the path to town was full of potential blockages, those who made it to the city continued to feel the racialized topography press in on them. Many recalled spending time in Pangani, this being one of the few sanctioned African locations.¹⁰³ Many others recalled their time in Nairobi through a single street: River Road. As one interlocutor succinctly put it, this was because “River Road” was the “place for Africans.”¹⁰⁴ But the racialized topography of Kenya’s road networks and of Nairobi itself were not the only proscriptive spatial logics with which people had to contend.

For elders in the countryside, the city was a space where people were “changed,” where people “got lost.” While many were drawn to town by the promises of employment and capital gains, young people could be wooed by what an earlier generation of critics had referred to as

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Joseph Mwaura 11 August 2014.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Peter Njurguna Ndirangu, 26 July 2014

¹⁰² Interview with James Mbigi, 17 July 2014.

¹⁰³ Interview with Francis Njuguna Gathimba 8 November 2014; Cite Down River Road here

¹⁰⁴ Interview with James Mbigi, 17 July 2014

“foreign ways.” The town was a place of trickery, recalled Moses Gacheru, who lost his money, 10 cents, gambling on River Road the first day he arrived.¹⁰⁵ These men were drawn by the possibilities of fantastic wealth. This could be a distraction because “now you have tasted money.” The responsible ones would find work and return home with gifts of *shukas* and sugar for their families, and money to invest in livestock and land.¹⁰⁶ But there were those that did not return. These were “naughty boys.”¹⁰⁷ Those that did not come home, those that did not invest in the land, had sacrificed their social standing. “If you are a man without a *shamba*, you are nothing,” Joseph Mwaura stated unequivocally.¹⁰⁸

Even those vehicle owners who made it home were subject to critique. While it was good for the community to have access to a vehicle—evidence of an individual’s wealth extending through the area, or their individual development developing place—many of the people I spoke to described the owners themselves as being slightly odd. There were those that seemed to stay alone, appearing to eschew relations with their age mates. For onlookers, this raised questions, which pivoted around the relative invisibility of their value-generating work.

Indeed, how early vehicle owners had raised the capital to invest in automotive technologies was rarely clear-cut. But connections to external sources of power were central in the narratives of the people with whom I spoke. In some instances, askaris used their savings from the War. In others, interviewees confirmed that people pooled their wealth. Neither the Post Office Savings Bank, nor Local Native Councils (LNC) offered loans, so others turned elsewhere, combining their monies with loans granted by Indian money lenders.¹⁰⁹ Many of them had traveled to the city in pursuit of work. Suffice it to say, people found ways of raising capital. As Chief Luka of Kiambu noted, “Kikuyu very seldom failed to raise large sums of money if necessary,” pointing to the routine purchase of “lorries for Shs. 15,000/-” as evidence.

Some strategies of capital generation were more morally suspect than others. Interviewees recalled how some early owners mobilized proximity to the state, and to whiteness in general, to seemingly miraculously generate wealth that they invested in vehicles. These dynamics of odd intimacy could produce estrangement with natal communities. Still others were

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Moses Gacheru 18 July 2014

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Francis Njuguna Gathimba, 8 November 2014

¹⁰⁷ Interview with James Muigai, 26 August 2014

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Joseph Mwaura, 11 August 2014.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with James Mbigi, 17 July 2014; Interview with William Mtua, 11 July 2014.

assumed to be thieves, those thugs of the city. What united these narratives, then, was uncertainty regarding the sources of these men's capital, and this turned on the invisibility of their labor. Unlike working the land, labor undertaken in Nairobi or with settlers or the government was invisible to family members and neighbors. When the accumulation appeared to be spectacular, there were questions. As in the past, rescaling this wealth would require transforming it into a socially recognized object of virtue. In this, these men often failed.

Elias Mutahi recalled that the earliest vehicle owners in his area were close with the white community living nearby. It was through these dynamics that money seemed, as though without the exertion of labor, without the exertion of sweat, to materialize. These men, it was widely assumed, were having same-sex relations with settlers.

If culture was the product of domesticating the wild, of cutting the land into civilization, this the means of securing a homestead as the prerequisite to becoming a fully productive man, the idea of non-reproductive sex as the source of value would index these paths to maturation as aberrant. For observers, these trajectories bespoke lorry owners' efforts to leverage unsanctioned relations of production into social reproduction—we might think here of the synergy between these accusations and those leveraged against “prostitutes” in the 1920s. These men had attained wealth but not *wiathi*. And while these men had the status of big men, this was a truncated and imperfectly articulated masculinity. This was wealth without adulthood.

Peter Ndirangu loved his father's brother, his second father or uncle, who went by the name of Becker, but it had to be admitted he was unusual, his behavior and modes of comportment marking him as unique. He had done well for himself. Working in the city, he had developed close relationships with whites. These relations of intimacy seemed to have given him access to wealth. Most notably, Becker wore a suit. This, in and of itself, might not have opened him up to suspicion. He was, without a doubt, “coming up” well. And he could have socialized this wealth, using his own development to develop his home area. But, as Peter told me, he rarely returned to the village, leading his grandmother to implore Peter to reason with him: “Why can't you tell him to come home?” she would ask.¹¹⁰ His visits were, indeed, episodic, but they were always eventful. On one occasion, his return home was announced with much fanfare, arriving as he did with a caravan of two cars. His work in the city had, evidently, served him well in

¹¹⁰ Interview with Peter Ndirangu. 3 August 2014

material terms. But he had done something that seemed to be unthinkable. He had purchased these vehicles without having undergone initiation, without having been circumcised.

Circumcision was part and parcel of pursuing the paths to socialization critical to achieving adulthood. This would, conventionally, have been followed by the purchase of land, the building of a home, and the establishment of oneself as a homesteader. If at all, a car fit into this hierarchy of investments, of future-making, as an afterthought. Becker did not do this. He had not only mixed up the order of maturation, claiming for himself a position of authority without being an elder, but he had bypassed circumcision, a ritual that fundamentally grounded one's pursuit of adult masculinity, embedding men in horizontal relationships with their *riika*, or age set. And it was essential that it occur at home.¹¹¹ In the case of Becker, his itinerary set him apart. As Peter told me: "If there's someone hard to understand, it's Becker."¹¹²

To be a vehicle owner, suffice it to say, was a vexed social position. While vehicle ownership was often associated with people who had access to "the modern," linked to people who were "well developed," who were "coming up well," it just as often raised questions as to how wealth had been attained, and talk that turned on evaluations of how people were leveraging capital in order to assert themselves as adults as they tried—or even worse, did not try—to domesticate new sources of value. The appearance of fast capital, of money made *not* through the exertion of labor, opened you up to rumors. Capital made through suspect means and sunk into vehicles was, evidently, difficult to socialize. And those who failed were culturally lost, and this loss had both spatial and conceptual coordinates.

Reading Wealth, Class, and the Politics of Mobility During *Mau Mau* Across Two Archives

By the early 1950s tensions over what seemed, to many, to be an untenable future had reached their breaking point. Land scarcity, in tandem with the increased consolidation of the power of a landed elite, left many social juniors few options. The material conditions of possibility for social

¹¹¹ We will recall here the letter of warning written in the pages of *Mwagwithania* some years earlier: "Realise that he who goes to be circumcised at someone else's village has it said of him that he is...afraid...also that 'at the village of another (i.e., away from home) there is circumcising, but no healing.'" *Mwigwithania*, KNA DC/MKS.10B/13/1.

¹¹² Interview with Peter Njurguna Ndirangu 26 June 2014

maturation appeared to have been excised from their horizons of expectation, with no hope of their returning. As in the 1890s, this was a moral as much as a material crisis. As Lonsdale writes:

by 1950 more and more Kikuyu were excluded from the means of production and self-mastery by inequality rather than idleness. Their poverty was not delinquent but structural. Land was now scarcer than labour. Rich men failed to adopt the poor but ate more meat. [With Mau Mau, or “the greedy eaters,” a reference to these hungry elders] Kikuyu were engaged in a struggle about class.

These social juniors were split geographically—some in Nairobi, others squatting in the Rift Valley, and others still in Central Province—but they shared a sense of the impending threat of social exclusion and, in the case of the poor, social oblivion. This was particularly the case following the 1950 eviction of squatters from Olenguruone, which, Lonsdale argues, “settled the pact between town and country,” between the *anake a forti*, or the Forty Group, and the landless.¹¹³

With an increasing measure of alarm, administrators reported clandestine meetings taking place both in Nairobi and in the reserves.¹¹⁴ Like in the 1890s, while tactics were argued over, both town and country agreed that what was needed was social renewal.¹¹⁵ On one reading, Mau Mau was an effort to restore the always imperfectly articulated vision of class structure—hierarchical but premised on the possibility for individual advancement—that shaped Kikuyu social life. With Mau Mau, social juniors sought to remind elders of their obligation to guarantee the material prerequisites young men required in order to change their station. Indeed, it would not be far-fetched to argue that the Mau Mau forest fighters strove to enact *ituika*, a period of social renewal, the last staging of which, we will recall, followed the devastating famine of the 1890s (Chapter 1). Like at the end of the nineteenth century, Mau Mau fighters were engaged in a battle to restore “social discipline.”¹¹⁶ Like in the 1890s, moreover, it was a debate over new measures of wealth, as land consolidation and the formalization of tenure forced the socially excluded to do more with less. For squatters, pursuing this critique on their own would have proven difficult. As Lonsdale argues, while the Gikuyu labor theory of value gave rights of

¹¹³ Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 427.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 402-03.

¹¹⁵ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 15-19.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

access to squatters via their labor, “it did not deliver the power to assert them.”¹¹⁷ For this, new alliances were necessary.

And in this, the urban and rural poor seemed to find allies in an emergent petite bourgeoisie. These men, it seems, had found their wealth not in landed status, but in trade. These were the lorry men. These were the taxi drivers. Some of these men might have been members of the driving associations formed at the war’s end, but theirs was a politics of mobility that moved along more than one axis.

Eliud Mutonyi was one such middle figure. Mutonyi was a self-made man, having leveraged his business in transport into a position of wealth.¹¹⁸ He had come to public notice as a member of the Kikuyu General Union in the 1940s.¹¹⁹ His ideology of respectability was normative. He joined landed rural elders, squatters, and city dwellers in decrying urban life. This they shared. And yet, his own position did not neatly map onto rural landed eldership status. Indeed, his capacity to become a man of means was, itself, premised on his movement through the urban spaces that he so decried.¹²⁰ Men like Mutonyi, unlike men of Kenyatta’s generation, though, found themselves unable to socialize their peripatetic itineraries and the sources of wealth that were their result. This was, perhaps, part of his point. Structural transformations had made city life a requisite for many. For these reasons, we might speculate, Mutonyi was more militant than the landed elites of the Kenya African Union (KAU), joining the poor in decrying the greed of rural patriarchs.¹²¹ Men of Mutonyi’s stature joined other urban men of means in challenging the authority of these men, men like Kenyatta. As Bildad Kaggia recalled, the men of the city were frustrated with Kenyatta’s willingness to decry the movement. Kaggia, along with Fred Kubai and Mutonyi, demanded that Kenyatta stop these public denunciations. His denigrations of city life and youth were too convincing. Kenyatta, Kaggia recalled, was taken aback. “It was rare for Kenyatta to face an organized opposition...but [he] accepted the demand.”¹²²

¹¹⁷ Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 438.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 430.

¹¹⁹ John Lonsdale, “KAU’s Cultures: Imaginations of Community and Constructions of Leadership in Kenya After the Second World War,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2000): 117.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*,

¹²¹ Keith Kyle, *The Politics of Independence in Kenya*, 51; See also Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 86.

¹²² Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 86.

For Mutonyi, as for Gakaara wa Wanjau, to whom we shall return, wealth itself did not confer virtue or patriotism. But whereas for Wanjau it was an accusation (wealth does not confer virtue), for Mutonyi it was posed in the interrogative: why did some forms of wealth, and some forms of work, not confer virtue? They seemed to agree that wealthy householders were not to be trusted.

Men of Mutonyi's ilk, it seems, hoped that the future of civic virtue lay in trade translated into self-mastery. As Lonsdale writes: "Fear of the Forty [as an affront of rural landed status] may have also stemmed from the fact that they were rejecting old authority in order to find a new basis of self-mastery in town. Repudiating ancestry, they would make their own way."¹²³ Landed elders disparaged these men, calling them spivs, *mikora*, hooligans, and collapsing them with the urban poor with whom they had formed an alliance. Wanjau, as we shall see, seems to have parted ways with men of Mutonyi's social standing, joining landed elders in disparaging their work as unmeritorious.

The driving set, however, did not seek to overturn the existing social order, but instead to supplant it, locating for themselves the status of moral eldership. In this they, in fact, sought to enact the same acrobatic feat as Kenyatta had with *Mwigwithania*, recuperating their itineraries as they rescaled them, incorporating exogenous skills and wealth as the new metrics of deserving leadership. One might be tempted to say here that their interests were at odds with those of the structurally junior: the squatters, the urban poor. This, though, would be to ignore the underwriting epistemology of civic virtue that guided the critique being advanced by the landless. This was, in part, a struggle wherein the indigent sought to rehabilitate themselves as the land poor but labor rich—a struggle for *ithaka na wiathi*—in the face of material constraints, and the intransigence and greed of landed wealthy elders. But it was not a critique of wealth itself. These youth—defined by *both* wealth and status—were seeking the restoration of a social contract, not its overturning. The men of means that offered leadership—men defined as youth by status but not by wealth—were likewise not interested in overturning the social order—they were interested in reconfiguring the metrics by which it was established. And this, of course, had a long history.

¹²³ Lonsdale, "Moral Economy of Mau Mau," 423.

An alliance was necessary. And despite their shared proscriptions on mobility, and their judgments surrounding it, mobile itineraries and vehicles themselves were the foundation of networks that linked an otherwise disjointed movement. People like Mutonyi, a capital rich, but respectability poor urbanite, were at the center of these networks. He was a man of the city, spending most of his time in this period in Nairobi. In this regard, too, Mutonyi was not unlike Kenyatta a generation earlier. It was from this position that he had joined the *anake a forti*, a heterogeneous group that included unmarried petty traders and artisans, as well as those of the lumpenproletariat. The first were excluded from *wiathi* by virtue of status, the second by status and wealth.¹²⁴ This was the group that Lonsdale refers to as “time bandits.” These men, he writes, fundamentally overturned a Kikuyu epistemology of the unfolding of time, of the unfolding of social life:

Kikuyu expected solidarity in annual initiation sets and, in the past, in the ‘regiments’ in which age-sets were serially grouped. They also saw alternate generations as ritually equivalent; one was reborn in a grandchild. The Forty Group challenged all three perceptions. They were not an age-set. One of their leaders was circumcised mission-style, as early as 1937; any man initiated during the 1940s was eligible for membership. Their name, the *anake* of 1940, suggests that they thought of themselves as a junior regiment; no elder could have seen them as such without the required rituals. Finally, the Forty Group asserted that their parents (*not* their grandparents) were born, initiated in 1940, the same year that they themselves underwent all these life crises. It is hard to think of a more appalling affront to authority. It jumbled up the young men’s own moral growth; it destroyed the generational basis of civic virtue, seniority and inheritance.¹²⁵

This sense of temporal compression was also central in Beuttah’s retrospective recounting of the movement. The 40 Group, he recalled: “used to say that they had been circumcised in 1940, gone to war in 1940, married in 1940, and had their first child in 1940—everything that was important had happened to them, they said, in 1940. It was sort of joke, but because of it people began calling them the ‘40 Group.’”¹²⁶ These men’s efforts to speed up time were matched by their mobile itineraries and, in the case of some, the vehicles they drove. And these mobile networks were a perennial concern of colonial administrators, an extension of the earlier trope of

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 421

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 422.

¹²⁶ Spencer, *James Beuttah, Freedom Fighter* 74.

the discontented urban youth of the 1920s and 1930s. Of the lorry men, administrators noted, “very few” were “really loyal.”¹²⁷

As Chairman of the *Muhimu*, Mau Mau’s central association, Mutonyi was rumored to transport men and women to “tea parties” where they undertook the oathing ceremony that bound together the loose congeries of people ostensibly unified in the project of what would be called Mau Mau.¹²⁸ In 1952, it was reported that there had been a number of meetings held in Kiambu:

Jomo Kenyatta, Ochieng and ex-Chief Koinange made provocative speeches, the main theme being the ‘return of our stolen lands.’ This appealed especially to the wives of those who were squatters in the Kinangop area. One may consider that the meeting held by the KAU...was the most effective one held to convert the bulk of the Akikuyu to Mau Mau tenets. At that meeting the sponsors brought forty lorries containing thugs and prostitutes, and in the vehicles all the necessary Mau Mau oath impedimenta were carried, flags and other emblems being openly displayed.¹²⁹

Lorries and taxis were central features in the memories of ex-forest fighters as well. Bildad Kaggia recalled that the first center of oath administration was in Kiambu, where they “used to transport hundreds of people...on buses by night.”¹³⁰ Taxi drivers, many of whom were members of the Transport and Allied Workers Union, allowed people to “keep in touch with every corner of the town.” They routinely transported “oath administrators,” a service for which they were “owed a special tribute.”¹³¹

And while the motivations for Mutonyi and the driving set remain unclear, it does appear that one thing that they lent the movement was the radicalization of what they perceived to be the unfair limits thrown up against Kikuyu traders and transporters by the government’s collusion with private capital, a marriage that impeded the aspirations of an emergent petite bourgeoisie.¹³² In 1952, Mau Mau organizers encouraged sympathizers to boycott shops and buses not owned by “their adherents.”¹³³ The leadership built on this energy.

¹²⁷ Fort Hall Handing Over Reports (Divisional), 1957, KNA DC/FH2/2

¹²⁸ Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 440.

¹²⁹ Annual Report, Central Province, 1952, Central Province, Annual Reports, 1950-52, KNA DC/MKS 1/2/1

¹³⁰ Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 1, 82.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 84; Kaggia recalls Beuttah transporting loads of people to be oathed in his vehicles, 105.

¹³² Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 440.

¹³³ Annual Report, Central Province, 1952, Central Province, Annual Reports, 1950-52, KNA DC/MKS 1/2/1.

In 1953, the “Voice of Truth” broadcast that the Central Command of Mau Mau in Nairobi had ordered their “adherents” to boycott the Kenya Bus Service (KBS).¹³⁴ Between September 23 and September 24 of 1953, the manager of KBS Ltd. reported that the number of passengers dropped by 30 percent. The alleged boycott, the manager claimed, was the result of one of the company’s “Kikuyu Bus Conductors” telling “a prospective passenger that he was not allowed to travel in the bus.” Since the incident: “Some Africans on bicycles” had “been observed standing at the bus stops and glaring at the odd African passenger in the bus.” All buses servicing “native locations” were subsequently withdrawn. The manager of KBS concluded: “The boycott is Kikuyu inspired because all actions taken by Government are thought to be aimed at depriving [sic] the Kikuyu of his living and increasing the revenue of the European. They think the Bus Company belongs to the Municipality.”¹³⁵ What the manager located as a misrecognition—the KBS was a private rather than public amenity—was, on another reading, a critique of the ways in which private monopolies impeded African entrepreneurs’ entrance into the transport market.

The conflict between the KBS and the driving set escalated in the years following. In 1954, following Operation Anvil, which saw the removal of Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru from Nairobi, the KBS reported that several of its conductors had been attacked, robbed by “gangs of Maragoli,” “armed thugs” who targeted immobile buses idling at transport terminuses across the city.¹³⁶ These attacks appear to have been anything but random.

Indeed, a more interesting and complicated topography of power, as it mapped onto the politics of mobility, underwrote this story. As we have seen, by the 1920s entrepreneurs living in the Central Province had carved out a niche for themselves in the transportation sector.¹³⁷ By the 1950s, these informal transportation networks seem to have been standardized, with African-owned lorries plying chartered routes. And over these routes, they were willing to fight.

In the early days of the boycott, the manager of KBS wrote to the Town Clerk, stating:

We would like to bring to your notice that many buses other than our own are now asking up and setting down the same passengers within the municipal area. We do this officially since such acts are in breach of the Exclusive Agreement

¹³⁴ Broadcast #18, 18 November, 1953. KNA AHC/18/4

¹³⁵ Manager of KBS Ltd., 25 September 1953, KNA RN/ 1/79, 1952-55.

¹³⁶ A.S. Kennard to the Commissioner of Police, Nairobi, 14 December 1954, KNA RN/1/79.

¹³⁷ For a history of this home-grown industry, see Kenda Mutongi, *Matatu: A History of Popular Transportation in Nairobi*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

between us, and we ask that immediate steps be taken to prevent such infringements.¹³⁸

The boycott, evidently, was a response to more than simply a conflict between a company driver and a passenger. This much was subsequently admitted by the company. Consulting with its staff, the KBS reported that the real causes for the boycott were myriad: African-owned buses had been taken off the road along Nairobi, Thika, Fort Hall, and Nyeri routes. African taxis were prohibited from entering the locations after 7 p.m., and those taxis had to be marked with a yellow band.¹³⁹ The acting director of KBS, writing to the Mayor of Nairobi, concluded with an astute observation: “Due to the stoppage of native buses, the Kikuyu thinks the European is trying to starve him out of Nairobi while the European continues to get fat.”¹⁴⁰ Landed elite were, evidently, not the only ones that were hungry, not the only Mau Mau or “greedy eaters.” These men were being squeezed from multiple directions. Not only did rural elders denigrate their capital and their work, repudiating their claims for self-mastery, rejecting their wealth and the self-possessed nature of their work as legitimate baselines from which adult status could be pursued, but in these years, their ability to pursue these vocations at all seemed to be under threat at the hands of a state-protected monopoly. These men were savvy in their efforts to circumnavigate state-led efforts to squeeze them out of the market and limit their access to the city.

Indeed, protecting KBS’ monopoly was difficult. African drivers reportedly changed the routes on which they were allowed travel on the officially issued passes that they were forced to carry. And try as they may, administrators were at a loss for how to quash this para-network in transport, African-owned vehicles ably evading the state’s security apparatuses, which picked up only “two contraventions of the Council’s By-laws” over the course of fourteen days. Part of the problem was one of visibility. While police officers trained their attention on unsanctioned Public Service Vehicles (PSVs) plying KBS routes, the bulk of the vehicles in circulation were not passenger vehicles but repurposed lorries.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Kennard, KBS Acting Director to Town Clerk, Nairobi, KNA, RN/1/79.

¹³⁹ A.S. Kennard to Mayor, Nairobi, “Confidential,” 25 September 1953, KNA, RN/1/79.

¹⁴⁰ A.S. Kennard, KBS Acting Director to Mayor of Nairobi, KNA, RN/1/79.

¹⁴¹ Town Clerk, Nairobi to A.S. Kennard, KBS Acting Director, KNA, RN/1/79.

These ghost vehicles were likely *komerera* buses, a Kikuyu word that translates to “lie low,” but which also pairs idleness with concealment.¹⁴² Denied their already limited paths to market, these secret buses continued to transport people, traders, and goods to and from Nairobi during the Emergency. Like the para-networks people used to get to Nairobi in these years, this network had many names, one report claiming that those behind the service called it the “Kikuyu Bus Service.” The parallel in the acronyms of the two services should not be ignored here. As in the case of literacy, the appropriation of technologies of mobility, once the markers of British prestige, was a means of capturing and subverting “the social value of the colonizers.”¹⁴³ These technologies were not, evidently, neutral objects, but objects “appropriated and harnessed to quite a different political project,” in the words of Brian Larkin.¹⁴⁴

While Mau Mau is typically framed as a struggle for land, these disputes suggest that access to markets and the city were also frames against which people interpreted the indignities of the present, their exclusion from markets foreclosing people’s possibilities for the future. The boycott was effective. By February 1954, the KBS reported that “the boycott appeared 100% as far as Africans were concerned.”¹⁴⁵ The number of passengers using its services had dropped to a mere 200–300 per day, the company’s revenues cut in half.¹⁴⁶ So fierce were these battles that by 1959 the Provincial Commissioner of the Coast Province was referring to it as a “transport war,” a war fought as much over material as symbolic resources. In the face of this “transport war,” KBS and municipal authorities devised a solution. Technologies of mobility serving the public would be segregated, the KBS giving the “best service possible to Europeans and Asians” within the city limits, with “a complete ban on all other buses (excepting Kenya bus Services and long distances buses) entering Nairobi.” Municipal administrators were well aware of the delicate politics involved in this decision, and emphasized that the ban must not “be confined to Kikuyu-

¹⁴² Claire Robertson, *Trouble Showed the Way: Women, Men, and Trade in the Nairobi Area, 1890-1990*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 136.

¹⁴³ James H. Smith, “Njama’s Supper: The Consumption and Use of Literary Potency by Mau Mau Insurgents in Colonial Kenya,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (1998): 528.

¹⁴⁴ Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 82.

¹⁴⁵ A.S. Kennard to the Mayor, Nairobi, “Confidential,” 25 September 1953.

¹⁴⁶ Minutes of First Meeting of Committee Appointed Under Clause 15 of the Franchise Agreement with the City Council for Joint Consultation on Matters Affecting the Bus Services, Held at the Town Hall on Friday, 26th February, 1954, at 3.30 P.M., KBS, 26 February 1954, KNA, RN/1/79.

owned buses, but to all buses by whomsoever owned.”¹⁴⁷ Race would determine how and in which vehicles people were permitted to travel. Technologies of mobility, like physical movement itself, would reflect the structure of the colonial hierarchy.

Mau Mau was many things to many people. To men like Mutonyi it was, in part, a position from which to leverage a critique of the limits to trade and transport thrown up by the racialized spatial and infrastructural policies of the state. In relation to landed elders, though, men like Mutonyi appear to have been trying to do work of another kind. Theirs was a politics framed by efforts to authenticate their own paths to wealth, their own mobile and urban itineraries of maturation by other means. In this, they were not so different from men like Kenyatta a generation earlier. They too wanted their wealth and newfound forms of expertise to confer virtue. This was something worth arguing over. These men were time bandits, yes, but they were not radicals. Theirs was a normative politics that sought to domesticate new sources of value and new forms of value-generating work. Their opponents, like Kenyatta, argued that they mistook wealth for civic virtue. That they used their vehicles to speed up time and launch themselves into the status of eldership. This was not the timescale at which social change was held to move. It was to be both incremental and cyclical, as well as rooted down. It was the inverse of the fast-paced mobility of the road. While perhaps cynically mobilized by the landed elite, such as Kenyatta given his own past, this critique would have been as legible to the landless as it was to the landed.

If we can locate a kind of progressive conservatism in Mutonyi’s efforts to socialize his wealth, it was not without its critics. And these were not limited to corporate monopolies, or the colonial state. Nor were they limited to men like Kenyatta. To locate these other voices, we need to turn elsewhere, and to a new interpretive genre of disputation. The writings of one cultural reformer, Gakaara wa Wanjau, affords us just such an opportunity.

¹⁴⁷ Minutes of First Meeting of Committee Appointed Under Clause 15 of the Franchise Agreement with the City Council for Joint Consultation on Matters Affecting the Bus Services, Held at the Town Hall on Friday, 26th February 1954, at 3.30 P.M, KBS, 26 February 1954, KNA, RN/1/79.; G.S.T. McHutchin, Secretary to Officer-in-charge, Nairobi Extra Provincial District, 22 April 1954, RN/1/79.

Wanjau had experienced many of the indignities of life *both* as a colonial subject and as a social junior with little hope of changing his station in either domain. Born in Nyeri, he was expelled from Alliance High school for going on a hunger strike in the early years of the war.¹⁴⁸ In World War II he joined the army. On his return, he found himself demoralized by the urban squalor that characterized his life working for the local government in Nakuru.¹⁴⁹ The city was a place that debased men, material conditions sapping their capacity for self-mastery.

His education and service ought to have paid off. But material deprivation functionally prevented him from becoming a homesteader. While he was able to marry, his wife was forced to live with his family in Nyeri.¹⁵⁰ Wanjau, like many of the young men that entered the forest, faced social censure in the years leading up to Mau Mau. Rural class formation, in conjunction with changing practices of land tenure, made social juniors and younger sons, such as Wanjau, vulnerable.¹⁵¹ Their possibilities for social maturation appeared truncated; social oblivion on the horizon. Holding true to a durable formation in Kikuyu cultural politics, he joined other young men in his position, rural elders, and wealthy traders, such as Mutonyi, in locating the cause for these unwelcomed conditions in the corruption of Kikuyu cultural life, castigating the wayward and corrupted youth of the city.¹⁵² And, like Mutonyi, he was very much of the place that he so critiqued.

Wanjau's writings at once offered a declension narrative of the present and a prescription for the future. His vocation was that of both a cultural critic and cultural architect. And he followed a long line of Kikuyu cultural reformers for whom mobility was both a source of anxiety and the condition of possibility for critique. Unlike men of Mutonyi's stature, however, Wanjau did not need to domesticate the wealth derived from experiences further afield, as he had derived none. Perhaps this was part of his argument. His life, perhaps it seemed to him, looked more like that of squatters living in Rift Valley—for whom he wrote a pamphlet following their ejection in 1948, titled *The Spirit of Manly Courage and Effort for the African*—than it ought.¹⁵³ Around him, Wanjau would have seen an emergent class of wealthy Kikuyu—men like

¹⁴⁸ Lonsdale, "The Moral Economy of Mau Mau," 432.

¹⁴⁹ Derek Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival, A History of Dissent, c. 1935-1972*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 218.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 219

¹⁵³ Lonsdale, "The Moral Economy of Mau Mau," 431.

Mutonyi—growing up. He would have seen these men benefiting from what were, to him, the disarming forms of moral disorder located in the city.

Wanjau reportedly took the oath in 1952, and was swept up in Operation Jock Scott the following year. He would remain in detention for 8 years, and by 1956 Wanjau had confessed his involvement in the movement. For this he was rewarded, being granted a position as a staff member at Athi River Rehabilitation Center. From this position, Wanjau pursued his long-standing vocation as a writer and cultural expert. While Wanjau was a prolific cultural producer, he clearly did not have a free hand in composing the texts he wrote while in detention, which were subject to the watchful oversight of the camp commandant.¹⁵⁴ And yet, we can be fairly sure that some key elements of this creative work, elements that would have seemed insignificant to government readers, were central to the cultural politics of Kikuyu communities in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Wanjau joined both contemporary cultural reformers and those of the past in mobilizing vehicles as a central trope of gendered and generational disorder. In the undated, “Nyarwimbo is With Me,” Wanjau narrates the story of Nyarwimbo and a girlfriend who, together with Nyarwimbo’s boyfriend, James, conspire against their parents, disrespecting the authority of their fathers and thereby undermining the basic hierarchies that ought to structure social life. Together the three plan to escape the oversight of their parents and travel to the city. They enroll a bus named *Kaukuo*, literally “there it goes,” in pursuit of their deviance.¹⁵⁵ The titular Nyarwimbo is described as a “pretty, plump girl, not very tall. She was decked out in the current fashion and, from her words, she seemed a bit aloof.”¹⁵⁶ We will recall here the anxieties that filled the pages of *Mwigwithania* in the 1920s and 1930s (Chapter 1). Dressed in current fashion immediately marked Nyarwimbo as deviant.

The three are caught when Nyarwimbo’s brother, Waigwa, stops the bus in his Saab and demands that they return home. It is quietly revealed that the three had conspired to leave Karatina so that Nyarwimbo and James could marry, taking to the road so that James could avoid paying bridewealth and the indemnity owed to Nyarwimbo’s father for her pregnancy. A fight

¹⁵⁴ Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, 218.

¹⁵⁵ Gakaara wa Wanjau, “Nyarwimbo is With Me,” in Christiana Pugliese, *Author, Publisher and Gikuyu Nationalist: The Life and Writings of Gakaara wa Wanjau*, 163-176, (Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, 1995), 163.

¹⁵⁶ Gakaara wa Wanjau, “Nyarwimbo is With Me,” in Christiana Pugliese, *Author, Publisher and Gikuyu Nationalist: The Life and Writings of Gakaara wa Wanjau*, 163-176, (Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, 1995), 163.

erupts between Waigwa and James. The driver and the conductor of the bus become frustrated with the delay caused by the conversation, to which Waigwa responds: “Oooh! So you are the ones who help other people’s girls to run away so that they can go where they want!” All seems about to descend in chaos but for the presence of an “elder” sitting at the back of the bus who intervenes. Having listened to the case, he proclaims that the young man must pay for the pregnancy and formalize his intention to marry Nyarwimbo. James concedes and sends money for the purchase of “dew beer,” promising that he will initiate bridewealth once he has spoken to his father. As though speaking directly to the reader, a listening police officer turns to the elder and says, “And you, elder, we’re grateful to you, we need elders like you in this country of ours.” All breathe a sigh of relief, marking the end of the “case regarding the marriage payment on the bus of ‘Kaukuuo’”

Here Wanjau was making an argument about the threats he saw facing Gikuyu society. For Wanjau, as for cultural reformers in the 1920s, youthful disobedience threatened to unglue the tethers of social obligation and respect for elders that were critical to the maintenance not only of social order but of social reproduction as well. For men like Wanjau, the road and automotive technologies became the sites upon which society’s nightmares materialized and, in the case of his writings, became “emotionally real.”¹⁵⁷

While working in a different genre, the central themes, objects, and sites of anxiety in the writings of Wanjau bear a striking resemblance to those expressed by the contributors of *Mwigwithania*. And like the writers of *Mwigwithania*, Wanjau was making an argument in these pages. But times had changed, and in structural terms his position was different from that occupied by men like Kenyatta in the 1930s. Indeed, he was no stranger to the existential crisis thrown up for young men unable to afford bridewealth. And yet, he was emphatic that the custom be maintained. What was needed were responsible “elders,” like the man at the back of the bus, capable of restoring moral order and ensuring that young people did not flee the countryside for life in the city. We will recall here the problem of poverty, which was at once evidence, cause, and effect of delinquency. Material conditions had to be modified such that the moral order could be restored. For Wanjau, writes Lonsdale, “wealth was not by itself

¹⁵⁷ Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 42 (2013), 333.

patriotic.”¹⁵⁸ And so, and in contrast to Mutonyi, Wanjau was suspicious of people trying to parlay new wealth into eldership status. It seems that, for him, the trader joined the “greedy” elder as the central archetype of this morally illegitimate wealth.

Consider “Let His Wickedness Judge Him,” a play Wanjau wrote in 1956 while he was interned at Athi River Camp.¹⁵⁹ It is a story that gives full expression to the concerns of men detained during Mau Mau. At its center are detainees’ anxieties regarding the conjugal lives of their wives and the status of their property.¹⁶⁰ The story is framed around the life of Mariko, who we learn is an old, unrepentant, and wealthy Mau Mau “adherent.”

There is something odd about this setup to begin with. Men such as Mariko were of a sociologically different type than many Mau Mau forest fighters. Wanjau was educated, but he joined the urban and rural poor, united by the impossibility of achieving self-mastery; theirs was a struggle for *ithaka na wiathi*—land and self-mastery—things that, on the face of it, Mariko, like Mutonyi, had achieved.¹⁶¹ But it is this oddity that seems to be at the center of Wanjau’s critique, Mariko acting as a stand-in for an emergent and increasingly robust class of men that had achieved wealth but not virtue. While the reader learns little of Mariko’s life pre-detention, pre-Mau Mau, Wanjau offers us some important clues. Mariko’s concerns throughout the play pivot around the status of his investments, not in land or cattle, but in motor-vehicles, in lorries. In describing his properties to the rehabilitation officer, he brags: “I had three buses and four lorries,” to which the officer responds: “Don’t say that as a joke. You can run mad when you remember wealth like that.” Over these investments hangs an unnamed moral ambiguity. We learn, for example, that Mariko leaves the work of managing his affairs in trade to others. What Mariko describes as “his work” falls outside of the definition of both *wiathi* and *wira*—two concepts that sits at the core of an always contested but remarkably robust Gikuyu labor theory of value: “My sole work [before I was detained] was to drink and enjoy life, enjoy the world because I was rather late. That’s why you see me asking for much money from home, for

¹⁵⁸ Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 432.

¹⁵⁹ Gakaara wa Wanjau, “Let His Wickedness Judge Him,” (Community Development and Rehabilitation Department. Athi River Camp).

¹⁶⁰ Derek Peterson, “The Intellectual Lives of Mau Mau Detainees,” *Journal of African History*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2008): 73-91.

¹⁶¹ In his published journal of his detention, Wanjau gestured to the ways in which class bisected those men detained when, for example, he recounted a prison guard offering protection to a wealthy man who, incidentally, had been in the transportation business in Muranga. 1 November 1952, Gakaara wa Wanjau, *Mau Mau Author in Detention*, (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1988), 6.

enjoyment, while people grieve over confessing our secrets.” Here we learn some critical information. Mariko, the reader was to understand, had been among those that found himself blocked from accessing land— “because I was rather late”—and yet he had managed to attain wealth nonetheless. And the absence of any discussion of land, in contrast to the repeated discussions of Mariko’s business, suggests that this wealth was secured through trade alone.¹⁶² While not de facto excluding him from the status of *wiathi*, his relationship to this work as the abrogation of labor may have. He had, in other words, attained wealth but not self-mastery. For Wanjau, unlike for Mutonyi, this was not a position from which legitimate critiques could be made. And, while it is not spelled out by Wanjau, other information provided suggests that his wealth came from suspect sources and that it had not been properly socialized. Mariko states that his “affairs are different from those of the common people.”

Here, Mariko marks himself as an outsider, one who had excluded his wealth from benefitting the collective. *Wiathi*, we will recall, was linked to civic virtue and *wira*. But forging the connections between labor, wealth, and respectability required further embedding, not distancing, oneself from the community. This required generating solidarities with one’s *riika*, or age set, but also with one’s *mbari*, or clan, the latter demanding the maintenance of a beneficent relationship with dependents. We will recall here the recriminations of early drivers, those that refused to return home, those that did not parlay their individual wealth into civic virtue, such as Becker. Mariko’s only dependents beyond his immediate family seem to have been urban discontents and waywards, those who “frequented the River Road,” with his “vehicles carrying people to oath ceremonies.” Mariko, in other words, had leveraged his improperly socialized wealth, for which his vehicles were the core symbol, to lead *mikora*, the unworthy poor, into the forest. Mariko was not a man of civic virtue nor self-mastery: he was a child. As the CDO rebuked him, “[What are you worth?] An old man like you, who has property and grown children? [And yet you] are no better than your son.”

A close reading of Wanjau’s writings, through a focused attention on his sites of anxiety and the moral ambiguity hanging over them, sheds some light on the complicated politics of class amongst the Kikuyu who called the forest, a space of the wild, home in the years of the

¹⁶² In a letter from his junior wife Lilly, for example, she writes: “I would like to tell you that I have obtained a new licence for a shop which was opened on 10th. I am going on selling goods well. I am also trying hard for the lorries to start working.”

Emergency. In this period, the always precarious relationships among wealth and status, hard work and class, aspiring eldership status and civic virtue had reached their breaking point. If men like Mutonyi argued that men like Kenyatta had an unfair advantage, having ably transformed their deviant pasts into leadership, men like Wanjau argued that men like Mutonyi's labor was unmeritorious. Not having properly socialized their wealth, this class of men, Wanjau seemed to argue, was illegitimately claiming for itself the right to leadership.

Conclusion

“Roads and Railways”—to this we might add lorries and cars—“are not just technical objects,” writes anthropologist Brian Larkin:

but also operate on the level of fantasy and desire. They encode the dreams of individuals and societies and are the vehicles whereby those fantasies [and nightmares] are transmitted and made emotionally real...They form of us as subjects not just on a technopolitical level but also through this mobilization of affect and the sense of desire, pride, and frustration, [and fear] feelings which can be deeply political.¹⁶³

It is by tacking back and forth between materiality and meaning, between form and the content to which people ascribe form, that we can begin to locate both the “politics and poetics” of infrastructures.

Chapters 1 and 2 worked at this interstice to explore the politics and poetics of roads, and the technologies that ride on their rails. Chapter 1 worked to tease out the vexed place of roads as common goods by exploring the contradictory place of infrastructures that began their lives in the hands of a corporation. The dual vision of roads as bearers of “commerce and civilization,” I argued, articulated with existing epistemologies as those living in the region interpreted these new infrastructures as against prevailing visions of space and work. In this chapter I turned to the postwar period and to vehicles. If in the early colonial period, the road and access to road infrastructures critically mediated relationships between the state and its putative subjects *and*

¹⁶³ Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” 333.

mediated relations at the scale of community and household, in the postwar period technologies of mobility joined roads in becoming dense nodes of conflict.

Askaris returned from the war with high hopes. Their participation in the British war effort had armed them with cash and expertise that they worked to translate into more desirable futures. While the state hoped that askaris would sink these monies into savings accounts, askaris brought to bear their own systems of valuation as they considered their futures. These men had been trained in the service corps, and at the center of their aspirations were lorries and the new markets of goods and people to which they promised access. Theirs was a politics that turned not on generic notions of sacrifice to the crown. It was more specific; a vocational politics that located newfound skills and expertise at their core. In this, they found their aspirations frustrated in at least two registers. In applying for licenses for vehicles and trade, aspiring traders were blocked by the racial and technological hierarchies that organized economic life in the Kenya colony. In particular, as they worked to enter new markets, they found themselves in conflict with South Asian traders, who had carved out for themselves what were popularly perceived to be monopolies in the fields of transport and trade. This offered yet further evidence that the public for whom infrastructures were constructed was tiered. These frustrations articulated with popular experiences of truncated mobility, which, I argue, was central to people's experiences of these colonial infrastructures. By the 1950s, Kenya's taxi-men and lorry drivers worked to scale up these (micro)politics of mobility as they tethered them to critiques of the racialized spatial and economic logics that shaped popular experiences of violence and exclusion in the Kenya colony.

But in Kenya, the politics of infrastructures have rarely simply been a site where state-subject relations are mediated. And it was not simply the state that seemed to foreclose young people's aspirations. As landholding status was increasingly out of reach for many, askaris among them, conventional routes to maturation were foreclosed. The consolidation of power of the land rich ensured this. These householders denigrated the labors of their social juniors, promising that the work of trade, that wealth in vehicles, would never measure up to the stores of wealth located in livestock and land. Their capital was excoriated and their paths to attaining it opened them up to moral censure as they tried to rescale their wealth, leapfrogging over the slow, incremental path to social maturation. In these labors of domestication would-be traders by and large failed. Had they succeeded in domesticating their wealth and expertise, they might have

had a generation named in their honor, this a means of integrating economic transformation and acknowledging the legitimacy of new forms of expertise and value generation.¹⁶⁴

By the 1940s, in other words, disputes over technologies of mobility and mobile work became the site where enduring generational dynamics played out. But this was not the first time. Indeed, each generation of men addressed in the past two chapters chastised the forms of mobility of which they themselves partook a generation earlier. Indeed, popular criticisms of youthful peripatetic itineraries seem to have become a *de facto* element of claiming elder status, all the while effacing the forms of movement and capital accumulation that had allowed successive generations to secure for themselves positions of power and authority. And this dynamic persists into the present (see Chapter 7).

But by the 1950s, this capacity for repetition appeared foreclosed, as constraints on the material conditions of possibility for maturation solidified. This reached a head during Mau Mau. It was here that social juniors—by virtue of status if not wealth—joined other social juniors—defined by status as well as wealth—as they took to the forest to fight for, on the face of it, *ithaka na wiathi*. As men like Mutonyi set to work claiming for themselves the right to parlay their wealth into elder status, they found their access to markets in transport and trade foreclosed, not simply by virtue of the censure of rural patriarchs, but by virtue of the early monopoly in transport secured by the KBS. While for Mau Mau forest fighters the struggle was, indeed, over *ithaka na wiathi*, for aspiring traders access to Nairobi and its markets was central to the politics of these men, men who perhaps uneasily called Nairobi home. And this alliance between city and country, between the property poor and the respectability poor, was always tenuous. Class formation amongst Kikuyu communities ensured this. For those doubly excluded, like Wanjau, the claims of the petite bourgeoisie seemed superfluous and self-indulgent. Wealth itself, he seemed to remind Mariko (and Mutonyi), did not make you virtuous.

If, in part, this chapter was about people's efforts to enroll infrastructures and technologies of mobility in a bid to rescale their futures in the context of widespread material transformation, the chapters to follow explore different labors of scale-making through interrogating a different infrastructure: that of radio broadcasting. As in the case of roads, discussions of radio generated conflict. As in the case of roads, these conflicts turned on

¹⁶⁴ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 16.

contestations over how radio broadcasting could enact new scales of social and political inclusion (and exclusion). And as in the case of roads, finally, these conflicts themselves resonated across multiple scales as various constituencies mobilized their own visions of the ideal organization of people and belonging as they worked to secure for themselves more desirable futures. It is to these stories to which we now turn.

Chapter 3

Enacting Radio: Expertise and the Politics of Scale in Colonial Kenya

I met Henry Makokha at his office at Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) early one May morning.¹ Henry is the radio program's manager at KBC, which is housed next to the University of Nairobi, and across the street from the storied Fairmont Hotel in Nairobi, Kenya's capital city.² The building has lost much of its luster in the years since its opening in the late 1950s. At that time, it was described as a state of the art facility. Today, the carpets are faded, and the computers' cathode ray tube monitors have seen better days. Henry had agreed to meet with me to discuss the history of radio broadcasting in Kenya, and greeted me warmly from across his large desk when I arrived.

Henry was born in 1963, the year of Kenya's independence, in Bungoma, a town located in Kenya's Western Province. A child of independence, Henry came to Nairobi following high school to begin a degree in literature at the University of Nairobi. Upon finishing his degree in the late 1980s, he was "invited to go for [two] interviews." One as a "District Officer," and the second as an "Information Officer." Henry was inclined towards the second position. Before college, he had fulfilled his mandatory term with the Kenya Youth Service (KYS) and had "participated a lot in drills, like a soldier...and I think I was...tired of that...so I had opted for information officer, which was a good job for me." Having impressed his interviewer, he was assigned his first position: "Producer Two."

¹ Interview with Henry Makhoka 30 May 2014.

² The Fairmont Hotel, built in the early years of the 20th century, was the site of large-scale protests following the arrest of Kenyan nationalist, Harry Thuku, in 1922. Thuku was one of the main organizers of a meeting staged on February 26, 1922, that was rumored to have amassed 25,000 people. There, Thuku called on attendees to engage in a campaign of mass civil disobedience, which included refusing to pay taxes and a strike action against all work for European employers. He was subsequently arrested, and held in a cell adjacent to the hotel. This provoked widespread protests, with hundreds amassing by the hotel. Security forces fired on the crowd, which was mainly composed of women, leading to the deaths of some 23 people. Thuku was subsequently deported (a typical colonial response to dissidence) and sent to Kismayo in Somalia, where he was held in detention for nearly nine years. But Thuku also played a role in the history of radio broadcasting in the Kenya colony. The colonial state mobilized Thuku to advise on radio broadcasting when it ran its first experimental broadcasts in 1938. He is an early example of a category of persons I have described as "African knowledge worker" upon whom the information arm of the state thoroughly depended, themes addressed more fully in chapters 4 and 5. Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo, eds. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Henry had taken the job hoping that it would grant him some distance from the regimented discipline to which he had been subjected in the state-run NYS. He was mistaken. As in the colonial period, radio in postcolonial Kenya was deeply implicated in Kenyan statecraft. In the 1980s, like in the 1940s, the state deployed broadcasting as an instrument of governance. In the 1980s, like in the 1940s, the Kenyan government used radio as a means of fashioning subjects, all the while pursuing “development.” In the 1980s, like in the 1940s, knowledge workers were subject to a good deal of censure at the hands of the state.

And yet, broadcasting in Kenya has gone through significant transformations since Henry began working for what was then called the Voice of Kenya (VoK) in the 1980s. Back then, the VoK was the only game in town, he told me. Things began to change in 1989, when the state-owned Voice of Kenya was transformed into a parastatal operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and was rebranded the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). These transformations were accompanied by the wholesale “liberalization and commercialization of the media industry in Kenya.” As Henry told me, “liberalization” transformed the industry from being one concerned with offering a “public service” into a “commercial venture.”

Kenya’s media industries were not alone in this. Transformations in this sector were part and parcel of a spate of reforms that characterized Kenya in the early 1990s. In Kenya, as elsewhere, pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank had led to an opening of the political, social, and economic spheres. Donors told then-President Daniel arap Moi that donor dollars would be withheld if he refused to initiate multi-partyism and otherwise move towards “liberalizing” the country’s political and economic spheres, not least through the privatization of state-held assets.

By 1991, Moi had been in office for 13 years, having come to power following the death of Kenya’s first post-independence president, Jomo Kenyatta. People viewed the VoK as a mouthpiece of the government during this period. Famously satirized by Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o as “The Voice of Truth” working at the behest of “His Excellency Ole Excellence,” the VoK hourly updated Kenyan listeners with the minutiae of the commandante’s daily life.³

³ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Matigari*, (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1993), 70. It is worth noting that a program called “The Voice of Truth” was, in fact, broadcast by the colonial government in the 1950s during the Mau Mau rebellion. “News Broadcast No. 23,” September 5, 1953, Kenya National Archives [hereafter KNA] AHC/18/4; for

For Kenyans, then, the liberalization of the media indexed a broader opening in the political sphere in Kenya, an opening which eventuated in the end of the dictatorship, with contested elections in 1992 and 1997 and, finally, Moi leaving office in 2002.

And yet, for Henry, the liberalization of the media did not lead to the emergence of more ‘open’ and truthful reportage. For him, interestingly, the period of liberalization has undermined the integrity of the industry as a purveyor of a “public service.” Exploiting what Henry referred to as “the negative aspects of liberalization,” the permissive regulatory structure that accompanied liberalization enabled commercial radio stations to pursue profit over the public good. For Henry, the drive for profits is an anathema to radio broadcasting’s function as a “public service,” which requires broadcasting offer “society” a vantage from which to “look at things from different levels:” the “local level, the regional level...[and the] global level.” For Henry, this multi-perspectivalism is crucial, enabling “the universal understanding of issues.” Far from leading to an opening in people’s media worlds, then, Henry argued that liberalization had foreclosed the interpretive terrain against which people recall the past, experience the present, and imagine the future.

That Henry feels ambivalent about these transformations is not altogether surprising. The 2007-2008 presidential election was marked by violence. Popular wisdom held that the newly liberalized media was largely to blame, with privately-owned, vernacular language radio stations stoking the sense of precarity of various communities defined, as they were, by ethno-linguistic attachments. Commercial broadcasters had abrogated what Henry views as being the central responsibility of broadcasters. Speaking to communities in vernacular languages, this had enabled the emergence and distillation of parochial modes of scale-making that, in the case of the election, were generative of what John Lonsdale has referred to as “political tribalism.”⁴

For Henry, these concerns are particular to his postcolonial, post-liberalization present. And yet, they distill concerns regarding the place of broadcasting in prospectively securing (or unraveling) the contested boundaries of social and political belonging that had animated debates surrounding

a discussion of the characteristics of the *commandante* in postcolonial Africa see Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁴ John Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought.” In *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa. Book Two: Violence and Ethnicity*. 315-468, (London: James Currey, 1992).

the medium from its earliest days in the region. In the colonial period, these discussions took place over a broad geographic expanse, and drew together a variety of interests: “men on the spot,” BBC “experts,” private firms, metropolitan administrators, “local” populations, missionaries, and radio hobbyists, each of whom forwarded their own vision of the place of radio in Kenya, in Eastern Africa, and across the British empire. As this suggests, discussions of radio were, from the outset, framed by multiple scalar logics and interests.

The first of three chapters on radio, this chapter explores the contested place of broadcasting in enacting East Africa as a region during the Second World War. Drawing on the concept of technopolitics, which highlights both how infrastructures are deployed to enact political goals, and the unintended “power effects” of technological assemblages, I argue that the debates over radio-broadcasting emerged at the nexus of multiple projects of scale-making.⁵ While metropolitan experts hoped that the development of a regional broadcasting network would generate a regional way of being with Nairobi at its center, “men on the spot,” building on the critiques of East Africa’s varied communities, countered that the homogenizing impulse of a regional network was not sensitive enough to accommodate itself to the particularities of conditions on the ground.

Two sets of concerns were at play in these debates. “Men on the spot” felt that their “expertise,” founded on their intimate knowledge of “their charges,” would be undermined by an emergent metropolitan emphasis on the standardization of administrative practice, of which regional broadcasting appeared to be a harbinger. These local experts argued that “place-based knowledge” constituted a form of expertise superior to the “portable” knowledge advocated by BBC experts and metropolitan administrators located in London.⁶ African communities, for their part, saw in metropolitan efforts to enact regional infrastructures a means of surreptitiously generating the material substrate that would usher in East African federation, a potential future that, they feared, would see their interests and lives subordinated to

⁵ Gabrielle Hecht, “Africa and the Nuclear World: Labor, Occupational Health, and The Transnational Production of Uranium,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2009): 896-926; Gabrielle Hecht, “Introduction,” in *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics of the Global Cold War*, ed. Gabrielle Hecht, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 3.

⁶ For a discussion of the tension between these two modalities of technical and scientific expertise during the Cold War, see Donna C. Mehos and Suzanne M. Moon, “The Uses of Portability: Circulating Experts in the Technopolitics of Cold War and Decolonization,” in *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics of the Global Cold War*, ed. Gabrielle Hecht, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).

the ideology of settler colonialism dominant in Kenya. “Men on the spot” and would-be African listeners found in each other an alliance. In leveraging their critiques, they called the Colonial Office’s bluff: technics could not be disentangled from the aspirational political futures from which metropolitan plans emerged. These cross-cutting projects of scale-making won the technopolitical battle of the day, and by 1949 the plans for a regional network were tabled.

Broadcasting Empire

Emergent communications networks were wrapped up in the project of empire. Sir John Pender, a Manchester Merchant, was one of the first enthusiasts to speculate on the possibilities of telegraphic communications, founding the Eastern Associated Telegraphy Companies in 1865.⁷ Upon his death this work was taken over by his son, Sir John Denison-Pender, or ‘Le Roi des Cables,’ of whom none other than Cecil Rhodes is rumored to have said: “Pender was imperializing the map while I was just feeling my way.”⁸

Rhodes’ was not merely speaking metaphorically here. As noted by Roland Belfort, a keen observer of telecommunications technologies, in 1898:

The need of...direct cable communication is real and pressing. The Imperial Government can now strengthen the British position...quicken Colonial commercial expansion, and establish between her principal colonies and the mother country a material bond of union which cannot but produce the happiest results.⁹

Communications networks, in other words, were imagined as being the material means by which disparate territories could be sutured together, linking seemingly distant ‘peripheries’ to Europe’s scattered metropolises. From the outset, telegraphy (both wired and wireless) was conceived of as a project of imperial scale-making.

By the late 1920s, radio enthusiasts took as self-evident that these emergent communications networks were a means of stitching together Empire. As Belfort wrote: “If the

⁷ “The New Cable and Wireless Merger,” MS Marconi 240, Marconi Archives, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

⁸ “The New Cable and Wireless Merger,” MS Marconi 240, Marconi Archives, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

⁹ Roland Belfort, “The Colonial Cable Peril: And How to Avert It,” (London: Roland Belfort, 1898).

vision of the Empire as an organized economic family is to be realized, its communications services must be organized as a unified system. Only so can Imperial and International Communications Limited play its part in knitting the Imperial family together.”¹⁰ In this register, the commercial possibilities of telegraphy were tempered by the prerogatives of securing “the public interest.”¹¹

For their part, when administrators in London considered the role of radio in colonial administration, they conceived of radio as capable of broadcasting “progress.” Historically an agricultural term, to broadcast meant to widely scatter seeds for harvest. For administrators at the time, broadcasting held out just such a promise; the medium itself capable of spreading “progress” in both its ideational and material forms. As noted in 1936 by a Committee appointed to report on broadcasting in the colonies:

We envisage the development of Colonial Broadcasting— and its justification— not as an instrument of entertainment ... but...as an instrument of advanced administration ... for the enlightenment and education of the more backward sections of the population, and for their instruction in public health, agriculture etc.¹²

The vision of broadcasting as an “instrument of advanced administration” would become an aphorism in the world of colonial information. And so, and from the beginning, radio was freighted with the baggage of pedagogy.

The temporality telegraphy seemed to offer was critical to the imperial ambitions wrapped up in radio. Metropolitan observers saw in the new communications network the possibility for centrally administering the colonies, the medium eliminating distance and enabling simultaneity. As Belfort noted: “there is no important country which is not in almost instant communication with Great Britain.”¹³ Radio’s capacity to transcend space and compress time seemed, to many, to neatly align with the Colonial Office’s (CO) aspiration that governance in the future should be standardized and streamlined, “rationally” administered from the putative

¹⁰ Belfort, “The Empire: Cable v. Radio, The Coming Struggle between Pioneers and Innovators,” (London: The Empire, N.D.).

¹¹ Belfort, “The Empire: Cable v. Radio.”

¹² Committee on Broadcasting in the Colonies as quoted in M.F. Hill, Information Officer, “Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” KNA HAKI/13/276 or CS/2/8/121 – Information and Propaganda

¹³ Not authored or titled. Ms. Marconi, 240, Marconi Archives, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

“centers” of imperial power. Within the metropole, in other words, administrators and technologists alike were confident that the space-scaling affordances of radio technology would enable the Colonial Office to enact “progress” “at a distance.”¹⁴

In Kenya, limited broadcasting was introduced in 1927 when a group of settlers and self-identified radio hobbyists pressured the government to initiate services for what was referred to as “the public.” This public, of course, was limited in both space and by race, radio broadcasting servicing as it did white settlers living in Nairobi and its immediate environs.¹⁵ Radio licenses cost 50/- per annum, and early efforts were financed by “prominent local business men.”¹⁶ These radio enthusiasts conceived of radio *not* as serving the public writ large, but as a special-interest venture.

For these men, broadcasting was of secondary importance, a piggyback venture tacked onto their primary ambition: establishing direct communication between settler populations and their metropolitan “compatriots” via telegraphy. Tellingly, Lord Delamere, a supporter of settlers’ rights and an advocate of regional federation, played a central role in early radio. It seems likely that Delamere, in advocating for the advent of telecommunications in Kenya, hoped to use the medium to connect nodes of support into a network of voices advocating the expansion of settlers’ social, political, and commercial interests in a new, federated, East Africa.¹⁷ Radio offered these men a medium through which their racialized vision of the future could prospectively be scaled up thereby gaining global purchase. In this sense, early radio in Kenya was a complex project of scale-making, used to both shore up the settler community’s parochialism, while linking it to global elsewhere.

But radio enthusiasts’ hopes of drawing metropolitan interests toward the Kenya colony were tempered by the terms of the agreement they had secured with the colonial government. As early radio enthusiasts Norman E. Walter and Allan S. Ker recalled when they penned “Some Reflections of the Early Days of Broadcasting in Kenya:” “The New company was granted an

¹⁴ Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*, (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Information Department, Colonial Office, *Handbook on Broadcasting Services in the Colonies, Etc.*, (London: Information Department, Colonial Office, 1953).

¹⁶ Norman E. Walter and Allan S. Ker, “Some Reflections of the Early Days of Broadcasting in Kenya,” File: Cable and Wireless Archive [hereafter CW], CW DOC/12/135 Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

¹⁷ Carla Wilson Heath, “Broadcasting in Kenya: Policy and Politics, 1928-1984” (Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1986), 60.

operating licence by the Kenya Government [in 1927] only on the understanding that it would at the same time inaugurate a local broadcasting service to cover the whole of the Colony” using the call sign VQ7LO.¹⁸

The company, called the British East African Broadcasting Co., was a short-lived venture. The Kenya colony was a large territory with a highly variable topography, and few people on the ground. The provisioning of a Colony-wide service was thus no easy task in material terms. As Walter and Ker recalled: “The medium wave transmitter was not powerful enough to cover adequately the required area, and...short wave was still in its infancy.” Medium wave, while desirable over short distances, is a sensitive medium, susceptible to atmospheric and electrical interference and so subject to distortion. The frequencies at which medium waves travel are also variable in a 24 hour cycle, messages moving better during the night, but struggling to travel during daylight hours.¹⁹ Financial constraints further challenged the team. As the two noted: “To begin with, all the equipment used for the telegraph and broadcasting services, was designed and constructed locally to cut costs.” Early radio networks were thus borne of policies of fiscal austerity as the state outsourced the cost of constructing and administering the network to a rag-tag operation: the British East African Broadcasting Co.²⁰ By the 1950s, these relations infrastructural dependency would prove to be a liability for the colonial state (see Chapter 4).

During a 1928 Imperial Conference, authorities mandated that the British East African Broadcasting Co. be absorbed by what was to become Cable and Wireless Ltd.²¹ While a team of local hobbyists and amateurs may have been partially replaced by Cable and Wireless’s experts,

¹⁸ Norman E Walter and Allan S. Ker, “Some Reflections of the Early Days of Broadcasting in Kenya,” File: Cable and Wireless Archive CW DOC/12/135 Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

¹⁹ One technological solution, one which would be on and off the table in the years to come, was to use a medium-wave transmitter to cover the Nairobi and its immediate hinterlands, while relying on a short-wave service for the rest of the colony. As we shall see in chapter 4, whether or not this strategy was pursued would have political implications. Norman E Walter and Allan S. Ker, “Some Reflections of the Early Days of Broadcasting in Kenya,” File: Cable and Wireless Archive CW DOC/12/135 Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

²⁰ For a discussion of what she refers to as “hegemony on a shoestring,” see Sara Berry, “Hegemony on a Shoestring: Indirect Rule and Access to Agricultural Land,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (1992): 327-355. This argument shares an affinity with that of Berry’s, but takes the argument in new directions. Whereas Berry emphasizes how policies of fiscal constraint required the use of “native authorities” in the form of indirect rule, here I emphasize how the pecuniary structures and constraint of the colonial state made it dependent on private enterprise to enact infrastructures and the critical contributions of African knowledge workers and experts.

²¹ Norman E Walter and Allan S. Ker, “Some Reflections of the Early Days of Broadcasting in Kenya,” File: Cable and Wireless Archive CW DOC/12/135 Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

and locally produced equipment replaced by state of the art manufactures, there was nothing seamless about the services offered by Cable and Wireless Ltd. As noted by the Sunday Post on the eve of C&W's tenure in Kenya: "The Wonderful thing about Cable and Wireless was that it existed quietly in a corner of our lives...It was often deliciously amateurish and for that reason, often equally lovable, like so much of early Kenya."²² This journalist's reflections on the early days of colonialism via its broadcasting, while nostalgic, were not altogether wrong. The early years of broadcasting were characterized by folly.²³

In the late 1930's the station began broadcasting on shortwave. Despite this technological transformation, the space-scaling (and yet decidedly parochial) achievements of this team were concurrently both more expansive and more limited than the group might have hoped. As Walter and Ker recalled:

During 1931 so many letters were being received from listeners in England stating how well they were receiving our short wave transmissions. While this was very gratifying it was also very disappointing as our objective was to give a Colony-wide coverage of about 400 miles and not 6,000. Local listeners [unable to pick up broadcasts from Nairobi 7LO] on the other hand were sending many complaints.²⁴

The uneven reach of broadcasts emanating from Nairobi was a perennial problem with which administrators had to reckon, and these limits would routinely undermine colonial aspirations to use radio to enact "progress" at a distance.

²² Norman E Walter and Allan S. Ker, "Some Reflections of the Early Days of Broadcasting in Kenya," File: Cable and Wireless Archive CW DOC/12/135 Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

²³ On one occasion, an announcer waited impatiently at the studio to receive the mail being delivered by bicycle messenger which contained the day's news. The studio was some distance from downtown. And Kabete road was not macadamized in the 1930s, rendering it virtually un-passable during the long and short rains. So eager was the lay-broadcaster to enlighten his waiting listeners that, when the messenger finally arrived, he began his broadcast without vetting the materials. "Without a hesitation," the announcer recalled, "I read that there had been an outbreak of 'RABBIS' in the Northern Frontier Province. I went gaily on as I did not realize that an error had been made. It took me years to live that one down!" These moments of more dramatic folly were accompanied by more mundane material interventions. On numerous occasions, broadcasts were disrupted as presenters choked as the studio's resident flies took up temporary residence in the mouths of announcers. From the outset, then, intransigent materialities intervened. Norman E Walter and Allan S. Ker, "Some Reflections of the Early Days of Broadcasting in Kenya," File: Cable and Wireless Archive CW DOC/12/135 Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

²⁴ Norman E Walter and Allan S. Ker, "Some Reflections of the Early Days of Broadcasting in Kenya," File: Cable and Wireless Archive CW DOC/12/135 Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

Broadcasting Expertise

In 1938, C&W constructed a new studio. The timing of this expansion was felicitous, coming as it did in the months leading to the outbreak of the Second World War. Cable and Wireless worked with the newly established Kenya Information Office (KIO) to facilitate a “large increase in broadcasting” to Africans.²⁵ In preparation for this expansion, the Kenyan government initiated an “experiment,” designed to gauge “Africans” reception of broadcasting in Kiambu, a district in Kenya’s Central Province, in August 1938.²⁶ The purpose of the experiment was “to discover how broadcasting can best be used for the educational development of Africans.”²⁷ And, as “a social service,” it was financed by Government.”²⁸

Running on a “shoestring,” the Kenya Information Office relied on a series of non-state actors to subsidize its labors. Then District Commissioner, G.H. Williams, assembled a team in possession of various registers of expertise in devising programming for the experiment, which included not only representatives from the “Medical, Education, and Agricultural Departments” but also Dr. Leakey, of whom we shall here more, and “an educated Kikuyu, Mr. Harry Thuku.”²⁹

²⁵ Norman E Walter and Allan S. Ker, “Some Reflections of the Early Days of Broadcasting in Kenya,” File: Cable and Wireless Archive CW DOC/12/135 Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

²⁶ D.H. Williams, District Commissioner, Kiambu to the Hon. Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, Nyeri. “Experimental Broadcasts to Africans,” 20 September, 1939, KNA AE/34/62 - Posts and Telegraphs. Wireless, 1938-39.

²⁷ D.H. Williams, District Commissioner, Kiambu to the Hon. Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, Nyeri. “Experimental Broadcasts to Africans,” 20 September, 1939, KNA AE/34/62 - Posts and Telegraphs. Wireless, 1938-39.

²⁸ In this instance, a combination of the colonial administration and the Kiambu Local Native Council, each contributing £25. N.A. Draft: “Memorandum on Broadcasting to Natives,” AE/34/62 - Posts and Telegraphs. Wireless, 1938-39

²⁹ D.H. Williams, District Commissioner, Kiambu to the Hon. Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, Nyeri. “A Report on a Series of ten Experimental Broadcasts to Africans held from August 18th to 20th October, 1939,” 4 November 1939, KNA AE/34/62 - Posts and Telegraphs. Wireless, 1938-39. Thuku was rather an odd selection here. A perennial thorn in the side of the administration in this period as he advocated for a politics of unity that transcended not simply the lines of race and ethnicity, but colonial boundaries themselves. Interestingly, Thuku does not reference his involvement from radio in his highly detailed autobiography. See Harry Thuku, *Harry Thuku: An Autobiography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

The spatially constrained nature of the experiment mirrored the arterial reach of the colonial state.³⁰ Instead of even territorial coverage, listening was clustered around nodes. A public reception facility was installed in Kiambu's marketplace by Cable & Wireless in conjunction with the Posts and Telegraphs Department, and another was installed in Memorial Hall, a welfare hall located in Nairobi's "African location," Pumwani. Other spaces of listening were made available by employers who "allowed their employees to listen in at their own wireless sets." Missionaries' labors were also mobilized, and Dr. Clive Irvine of the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM), erected a "special aerial and power supply" outside of his house.³¹

Policies of fiscal austerity required the state mobilize these extra-state entities—missionaries and settlers, African knowledge workers and experts. The administration simply could not have pulled off the experiment on its own. But the mobilization of local expertise also reflected the prevailing ethos surrounding development initiatives in this period. Advocates of "place-based" knowledge argued that if the globally circulating technology of broadcasting was to take root in Kenya, it would have to be transformed and 'localized' as it was rescaled. These advocates for the local did not think in terms of the empire, nor the region, nor, even, the colony, but demanded a more precise telescoping. These "men on the spot" challenged the centralizing impulse underwriting metropolitan aspirations to extend broadcasting to African communities, emphasizing the importance of enrolling allies knowledgeable about the particularities of this Kiambu milieu.

But simply enrolling these allies as prosthetic helpers and generating these spaces of listening were not, in and of themselves, guaranteed to produce the desired results. The medium was too novel. The messages too new. And the relationship between medium and message too tenuous. As it pertained to medium, as numerous observers would argue, any interruption in the medium of conveyance—crackles, fading, atmospheric noise—would undermine the developmentalist messages on offer. As Edward Twining argued, an inefficient service was

³⁰ Frederick Cooper first described the reach of colonial states in Africa as being arterial, by contrast to the capillary power Michel Foucault argued typified modern states. See Frederick Cooper "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No. 5 (1994): 1516-45.

³¹ Clive Irvine to the Hon. Chief Native Commissioner (CNC), September 14, 1939, KNA AE/34/62 Posts and Telegraphs, 1938-39.

guaranteed to derail the “development of broadcasting in East Africa for many years.”³² As it pertained to message, many argued that assessing listeners’ responses would be all but impossible. Both the Provincial Commissioner and the District Commissioner argued that what was needed was research, a network of knowledge workers tasked with generating a clear understanding of how people were listening and, even more crucially, to understand what they were hearing. The goal of these tests was to gain: “valuable information...regarding the reactions of natives to various types of broadcasts.”³³ And so, a wide variety of programming was included “with a view to finding out what appealed to the African Mentality.”³⁴ These early broadcasts were in Kikuyu with English “interpolations,” but designers imagined a future wherein Kikuyu broadcasts would be accompanied by Kiswahili translations which, some hoped, would eventually propagate across the region under the mantle of the “East African Native Broadcasting Service.”³⁵

Calibrating Africans’ responses to radio required constant vigilance and local knowledge, “men on the spot” argued. And yet, administrators were confident in the results of the test. “There can be no doubt of the success of these experiments, or of the value of broadcasting,” wrote District Commissioner, Williams. Missionaries reported that the Kikuyu broadcasts were “most eagerly listened to,” with large groups assembling around receivers during listening parties.³⁶ While some reported that listeners were particularly interested in “international events,” others noted that people showed: “particular pleasure at Kikuyu songs.”³⁷ Employers,

³² E.F. Twining, M.B.E., District Officer, Uganda, W.K. Brasher, Engineer-in-Chief, Department of Posts and Telegraphs, Palestine, and C.A.L. Richards, Assistant District Officer, Uganda, “Broadcasting Investigations,” (Entebbe: Government Printer, Uganda, 1939), KNA AHC/34/62.

³³ D.H. Williams, District Commissioner, Kiambu to the Hon. Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, Nyeri. “Experimental Broadcasts to Africans,” 20 September 1939, KNA AE/34/62 - Posts and Telegraphs. Wireless, 1938-39.

³⁴ D.H. Williams, District Commissioner, Kiambu to the Hon. Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, Nyeri. “Experimental Broadcasts to Africans,” 20 September 1939, KNA AE/34/62 - Posts and Telegraphs. Wireless, 1938-39.

³⁵ Language of “interpolations” comes from not authored to the Honorable Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, Nyeri “Experimental Broadcasts to Africans,” 20 September, 1939, AE/34/62 Posts and Telegraphs. Wireless 1938-39, p 3; Honorable Chief Secretary to Chief Native Commissioner (CNC) 10 March 1940, KNA AE/34/63, Posts and Telegraphs: Wireless; Broadcasting; To Natives.

³⁶ Clive Irvine to the Hon. Chief Native Commissioner (CNC), September 14, 1939, KNA AE/34/62 Posts and Telegraphs, 1938-39.

³⁷ E.F. Twining, W.K. Brasher, C.A.L. Richards, “Broadcasting Investigations,” Entebbe: Printed by the Government Printer, Uganda), p. 10; As noted in the Ugandan context, “African does like to hear news and talks in his own tongue.” UNA Broadcast for Africans, 14; Others noted the popularity of “gramophone records of native music.” See BNA CO 875/9/18.

for their part, enthusiastically reported on the capacity of radio to correct “rumors” and other “erroneous matter,” which typified the para-networks of communication which took the form of word of mouth communication.³⁸ From the outset, then, radio’s purported function was to shore up government propaganda, and to “wear the wobblers away from the agitators.”³⁹ This was truly a miraculous tool of “advanced administration,” they believed, which “proved quite definitely that the African is ‘Wireless’ minded.”⁴⁰

But what did it mean to say that “the African” was “wireless minded”? This statement, while rhetorically powerful in this period, turned on the conceit that both “the African” and the technology of broadcasting were generalizable, internally homogenous entities. Of course, though in less explicit terms, this was similarly the conceit of metropolitan administrators who imagined broadcasting ushering in a future of centralized “progress,” the infrastructure a “tool” of rationalized, centrally directed “advanced administration.” This conceit, in both its valences, would be challenged by a perhaps unexpected cast of characters.

If in the experimental mode broadcasts were designed to capture a community separated in space but sharing a linguistic affinity, the affordances of shortwave radio held out the possibility of scale-making of a much more expansive kind. The 1938 experimental broadcasts transcended not simply the boundaries of the reserve and the African location of Pumwani, but the boundaries of the Kenya colony itself with reports indicating that the broadcasts were being picked up by listeners in neighboring territories.⁴¹ In the coming years, as we shall see in chapter 4, this capacity would appear to be both a boon and a liability for administrators who assiduously worked to police the scales of social and political affinity enabled by shortwave radio.

The exigencies of the war heightened the Colonial Office’s perception that imperial communications infrastructures needed to be expanded. So, for the time being, the experimental model was abandoned. And in 1939, and much to the dismay of local administrators, the government halted the carefully planned Kiambu experiment, precisely at the moment it

³⁸ Settler’s opinion as cited in “Experimental Broadcasts to Africans,” KNA AE/34/62 - Posts and Telegraphs. Wireless 1938-39 p 4.

³⁹ Settler’s opinion as cited in “Experimental Broadcasts to Africans,” KNA AE/34/62 - Posts and Telegraphs. Wireless 1938-39 p 4.

⁴⁰ “Draft: Memorandum on Broadcasting to Natives,” KNA AE/34/62 - Posts and Telegraphs. Wireless 1938-39

⁴¹ N.A. to Hon. Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, Nyeri. 20 September 1939. “Experimental Broadcasts to Africans,” KNA AE/34/62 - Posts and Telegraphs. Wireless, 1938-39.

expanded broadcasting especially intended for “natives.” During the war, 7LO initiated broadcasts in Kikuyu, Dholuo, Kikamba, Luhya, Luganda, Kinandi, Kisii, and Kiswahili.⁴² With this expansion in the reach of address came the expansion of the bureaucracy of communication. Across the Empire, the Colonial Office appointed Information Officers (IO) who were tasked with conveying “information about the war from the Governments to the peoples...to ensure the latter’s co-operation in the war effort,” and for generating material for metropolitan consumption.⁴³ Within Kenya, an Information Office was established to service the regions of “East Africa,” here comprised of Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Nyasaland, and Northern Rhodesia.⁴⁴ The mandate of this office required the generation of content both particular and general.

These goals tugged in two directions. On the one hand, the Colonial Office was concerned with ensuring that “local populations” received official versions of the “war effort.” “Uniformity” was the keyword here, indexing the effort to standardize propaganda directed to all communities within the command area.⁴⁵ In spatial terms, this required “centralizing all propaganda and broadcasts in Nairobi.”⁴⁶ On the other hand, broadcasts demanded localizing content such that it would appeal to East Africa’s myriad rural populations who were ostensibly located in parochial spaces and vernacular universes. These twin mandates reflected a tension between “portability” and “place-based knowledge,” and mapped onto a tension that cleaved along lines that divided metropolitan administrators and experts from “men on the spot.” Arguments in the years to come, as we shall see, were, at base, contests that turned on the scale of expertise required to enact radio in the Kenya colony.

The tension between these imperatives was in clear evidence in the peculiar structure of the Ministry of Information (MoI) itself. From the outset, there was confusion regarding the hierarchy of the world of Information in East and Central Africa, a confusion which would persist following the end of hostilities. Geoffrey Northcote was assigned as Principal Information

⁴² M.F. Hill, “Memorandum on Broadcasting to Africans in Kenya,” KNA AHC/10/63

⁴³ N.A., “Overseas Planning Committee: Plan for Propaganda to British East Africa,” 7 July 1943, British National Archives [hereafter BNA], Colonial Office [hereafter CO] 875/9/21 “Propaganda: East Africa Plan”

⁴⁴ N.A., “Overseas Planning Committee: Plan for Propaganda to British East Africa,” 7 July 1943, British National Archives [hereafter BNA], Colonial Office [hereafter CO] 875/9/21 “Propaganda: East Africa Plan”

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Northcote, Principal Information Officer (PIO) to Kenya and Uganda Civil Defence and Supply Council, “Broadcasting from 7.L.O. Nairobi Station,” 1 June 1942, KNA HAKI/13/276.

⁴⁶ Secret Cipher Telegram from G.O.C., East Africa to the War Office, 4 September 1941. CO 875/9/17 (1941) “Propaganda East Africa.”

Officer (PIO) in 1942.⁴⁷ His office, titled the Regional Information Office in East Africa, had its headquarters in Nairobi and was a branch of the British Colonial Office. Northcote, in his capacity as Principal Information Officer (PIO), was responsible for conducting information work that addressed itself to all interested parties within the East Africa Command. And yet, Northcote was administratively beholden to the Colonial Office's Director of Information Services located in London, not to the governments of the territories which he served. Territorial governments, for their part, were tasked with assigning Information Officers within their respective territories. Many of these men were not formally trained in the "comparatively new science of broadcasting," most being officials seconded from Department of Education, and they were responsible, first and foremost, to "local government."⁴⁸ This set of relations de facto bypassed the authority of the PIO located in Nairobi.⁴⁹ From the outset, then, the centralizing impulse of the Colonial Office existed in tension with what would come to be called the "parochial" interests of the individual territories.

People within these imperfectly nested administrative structures differed over how to best wield radio as a "valuable weapon," a "precision tool" of "advanced administration."⁵⁰ While administrators at the Colonial Office hoped that radio could streamline colonial governance through standardization, "local" officials argued that broadcasting was not a sensitive or malleable enough medium to be able to accommodate itself to the particular needs and proclivities of the communities to whom broadcasts were targeted. These conflicts, as Northcote

⁴⁷ N.A., "Overseas Planning Committee Plan of Propaganda to British East Africa," 7 September 1943, BNA CO 875/9/21 "Propaganda: East Africa Plan"; See also G.A.S. Northcote, Principal Information Officer, "Functions of the Principal Information Officer of the East Africa Command," 20 August, 1942, BNA CO 875/6/17.

⁴⁸ Harry Franklin, "The Development of Broadcasting to Africans in Central Africa," (Lusaka: Government Printer, 1950); "Overseas Planning Committee Plan of Propaganda to British East Africa," 7 September 1943, BNA CO 875/9/21 "Propaganda: East Africa Plan"; See also G.A.S. Northcote, Principal Information Officer, "Functions of the Principal Information Officer of the East Africa Command," 20 August, 1942. BNA CO 875/6/17; See also KNA HAKI/13/133 – Information and Propaganda; Organization and Establishment'; Staff- General; Public Relations Officer, 1944-49

⁴⁹ "Overseas Planning Committee Plan of Propaganda to British East Africa," 7 September 1943, BNA CO 875/9/21 "Propaganda: East Africa Plan"

⁵⁰ M.F. Hill, Information Officer, "Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station," KNA HAKI/13/276; To the Hon. Deputy Chief Secretary, Nairobi from the Postmaster General, "Broadcasting in East Africa," 10 August, 1948, KNA HAKI/13/276 or CS/2/8/121 – Information and Propaganda

noted, tended to “limit the scope of the Principal Information Officer,”⁵¹ rendering centralized coordination all but impossible.⁵² But try they did.

Centralization was a labor of knowledge-work and paper. The Colonial Office tasked “men on the spot” and Information Officers with assiduously documenting the responses of listening audiences. These reports were subsequently sent up to the Colonial Office. In interpreting these reports, the CO appealed to metropolitan “experts” of the medium, notably the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Once reviewed in London, the best among these reports were circulated back to each of Britain’s colonial holdings as examples of model knowledge-work, methods of information gathering to be emulated.⁵³

Many viewed the mobilization of expert knowledge at the ostensible “center” of Imperial power as being critical to the expansion of communications infrastructures during the war. As noted by one observer, if “expert knowledge and work” is to be achieved, it was imperative that “the very closest and most constant contacts between the Colonial Office and the BBC...and between this Office [in London] and the Information Officers and Broadcast departments in the Colonies [be maintained].”⁵⁴

Maintaining the “very closest and most constant contacts” was no easy task. Indeed, BBC experts routinely lamented the absence of uniform standards in the work of Information Officers on the ground. As noted by a BBC observer in a report on Radio Listening in the Colonies in 1942: “the information sent in by information officers is disappointing...Some of the comments...might well be the Information Officer’s personal opinion. This is not wanted in *objective* listening research.”⁵⁵ For BBC experts, cultivating listeners was a “science” that required the use of uniform measures of evaluation and critical distance from that which was

⁵¹ G.A.S. Northcote, Principal Information Officer, “Functions of the Principal Information Officer of the East Africa Command,” 20 August 1942. BNA CO 875/6/17

⁵² G.A.S. Northcote, Principal Information Officer, “Functions of the Principal Information Officer of the East Africa Command,” 20 August 1942. BNA CO 875/6/17; See also BNA CO 875/9/20 “Propaganda: Progress Reports, East Africa” (1943); Indeed, Northcote expended a great deal of energy trying not to offend colonial governments, and local Information Officers see G.A.S. Northcote, Principal Information Officer, “Functions of the Principal Information Officer of the East Africa Command,” 20 August, 1942. BNA CO 875/6/17.

⁵³ This network of knowledge work was empire-wide, drawing together knowledge workers from all of Britain’s colonial holdings.

⁵⁴ Mr. Edmett, 1941 Correspondence – Record of Meeting of Sub-Committee appointed by Information Officers to consider matter of Broadcasting Policy and Practice, N.D. BNA CO 875/2/14.

⁵⁵ J. Wilson, “Correspondence, 1942.” BNA CO 875/3/9 “Broadcasting: M of I Questionnaire on Radio Listening in the Colonies.” Emphasis added.

being evaluated. For these men, expert knowledge was defined by its standardization. Only uniformity would generate usable data that would be universally applicable and portable. In pursuit of these ends, the Colonial Office recommended that the BBC send “qualified intelligence officers to the Colonies.”⁵⁶ For “men on the spot,” by contrast, the demand for “objective” knowledge completely missed the point.⁵⁷

Indeed, advocates of “local” knowledge routinely lamented working under “experts” who had “no experience of the African Areas.”⁵⁸ This, they argued, was a liability. As Noel Sabine of the Colonial Office noted with some frustration, East African governments were opposed to the prospect that programs for the region be developed in, and broadcast from, London:

Apart from practical language difficulties East African Governments regard as dangerous proposal[s] to broadcast to Africans from London. Experience in Kenya [they argue] has shown that unless those responsible for programmes are in constant touch with African listeners and can ascertain their reactions broadcasts may produce results the reverse of those intended.⁵⁹

Centralization, for these observers, was not simply undesirable—it was dangerous.⁶⁰ Local knowledge was essential to interpreting listener responses, and was critical in program development. As noted by M.F. Hill: “if the African’s interest in broadcasting is to be stimulated and maintained...the programmes must concern themselves with the warp and woof of his life.”⁶¹ Place-based knowledge, these men argued, should govern the world of imperial information work. As Chief Secretary of the Governors’ Conference, Henry Gurney, wrote:

Any material...[issued] from London of either standardized or more specialized form...can be more usefully, safely and economically be sent in the form of concise notes or list of facts which *can be adapted for local use*...the African

⁵⁶ J. Wilson, “Correspondence, 1942.” BNA CO 875/3/9 “Broadcasting: M of I Questionnaire on Radio Listening in the Colonies.”

⁵⁷ The language of the “man on the spot” is ubiquitous in this archive. See BNA CO 875/9/21 “Propaganda: East Africa Plan”

⁵⁸ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Papers of W.F.P. Kelly [hereafter Kelly] MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

⁵⁹ Chief Secretary to East African Governors’ Conference, 23 March 1941. CO 875/3/6 – Africa-Wide Conversation about Broadcasting

⁶⁰ As noted by C.W. Hayes Sadler, Chief Secretary, East Africa, in 1941: “Experience of broadcasting to Africans has shown that...those responsible for arranging programmes...[must be] in touch with African listeners. M.F. Hill, Information Officer, “Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” N.D. HAKI/13/276

⁶¹ M.F. Hill, Information Officer, “Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” KNA HAKI/13/276; See also CO 875/2/14

population should be provided with material prepared in the light of up to date *local knowledge* with an understanding of African sentiment [and] with an eye to translation.⁶²

Colonial information work, in other words, demanded particularization.

The most forceful advocates of place-based knowledge were “men on the spot,” including those information workers that moved with the medium. Despite the ambitions of the CO, the reach of broadcasting from 7LO was uneven throughout the war years. And so, administrators brought the medium to communities along the region’s troublesome road networks. Arthur M. Champion, of whom we will hear more (Chapter 5), ran Kenya’s first Mobile Unit. Formerly a Provincial Commissioner in Kenya (Chapter 2), Champion was selected for his “wide knowledge of natives” and his long interest in “native welfare.”⁶³ The Government hoped that “through the medium of a wireless receiving set attached to the van” the problems thrown up by the lumpy reach of the state in both material and ideological terms could be mitigated, as the van brought government messages and entertainment “to audiences which would not otherwise be reached [by] the vernacular broadcasts from the Nairobi Station.”⁶⁴

Moving with these Mobile Units offered ample opportunity for traveling administrators to engage in a comparative, if essentializing, ethnographic mode as they evaluated audience responses and commented on “local” conditions.⁶⁵ For these men, metropolitan technopolitical aspirations for centrally produced broadcasts were completely misguided, unable to account for the variation in would-be listeners. Reflecting on the experience of conducting a Safari in Uganda in 1943, Gurney noted the variations in audience responses, writing: “It is quite impossible to generalize about our audiences” each of which responded differently to the messages brought to them by van.⁶⁶

⁶² Chief Secretary of the East African Governors’ Conference, Gurney to Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, 19 December 1942, BNA CO 875/91/08. Emphasis added.

⁶³ Governor Henry Moore to the Information Office, N.D. KNA HAKI/13/328

⁶⁴ Governor Henry Moore to the Information Office, N.D. KNA HAKI/13/328; “Broadcasting,” remarked Kenya’s Director of Medical Services, A.A. Peterson, was the “only reasonably cheap way, if not the only way of reaching a high proportion of Adult Africans sufficiently frequently” KNA AE/34/63

⁶⁵ As Champion wrote following a visit to Western Kenya: “one must admit that our efforts have been less appreciated by the Luo than any other tribe.” This he attributed to Luo views of education, writing: “I am inclined to think that their general view is that education is to be confined within the four walls of the schoolroom and therefore out of place at an open air... display” Arthur M. Champion, “Government Cinema Unit: Report on Week Ending October 27th, 1940,” KNA HAKI/13/328

⁶⁶ Illegible “Mobile Propaganda Safari in Uganda,” 25 March, 1943. BNA CO 875/8/8, 1943 - Propaganda, Uganda.

They varied from wild Acholi, stuff of the KAR, dancing around us with speakers and shields, and shooting technical questions regarding machine gun calibres and ranges: timid, primitive, skill-clad Bachiga...starting back as a spear was thrown on the cinema screen: rubbishy town audiences – ‘takaka ya soko’ - of pimps and urchins, already used to the films: highly critical audiences of the KAR, Pioneers and Police (at Kampala, Tororo, Jinja and Kisumu), viewing our drill and weapon display with professionally jaundiced eyes: the cynical and suspicious, but indisputably intelligent Baganda, main source of supply of Signallers, clerks, Drivers, Dressers, Education Corps teachers, and other ‘fundis’ of the EA Forces: the Teso, turning out in thousands to see our show but forbidding their women to attend.

Local Information Officers, such as Gurney, rejected metropolitan claims for the portability of radio work. As Gurney argued: “With audiences so widely different, the impossibility of generalising and the difficulty of lying down any hard-and-fast lines of propaganda will be appreciated.”⁶⁷ Local information workers were largely in agreement with this position. As noted by W. Kelly who manned the mobile cinema unit in Kenya following Champion’s retirement, audiences were composed of “‘individuals’” all of whom had “‘different views.’”⁶⁸ For these knowledge workers, the notion of a *singular* “‘African mentality’” was, evidently, rubbish. And the stakes of this misapprehension were high. As officials on the ground were quick to argue absent “‘up-to-date information as to...[audience] reactions, serious danger exists that the broadcasts may lead to results the reverse of those intended.’”⁶⁹

Conflicts over content and audience reception, then, were conflicts over the status of expertise as it related to questions regarding the affordances of radio as a tool of administration. And they were not limited to those concerned with Information, but were arguments that distilled broader anxieties provoked as strategies of colonial governance were being reformed in the years bookending WWII. This period was marked by an astronomical increase in the technical and

⁶⁷ “On this safari the language problem was particularly acute.” [This last sentence perhaps gets moved to section on African labor from the mobile prop unit published report from African Affairs]

⁶⁸ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

⁶⁹ Letter written by C.W. Hayes Sadler, to Chief Secretary, EA Governors’ Conference, Nairobi, 1941, KNA HAKI/13/276.

professional branches of the colonial service, which generated tensions, as the Colonial Office sought to replace the “man on the spot” by waves of technical experts.⁷⁰

The Postmaster General, himself responsible for Uganda, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, and Kenya, a position that perhaps lent itself to regional thinking, put his finger on a key node of conflict when he wrote:

One reads in the general press and in the deliberations of certain societies lamentation, whether justified or not, that the Administrative Service has been progressively losing that intimate contact with the indigenous peoples which, in earlier days, was one of its most important functions. Those who regret this change attribute what they view as a deterioration to the growth of paper-work in District Commissioners’ offices.⁷¹

An increase in the bureaucratization of colonial hierarchies had critically separated “men on the spot” from intimate knowledge of their “charges.” Developing programming suitable for what some administrators referred to paternalistically as “my listeners,” turned on mobilizing these intimacies.⁷² These men did not deny the valuable role radio could play in spreading the emergent developmentalist ethos. They did, however, argue that development could not be transposed without modification to new spaces. This was an argument *against* scalability.

For the Postmaster General, by contrast, far from separating administrators from the African communities with whom they worked, the technocratic impulse underwriting the

⁷⁰ A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, “The Thin White Line: The Size of the British Colonial Service in Africa,” *African Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 314 (January 1980): 25-44; Typically attributed to the Colonial Development and Welfare Acts of 1945 and 1949, the Colonial Office insisted on a new mode of administration. This mode would be “rationalized” and “centralized,” administrative labors being guided by a new cadre of “experts,” all driven by the hopes of initiating “programmes of social and economic advancement.” These transformations have been read by historians as ushering in of a new model of developmentalist thinking that they firmly locate in the postwar period. Programs to ensure the social good, would both be ushered in by and productive of the equally protean category of “development.” Idiosyncratic modes of governance were not the order of the day, but universal “truths,” expertly administered, to ensure social, political, economic, and cultural advancement. See Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, eds. *International Development and the Social Sciences; Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). And yet, and as we have seen, what historians have located as a new vision of “development” in the postwar period was central to how people conceived of the possibilities of radio broadcasting from at least the 1930s. And, from the outset, this tension between the centralizing impulse of the Colonial Office evident in other domains in the post-1945 period, was confronted by the claims of other, “more local” articulations of expertise.

⁷¹ Postmaster General to The Hon. Deputy Chief Secretary, Nairobi “Broadcasting in East Africa,” 10 August, 1948, KNA HAKI/13/276 or CS/2/8/121 – Information and Propaganda

⁷² Harry Franklin, “Listener Report,” N.D. “Broadcasting: Listener Research” BNA CO 875/70/6 - “Broadcasting: Listener Research.”

expansion of broadcasting, in tandem with the prospective reach of the infrastructure, would enable a return to older models of intimacy:

Re-examination of the case by the Administration with the possibilities of broadcasting in mind may show that whereas no District Officer can be expert in all phases of matters affecting administrative work, a judiciously selected team of officers coupled with a liberal corps of trained interpreter-broadcasters for the various vernaculars may be capable of carrying the administration once again intimately into the lives of the people and thus make the influence of the Government more effective.⁷³

Infrastructural regionalists, such as the Postmaster General, argued that the labor and knowledge of idiosyncratic “men on the spot” ought to be standardized as it was distributed across a cadre of technical experts. Rather than a kind of arterial knowledge network, what was imagined here was a capillary and distributed knowledge apparatus which, as we shall see, advocates of regional standardization hoped to mirror in the infrastructure of broadcasting itself. If these debates distilled broader anxieties regarding the shape of colonial hierarchies and the status of expertise during the war, they concurrently articulated with debates about the appropriate scale of administration in Eastern Africa.

Broadcasting the Region

At a 1941 Conference of Information Officers held in Nairobi then Governor of Kenya, Henry Moore, addressed attendees. He opened by remarking that theirs was a moment of profound transformation in the region, transformations in which radio could play a central role. In Moore’s framing, radio broadcasting enabled a kind of space-scaling that marked the medium as distinct from other communications technologies. “That I should be able to address a Conference such as this” he began:

is a forcible illustration of the manner in which the vast distances that in Africa separate us from one another in a physical sense are being bridged by the

⁷³ Postmaster General to The Hon. Deputy Chief Secretary, Nairobi, “Broadcasting in East Africa,” 10 August, 1948, KNA HAKI/13/276 or CS/2/8/121 – Information and Propaganda

aeroplane. But in the realm of ideas the development of wireless broadcasting is in a fair way to eliminate these vast distances altogether...because the transmission of information and the dissemination of ideas knows nowadays no territorial boundaries.⁷⁴

Just as the Postmaster General imagined broadcasting as a means to restore administrative intimacy, the Governor, too, imagined broadcasting as capable of transcending space, and generating new scalar imaginaries. These two positions shared a belief that there was something enabling about the intangibility of the air through which broadcasts moved. Radio signals' capacity to propagate through the air could, he argued, be mobilized to generate profound material transformations. At the forefront of Moore's mind was the possibility that radio could enact a new geographic and political unit: the region. Not all agreed with this position.

Prior to the war, it was more or less undisputed that radio broadcasting could serve as a new tool for effecting "social welfare" and "development."⁷⁵ As Kenya Information Officer (KIO) Mervyn Hill noted in 1941:

Before the outbreak of this present war there had been a growing realisation in certain East African colonies that Broadcasting provided a valuable means of propaganda designed to reinforce the efforts of Medical, Educational, Agricultural, Veterinary and other Departments of Government concerned with leading the African towards a better life.⁷⁶

For Hill, radio could bolster the efforts of other branches of government as they sought to lead "Africa towards a better life." And all in attendance agreed with this general principle, but many of those present emphasized the volatility of the medium, an instability which convinced them that "the question of an East African broadcasting station ought not be left till after the war."⁷⁷

Precisely how broadcasting could best articulate with government directives and plans for the future remained both uncertain and disputed. For administrators, like Hill, the war had unduly interrupted the knowledge work he viewed as being critical to understanding the nature of

⁷⁴ Opening Statements of H.E. The Governor of Kenya, Sir Henry Moore, "Proceedings of the Conference of Information Officers, Nairobi, May 21st, 1941 and following days," KNA HAKI/13/170 or CS/2/8/3

⁷⁵ "Extracts from Letter Received from the Information Officer, Kampala, Uganda" "Broadcasting Station for Uganda." 11 November 1943. KNA HAKI/13/276

⁷⁶ He proceeded, citing the standard line that broadcasting was, from this perspective, to function as a "tool of advanced administration." M.F. Hill, Information Officer, "Memorandum of the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office, with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless Limited, with Certain Proposals for the Improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station," 11 February, 1941, CO 875/2/14

⁷⁷ "Extract from proceedings of the Conference of East African Information Officers. NBO, 1943" CO 875/2/15

the medium and its relation to messages received. Derailing the experiments in Kiambu had led to an “inadequate appreciation of the many and perplexing difficulties involved in devising broadcast programmes...suited to the intelligence of the audience to which they were directed.”⁷⁸

This was no matter of small importance, he concluded, because:

whereas the wireless is a powerful weapon of propaganda, it is also a disappointing weapon, and it can be a dangerous weapon, to the wielder unless it is used with great care and skill. The ephemeral character of any message carried by sound waves, frequently unsupported by subsequent recording in print, renders wireless propaganda peculiarly susceptible to distortion, benignant as well as malignant, in the minds and by the tongues of listeners.⁷⁹

For Hill the problems of broadcasting inhered in the qualities of the medium itself. Unlike print, a medium to which readers (and administrators) could refer back, soundwaves seemingly melted into thin air, distorted versions extending beyond the moment of broadcast as they were carried by the “tongues of listeners,” the new mediums of “garbled” versions of official messages.⁸⁰

If the medium of broadcasting lacked the verifiability of print media, it also precluded clarification through face-to-face communication enabled by the presence of “men on the spot.” As noted by Edward Twining in his much-cited recommendations on the future of broadcasting in east Africa: it was necessary that programing designers “anticipate the sort of questions that would be likely to be asked,” concluding that “the best way of doing this would be to present the talk in the form of a dialogue.”⁸¹

Administrative aspirations to mobilize broadcasting as a medium that transcended “territorial boundaries” were quickly beset by problems, which hinged on the material qualities

⁷⁸ “Memorandum of the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office, with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless Limited, with Certain Proposals for the Improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” By M.F. Hill, Information Officer,” 11 February, 1941, CO 875/2/14, “Broadcasting, East Africa”

⁷⁹ M.F. Hill, Information Officer, “Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office, with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the Improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” KNA HAKI/13/276; The concern over broadcasts being unsupported by printed materials was not limited to Hill, see KNA AHC/ 10/68

⁸⁰ Commissioner of Police to the Honorable Chief Secretary, Nairobi, “Reactions to Broadcasts,” 26 October 1940, KNA AE/34/64 - Posts and Telegraphs, 1940-41.

⁸¹ He continued, arguing that “It should in fact be possible to create a number of wireless characters who would represent different types of the population and who would discuss the topics of the day in an essentially African manner but drawing the moral in the end.” E.F. Twining, M.B.E., District Officer, Uganda, W.K. Brasher, Engineer-in-Chief, Department of Posts and Telegraphs, Palestine, and C.A.L. Richards, Assistant District Officer, Uganda, “Broadcasting Investigations,” (Entebbe: Government Printer, Uganda, 1939). This would require the mobilization of another set of would-be allies: African Information Officers. These men, their labors and their expertise, are the subject of Chapter 5.

of the air itself. Wavelengths is “tropical Africa,” experts lamented, were burdened by higher noise levels. And, while shortwave was less subject to noise interference it held out other problems. Not only was the technology of shortwave more expensive but the frequencies themselves were overcrowded and were subject to competition. If administrators were committed to expanding broadcasting in the region they would need to contend with the “acute, world-wide shortage of short wavelengths available for broadcasting.”⁸²

Problems of transmission led to problems in reception. Administrators argued that receivers picking up signals obstructed by “noise” were of serious consequence, capable of destroying the purported benefits of broadcasting altogether. As Twining wrote: “Poor reception” was “likely to jeopardise the successful establishment of Broadcasting in this Protectorate for a generation.”⁸³

But perhaps most vexingly, shortwaves travel at a higher frequency, enabling them to traverse vast expanses of space. In practice, this meant that people listening in to shortwave broadcasts from Nairobi needed only turn the dial to access broadcasts emanating from further afield. Indeed, colonial anxieties regarding parallel infrastructures of information critically animated discussions surrounding the need for an expanded broadcasting service during the war, as administrators reported that people were listening in to shortwave broadcasts from Italy and Germany. While the spread of this information “by the tongues of listeners” was derided as “rumor” in the “colonial lexicon,” officials had to concede that many of these “agitators” were tapped into global networks of information that were precisely facilitated by the introduction of shortwave broadcasting.⁸⁴ The affordance of shortwave technologies was a source of a good deal of anxiety for the administration and, as I explore the chapter to follow, critically shaped

⁸² Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Officer Administering the Government of Kenya, 25 March 1949, “Broadcasting: With Special Reference to East Africa,” KNA HAKI/13/173.

⁸³ E.F. Twining, M.B.E., District Officer, Uganda, W.K. Brasher, Engineer-in-Chief, Department of Posts and Telegraphs, Palestine, and C.A.L. Richards, Assistant District Officer, Uganda, “Broadcasting Investigations,” (Entebbe: Government Printer, Uganda, 1939).

⁸⁴ Rumors did not only travel from outside in. There were also rumors moving in the other direction, from Kenya to places as far away as California, USA where, in 1940, there was a rumor reported that colonial subjects in East Africa were punished by death for owning radios. H. Gurney, Information Officer, to the Honorable Chief Secretary, 23 September 1940. KNA AE/34/64 - Posts and Telegraphs, 1940-41. The term “colonial lexicon” comes from Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

discussions over the ideal type of network and “tropicalised” receiver to be used in colonial Kenya.

Administrators feared that people were drawing on the space-scaling capacity of shortwave broadcasting to generate new networks of affinity with global elsewhere that could lead to a scale of political connection that was out of synch with colonial logics. Government broadcasts were designed precisely to supersede “bush telegraph[s]”—those inscrutable lines of communication which were held to be responsible for spreading the news of foreign broadcasts throughout the countryside—by offering listeners a register of belonging in line with colonial policies.⁸⁵ But here was the rub. In the years bookending the war, debates over broadcasting turned precisely on the capacity of broadcasting to eliminate space and create new scalar imaginaries underwritten by the extension of material networks.

In 1939, Twining penned a report which made recommendations regarding the future of broadcasting in East Africa, and which circulated broadly in the world of colonial information.⁸⁶ Twining was not a technical expert, but was a District Officer (DO) turned member of the British Intelligence Service for East Africa.⁸⁷ He was somewhat unusual in his capacity as DO. While he and his wife, a doctor, thoroughly enjoyed the early years of their post in Uganda, he had no affinity for language-learning, struggling even to develop a rudimentary understanding of Kiswahili after having spent ten years in the region.⁸⁸ As noted by his biographer, Darrol Bates, the Colonial Office did not know quite what to do with Twining: “He had neither the unobtrusive temperament nor the talent for detachment needed in a secretariat official and his value as a district officer was limited by the fact that he couldn’t pass the statutory examinations in Swahili.”⁸⁹ He was, in other words, betwixt and between two epistemologies of administration. The first, standardized and detached. The second, embedded and intimate.

⁸⁵ The language of “bush telegraph” is ubiquitous in this archive. See, N.A., “Information and Propaganda.” KNA HAKI/13/81 – Information and Propaganda, 1950-55.

⁸⁶ E.F. Twining, M.B.E., District Officer, Uganda, W.K. Brasher, Engineer-in-Chief, Department of Posts and Telegraphs, Palestine, and C.A.L. Richards, Assistant District Officer, Uganda, “Broadcasting Investigations,” (Entebbe: Government Printer, Uganda, 1939), KNA AHC/34/62.

⁸⁷ Twining would climb the colonial hierarchy, finally landing the position of Governor of Tanganyika, at which point he would oppose proposals for Federation. Darrol Bates, *A Gust of Plumes: A Biography of Lord Twining of Godalming and Tanganyika*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972).

⁸⁸ Darrol Bates, *A Gust of Plumes: A Biography of Lord Twining of Godalming and Tanganyika*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 100.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

But large scale projects of the kind demanded by the Uganda broadcasting experiment were right up his alley.⁹⁰ And knowledge work of this kind, so he argued, demanded regional thinking. As he warned: “a parochial view regarding the development of Broadcasting in East Africa,” must be avoided at all costs.⁹¹ Instead he spoke of the “great advantages to be gained if the development of Broadcasting in Kenya, Tanganyika and Uganda was considered on an East African, rather than a territorial basis.”⁹² Twining was not alone in this mode of infrastructural thinking. Indeed, Twining’s emphatic plea for this particular vision of centralization was embedded in a more enduring set of contentious conversations regarding scale-making in Eastern Africa, conversations which turned on an administrative and infrastructural future bound not by the colony, but extended to enact the region.

As early as 1922, then Secretary of State for the Colonies, Winston Churchill, told representatives of Uganda and Kenya that he looked forward to the day when the four territories— Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Zanzibar— would become: “a great East African Federation, almost an Empire.”⁹³ Like the move away from the “man on the spot” that would characterized Colonial Office policies in the years following the Second World War, regional thinking was guided by the aspiration of ushering in a mode of colonial rule that was centrally administered and standardized.

Immediately, African communities voiced their opposition to East African federation. Nowhere was the opposition stronger than in Uganda. In the late 1920s, coming on the heels of the Hilton Young Commission, which was tasked with exploring the possibility of the “Closer Union” of East Africa, representatives of the Buganda Kingdom wrote a series of memoranda

⁹⁰ One of his crowning achievements in Uganda was his organization of a Coronation celebration for King George VI in 1937, of which his biographer wrote: “By a combination of geniality, unorthodoxy, good organisation, persuasiveness, and tremendous drive and infectious enthusiasm he made what would otherwise have probably been a somewhat pompous and stereotyped event into something that was both entertaining and impressive. The press reports and the programmes and the letters of congratulation which Twining received afterwards show clearly how well it was done and what a success it had been...” See Bates, *A Gust of Plumes*, 101-102.

⁹¹ M.F. Hill, Information Officer, “Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office, with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the Improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” KNA HAKI/13/276 “Information and Propaganda.

⁹² E.F. Twining, M.B.E., District Officer, Uganda, W.K. Brasher, Engineer-in-Chief, Department of Posts and Telegraphs, Palestine, and C.A.L. Richards, Assistant District Officer, Uganda, “Broadcasting Investigations,” (Entebbe: Government Printer, Uganda, 1939), KNA AHC/34/62.

⁹³ Donald S. Rothchild, *Towards Unity in Africa: A Study of Federalism in British Africa*, (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1960), 16.

opposing the unification of the region. In particular, they cited their fears that the Kingdom's relative autonomy would be undermined and subordinated to the interests of other communities.

As Daudi Chwa II, then Kabaka of the Buganda Kingdom, wrote:

From the newspaper reports and other correspondence on this subject emanating from the European Community in Kenya, it is only too clear that my fears and anxieties are well-founded and that it is the express intention on the part of the European Community to subordinate the interests of the Natives of East African Territories to the interests of the immigrant European races.⁹⁴

At the center of these fears was the possibility that unification would open Uganda up to white settlement on the model of neighboring Kenya. For these reasons the parliament of Buganda, the Lukiko, expressed its: “unanimous disapproval of the contemplated amalgamation of the Kingdom of Buganda with any other African tribes of the British Territories in East Africa outside the Buganda Kingdom.”⁹⁵ The Baganda feared that federation would usher in a scale of politics—that of the region—to which another scale of politics—that of the Kingdom— would be subordinated.

The homogenizing impulse underwriting proposals for political integration demanded a politics of differentiation.⁹⁶ As a subsequent memorandum argued: “it is... well known... that the fundamental traditions and customs of the Baganda... are totally different from those of any other native tribe in East Africa.”⁹⁷ This argument cut against the centralizing aspirations for standardized administration at the heart of both arguments for Federation, and the centralization of broadcasting services.

⁹⁴ His Highness, the Kabaka of Buganda, “Further Memorandum on the Proposed Closer Union of British East African Dependencies,” N.D. but likely 1929, T.C. Colchester Papers [Hereafter Colchester Papers], MSS+Afr.s.742 Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

⁹⁵ Resolution of Lukiko of the Kingdom of Buganda, “The Proposed Federation of the British Dependencies in East Africa.” N.D. but likely 1929, Colchester Papers, MSS+Afr.s.742 Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

⁹⁶ If arguments for federation positioned it as an inexorable inevitability in the future, the Baganda positioned their opposition as firmly rooted in a deep past. “It is known all over that the Kingdom of Buganda was and used to be an Independent Kingdom as well as a Ruling Nation.” Indeed, it was on the basis of this common-sense that nearly 50 years earlier, the Buganda secured the 1900 agreement with the British crown, which guaranteed the Kingdom's relative sovereignty. Resolution of Lukiko of the Kingdom of Buganda, “The Proposed Federation of the British Dependencies in East Africa.” N.D. but likely 1929, Colchester Papers, MSS+Afr.s.742 Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

⁹⁷ Resolution of Lukiko of the Kingdom of Buganda, “The Proposed Federation of the British Dependencies in East Africa.” N.D. but likely 1929, Colchester Papers, MSS+Afr.s.742 Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

The prospect of political Federation was formally tabled following the 1931 Report of the Joint Committee which noted a rejection of: “the whole idea of closer union.”⁹⁸ This it attributed to inadequate communications networks which resulted in “the absence of a sufficient East African consciousness (particularly among indigenous populations).”⁹⁹ In the face of obstructions to political unification, the Joint Committee sought to enact unification by other means, namely by extending “common services,” a measure which fell just “short of superimposing...[a] political framework.”¹⁰⁰ Regional infrastructures, the Report noted, would “create [the] machinery” that could both precede and enable the ultimate goal of “advancing towards unification.”¹⁰¹ Political federation would be borne of the extension of these new infrastructural and administrative networks.

This mode of infrastructural thinking, then, was at base a technopolitical project of incremental regional scale-making.¹⁰² The future-driven technopolitical aspirations embedded in regional broadcasting operated along two contiguous registers, the first pertaining to medium, the second pertaining to message. First, regionalists hoped that the infrastructure underwriting an East African broadcasting network could generate the region, requiring as it would a new center of administrative power to coordinate the network. Second, regionalists speculated that the messages carried over this East African network could surreptitiously instill in listeners a regional way of being. As the Chief Secretary of the Colonies wrote: “Though opinions may differ on the methods by which closer integration should be effected between the territories...Information and Public Relations are powerful agent[s] in this matter.”¹⁰³

⁹⁸ House of Commons, Joint Committee on Closer Union in East Africa, *Report Together with the Proceedings of the Committee*, I (London, 1931), p. 14 as cited in Rothchild, *Towards Unity in Africa*, 33.

⁹⁹ Rothchild, *Towards Unity in Africa*, 33.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰¹ Edward Hilton Young, “Report of the Commission on Closer Union of the Dependencies in Eastern and Central Africa,” (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1929), 141.

¹⁰² Lord Croydon, Governor of Uganda in the period, recommended caution in the tempo of regional scale-making. As one of his aides reflected, this was a period where many were animated by the “dream of the federation of Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika.” Croydon existed within this milieu but was more cautious, arguing that: “If the change were made suddenly...there would be left in the old units too many top men deprived of their status, disgruntled, enemies of the new order.” Instead, his personal secretary recalled, he “preferred a long-term exercise in which common services would be built up, gradually, one by one. He liked his tasks to be ready to his hand, and practical. His dreams were woven around new buildings, new railways, new harbor works.” Perhaps unsurprisingly given his scalar aspirations, he had been an aid to none other than Cecil Rhodes. Eric Dutton, “The Night of the Hyena” 1942, (Memoirs) Rhodes House, Oxford.

¹⁰³ Mesurier to the Chief Secretary, 21 March, 1949, KNA HAKI/13/173 or CS/2/8/147.

Baganda observers had been well aware that metropolitan efforts to cordon off “politics” from the “machinery” of unification were duplicitous. For them, infrastructural coordination at the scale of the region was inherently political, portending a political future that would lead to their subordination within a newly enlarged field of competition. As they wrote: “Although it was set aside in the Report that the things to be amalgamated...were to be: Customs, Railways, Defence, Posts, Telegraphs and Researches...it is apparent that the policy of administration and welfare of the Natives will be gradually affected in time to come.”¹⁰⁴ Efforts to impose federation, wrote a man who identified as a “Ugandan African,” conjured up a vision of the future that was “very degrading as far as Uganda is concerned.”¹⁰⁵

Ugandans had not been alone in taking this position. As noted by Chief Kidaha of Tanganyika in a letter to the editor of the *East African Standard*, it was well known that “the Native people” were very much “opposed to political...union.” He continued, rejecting efforts to cordon off politics from the project of infrastructural and administrative coordination, writing: “economic fusion of the three territories...[will] ultimately mean political fusion later, because economics cannot be kept widely away from politics.”¹⁰⁶ Dissenters like Chief Kidaha were savvy as to the uneven tempo of administrative transformation, and savvy, too, in their observations that constructing one infrastructure on a regional basis could become the foundation upon which subsequent infrastructures and administrative practices could assemble.

If colonial administrators debated amongst themselves and with metropolitan experts about the role of the language of broadcast in enacting affinities, African communities, too, framed language as political when confronted with the standardizing impulse of radio broadcasting in the region. And this had characterized people’s responses since the earliest days. In 1939 during the Kiambu experiments, various overhearers queried why Kikuyu was the only

¹⁰⁴ Members of the Lukiko to His Highness, the Kabaka of Buganda, 23 October, 1929 Colchester Papers, MSS+Afr.s.742, University of Oxford, Bodleian Libraries; Despite the assurances received by the administration that promised that if: “any arrangements for effecting closer co-ordination between the Administrations in East Africa, whether by federation or by other means,” were decided, the Kabaka could “rest assured that no action will be taken involving infringement of the Agreement of 1900.” J.C.R. Surrock, Acting Chief Secretary to the Kabaka of the Baganda N.D. but likely 1929, Colchester Papers, MSS+Afr.s.742, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

¹⁰⁵ I imagine that this is the same as above but confirm

¹⁰⁶ N.A., Not titled, *East African Standard*, N.D. but likely 1929. KNA HAKI/13/107.

language of broadcast.¹⁰⁷ By 1940, an official reported that: “without exception audiences all over these territories are now asking for more radio programmes [in their vernaculars].”¹⁰⁸

Infrastructural regionalists derided Africans’ demands for linguistic differentiation as evidence of “parochial pride.”¹⁰⁹ However, listeners’ tastes for international news and music suggests something more complicated was afoot. It was precisely against the enlarged frame of reference enabled by broadcasting that people’s demands for inclusion via the recognition of difference were made.¹¹⁰ As Yowana Mukasi, a Bugandan man wrote succinctly in letter that, significantly, he penned in Kiswahili: “We people of Uganda... wish to hear... the news broadcast in our own language. Every day we hear the news in Kikamba, Nandi, Luo and Swahili. Now why is Luganda alone forbidden?”¹¹¹ It was at least in part in response to these demands that, during the war, broadcasts were given in: Kiswahili, Dholuo, Luyia, Kikamba, Kisii, Kinandi, Kikuyu, and Luganda.¹¹²

For proponents of Federation, by contrast, the peculiarities of the medium of radio broadcasting were critical to its capacity to generate regional unification unbifurcated by difference. As the authors of the “Report of the Commission of the Dependencies in Eastern and Central Africa” wrote: broadcasting was of “much importance for the future.” “The air,” the authors continued, “knows no frontiers, and this service, of such special moment to the territories in which other means of communication are few, ought not to be allowed to be delayed.”¹¹³ For these writers, by contrast to some of their local counterparts, the possibilities that broadcasting seemed to hold out were defined by contrast. Unlike the difficulty of creating a robust communications network in the form of roads, for example, the capacity of broadcasts to propagate through the air, theoretically unencumbered by regional variations in geography, and touch down in local communities, lent the medium to the project of regional scale-making.

¹⁰⁷ Provincial Commissioner, Central Province to the District Commissioner, Fort Hall, 2 November 1939, KNA DC/MUR/3/10/2

¹⁰⁸ R.B. Gurney, Information Officer to Honorable Chief Secretary, “Carnegie Grant,” 23 August, 1940, KNA AE/34/63

¹⁰⁹ W.F.P. Kelly, Officer in Charge, Mobile Cinema Unit “Government Mobile Cinema, Annual Report for 1944,” KNA HAKI/13/309

¹¹⁰ D.A. Low and J.M. Lonsdale, “Introduction: Towards the New Order, 1945-63,” eds. D.A. Low and Alison Smith, in *History of East Africa, Vol. III*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 27.

¹¹¹ Yowana Mukasi to “Bwana,” N.D., KNA AE/34/63.

¹¹² M.F. Hill, “Memorandum on Broadcasting to Africans in Kenya,” KNA AHC/10/63

¹¹³ Edward Hilton Young, “Report of the Commission on Closer Union of the Dependencies in Eastern and Central Africa,” (Great Britain: H.M.S.O., 1929), 130-31.

These aspirations for a re-scaled future critically shaped Twining's recommendations. As he stated, emergent plans for broadcasting must look away from the parochial past towards a federated "future:" "At the present time," he wrote, "an important factor to be taken into account is the policy of regional areas in Colonial Administration, which is being projected...This would seem to preclude entirely independent stations which are not linked to some central control."¹¹⁴ He continued, acknowledging that there existed:

some apparent difficulties resulting from the different conditions existing in the three Territories and from multiplicity of languages spoken by the African tribes, but these are not insuperable, and any disadvantages that may be entailed are outweighed by the economic *and* administrative advantages which would result from unified control.¹¹⁵

Mervyn Hill was even more deterministic in his views. Reflecting on Twining's recommendations, he noted: "In regard to the language question it seems reasonable to assume that the need to broadcast in several vernacular languages is an expedient which will disappear before the march of progress."¹¹⁶

Just as Hill imagined a *lingua franca* superseding vernacular languages, those in favor of Federation, Hill seemingly among them, imagined broadcasting as being capable of transcending individual territories and enacting the region. Simple coordination was not sufficient, however. Instead infrastructural regionalists argued that all broadcasts coming out of 7LO Nairobi must be made "truly East African" in order to impart a "Pan-African conception of the [war] campaign."¹¹⁷ For Hill, broadcasting was the infrastructure of monolingualism. In regional terms, it was the infrastructure of East Africa.

Until this time, Nairobi 7LO had been broadcasting on 350 and 49.5 meters, the 350 wavelength giving service over a 50 mile radius, with the 49.5 meter providing service to the rest

¹¹⁴ M.F. Hill, Information Officer, "Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office, with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the Improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station," KNA HAKI/13/276 "Information and Propaganda"

¹¹⁵ E.F. Twining, M.B.E., District Officer, Uganda, W.K. Brasher, Engineer-in-Chief, Department of Posts and Telegraphs, Palestin, and C.A.L. Richards, Assistant District Officer, Ugaunda, "Broadcasting Investigations," (Entebbe: Government Printer, Uganda, 1939),

¹¹⁶ M.F. Hill, Information Officer, "Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office, with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the Improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station," 23 January, 1941. HAKI/13/276 or CS/2/8/121 - "Information and Propaganda."

¹¹⁷ Paraphrasing of M.F. Hill, "Proceedings of the Conference of Information Officers, Nairobi, May 21st, 1941," KNA HAKI/13/170

of Kenya and beyond though, it was acknowledged, the 49.5 meter failed “to ensure satisfactory reception over considerable areas of Uganda and Tanganyika.”¹¹⁸ During the war years, experimental broadcasts had been put out on a third wavelength, 27.96 meters, and the “available evidence” suggested that this wavelength provided “a greatly improved service over the greater part of East Africa.”¹¹⁹ The Information Office was hopeful that seamless broadcasting would be generative of a regional way of being. These messages, traveling through a substance that “knows no frontiers,” it was hoped, would break down barriers, variously described as “linguistic,” “political” and “geographic,” as new relations of regional affinity were broadcast over the airwaves.

The experiment was an unequivocal failure. As one administrator noted: “I regret to say that there is no evidence that the experiment...has succeeded in enlarging...the number of habitual listeners to 7 L.O. Nairobi.”¹²⁰ Gurney, Chief Secretary to the East African Governors’ Conference, was more explicit, writing: “Efforts to make the news and announcements broadcast from Nairobi more East African and less parochial in character have apparently failed.”¹²¹ Parochialism, here, was conceived of as being both infrastructural and ideational. The first concerned with form, the second with content. Infrastructural parochialism inhered in the material limits of broadcasts emanating from 7LO.¹²² The other register of parochialism was related to content. Information workers had failed to generate programming with broad appeal, content capable of transcending the ostensible parochialism of target populations themselves. Both were conceived of as being problems of scale. Enacting the region would require transcending both. And maybe, regionalists thought, the medium of regional broadcasting, could

¹¹⁸ H.L.G. Gurney, Chief Secretary to the Governors’ Conference to the Hon Chief Secretary. 14 January, 1943. KNA HAKI/13/276.

¹¹⁹ M.F. Hill, Information Officer, “Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office, with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the Improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” 23 January 1941. HAKI/13/276 or CS/2/8/121 - “Information and Propaganda”

¹²⁰ G.A.S. Northcote, Principal Information Officer to Chief Secretary, Governor’s Conference, “Radiation on 28 Metres,” 11 January 1943, KNA HAKI 13/276

¹²¹ H.L.G. Gurney, Chief Secretary to the Governors’ Conference to the Hon Chief Secretary. 14 January 1943. HAKI/13/276; CS/2/8/124 Information and Propaganda. Wireless Broadcasting; Nairobi; To Other East African Territories. Blackburne ultimately decided to abandon the experiment, arguing that it was not worth the £90 it cost monthly, he suggested that its continuance was not feasible unless Tanganyika and Uganda were willing to contribute monetarily

¹²² N.A. to Honorable Chief Secretary “Extension of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” 29 November 1941, KNA HAKI/13/276; See also, H.L.G. Gurney, Chief Secretary to the Governor’s Conference to the Honorable Chief Secretary, 14 January, 1943, KNA HAKI/13/276.

become the message of unification. For reasons that will be explored, both Uganda and Tanganyika rejected this logic. In their hands, parochialism was not something to be overcome, but something to be protected against another essentializing impulse, one which spoke easily of “the East African.”

In 1943, the Conference of Governors agreed that a BBC engineer should be invited to visit the territories to “investigate and report upon the future of broadcasting in East Africa from the *technical* side.”¹²³ In a bid to offset criticism the Chairman emphatically argued that investigations into the feasibility of region-wide broadcasting were being undertaken on “technical grounds” alone.¹²⁴ Proponents of centralized broadcasting hoped that an “expert from outside might...suggest a policy which could be satisfactory to all EA territories.”¹²⁵ The hope here was that a team of technical experts, and the recommendations they made, would appear to be operating outside of political interest, making recommendations on the basis of objective knowledge alone. The hope, in other words, was that technics could simultaneously precede, and yet be productive of, new political futures.

The following year, W.E.C. Varley, an engineer from the BBC, undertook the survey. The findings of this research established that the six territories be broken up into two groups: a “Central African Group” and an “East African Group.” Perhaps unduly insensitive to the politics of the project, he argued that the particularizing work of vernacular language programming was undesirable for “reasons of economy.” To this end, he recommended that vernacular programs be limited to a maximum of Kiswahili, Luganda, Gang and Kikuyu. These vernaculars would be broadcast over a “single, centrally sited short-wave transmitter of adequate power employing the special aerial systems necessary to provide a...short wave service and using wavelengths which [are] optimum for distance, time of day, season of year and position in sunspot cycle.”¹²⁶

These recommendations were met with no small measure of critique. Perhaps predictably, Varley’s few supporters were other infrastructural-regionalists, such as the

¹²³ “Extract from Proceedings of the Conference of East Africa Information Officers, held at the Ministry of Information Offices, Nairobi, on 27th, 28th and 29th September 1943, KNA HAKI/13/276.

¹²⁴ G.G.S. Hutchinson, “Broadcasting in the Colonies,” 31 August 1948, KNA HAKI/13/276.

¹²⁵ H.L.G. Gurney, Chief Secretary of the Governor’s Conference to Undersecretary of State, Colonial Office, 29 January 1944, KNA HAKI/13/276.

¹²⁶ W.E.C. Varley, Engineering Division, British Broadcasting Corporation, “Broadcasting Survey of the British East African Territories,” April 1946, KNA HAKI/13/276 or CS/2/8/121 – Information and Propaganda

Postmaster General, and the Kenyan Government. Tanganyika and Uganda, by contrast, evidenced “an apparent lack of interest in this matter.”¹²⁷ At issue was not so much coordination across the territories, but the fact that this would turn on establishing a center. Indeed, Uganda and Tanganyika harbored a healthy suspicion as to Nairobi’s interests in regional broadcasting, which located it as the central node. As the Ugandan representative noted: “In these discussions in Nairobi on broadcasting one could not help feeling that the suggestions about a central broadcasting station were not as altruistic as the Kenya representative would have us believe. The representatives from Tanganyika and Zanzibar were of the same opinion.”¹²⁸ These administrators feared that the new scheme would enable an unwanted redistribution of agency which would usher in a new scale of administrative order: that of the region with Nairobi as its center. And there was nothing new in their opposition to such a plan. As a *Colonial Times* article noted: “Uganda and Tanganyika have always been opposed to this idea [of federation].”¹²⁹

Uganda and Tanganyika, though, were discursively limited in how they could frame their rejection due to the terms of the conversation. It was widely accepted that the governments of Tanganyika and Uganda could not afford “to ignore the potentialities [of a regional broadcasting network] in view of the Colonial Office’s manifest” interest. And so, it was necessary to convince the Colonial Office that “the matter” had been “carefully considered.” The plan, in other words, could not be rejected on political terms alone—the different communities interested—but had to be framed in a language of material constraints.¹³⁰ If infrastructural regionalists had worked to separate the technics from the politics, their opponents, too, framed their rejections in technical terms foregrounding arguments about place-based expertise, infrastructural limitations, and a dearth of funds. This did not depoliticize the debate but, instead, reflected an acute awareness on all sides as to where the politics of regional integration were

¹²⁷ G. Latham, Broadcasting Division, Ministry of Information to Geoffrey Northcote, 29 November 1943. BNA CO 875/2/15; Kenya had long held regional ambitions when it came to broadcasting. Indeed, the 1939 experiment was imagined as the first step towards developing a more embracing regional scheme which was imagined as being “An East African Native Broadcasting Service,” Honorable Chief Secretary to Chief Native Commissioner (CNC) 10 March 1940, KNA AE/34/63, Posts and Telegraphs: Wireless; Broadcasting; To Natives, KNA AE/34/63.

¹²⁸ Information Officer, Kampala to Honorable Chief Secretary, Entebbe, “Broadcasting,” 11 June 1941. Broadcasts for Africans (includes papers on Listener Research), Uganda National Archives [hereafter UNA].

¹²⁹ N.A., Not Titled, *The Colonial Times*, 15 December, 1945, KNA HAKI 13/107

¹³⁰ Chief Secretary, Entebbe, Uganda, to the Honourable Chief Secretary, Nairobi, 17 September, 1948, KNA HAKI/13/276.

playing out in these years. In other words, and Gurney's hopes notwithstanding, prospective technological transformations could not be easily untethered from the politics of federation.

Indeed, if the problem that Uganda and Tanganyika were confronting was how centralized broadcasting would usher in a scale of politics—that of the region—through assembling a new infrastructure, they framed their rejection of regional coordination in infrastructural terms. As the Chief Secretary of Uganda argued: “the same broadcasting wave length could not deal with both Kenya and Uganda...on account of technical reception difficulties. As an addendum, he added, there was the “insuperable problem of [developing programmes]...to suit the *widely different communities interested*.”¹³¹ Foregrounding technical constraints enabled the Chief Secretary to reintegrate the politics of regional broadcasting into the conversation.

Arguing that expert knowledge was place-based offered administrators another opportunity to simultaneously make political arguments while effacing the political reasons they were rejecting the network. Here, the status of expert knowledge as it related to the politics of language again came to the fore as a key node of conflict. As the Ugandan Information Officer stated: “I can see no...advantage accruing to Uganda. I am quite convinced that no broadcast in a local language would be translated as satisfactorily in Nairobi as in Kampala.” He concluded unequivocally: “[And] Nairobi news is not wanted here.”¹³² If, at the scale of empire, the conflict had been framed as one of the metropolitan expert against the local expert, this logic was re-rehearsed between a different center, now Kenya, and its would-be peripheries of Uganda and Tanganyika. Here the politics of expertise intersected with debates surrounding the desirability of regional scale-making.

Conclusion

In the 1930s, metropolitan administrators hoped to use radio broadcasting as a tool of centrally directed “advanced administration.” The capacity of broadcasts to propagate through the air lent

¹³¹ Chief Secretary, Entebbe, Uganda, to the Honourable Chief Secretary, Nairobi, 17 September, 1948, KNA HAKI/13/276.

¹³² N.A. to Whitley, “In Uganda,” 9 April 1949, BNA CO/875/68/3, Broadcasting, Propaganda (1949-51).

radio to this vision, radio capable of redrawing the boundaries among people as new relations of affinity were forged over the airwaves. The Colonial Office was not unique hoping that the scalar capacity of broadcasting could generate social and political futures of a new scale.

Since the earliest days of the medium in the region, radio enthusiasts had seen in radio a means of enacting scalar leaps by drawing dispersed communities into a single orbit. When the small settler community living in the Kenya colony first proposed broadcasting in 1927, it aspired to use the new network as a means of connecting them to their metropolitan kin, generating a set of infrastructural attachments which, they hoped, would have political effects, cultivating empire-wide support for regional federation dominated by the interests of white settlers.

This parochial view of broadcasting was taken up by administrators in London, who imagined a regional network as capable of having a homogenizing effect in the region, in the process generating a new political unit, the East African federation, with a new type of political subject, the East African, at its center. Officially federation had been tabled years before, there was simply too much opposition to proceed with the project of integration in explicitly political terms. Instead, the Colonial Office and regional enthusiasts had worked to untether conversations of infrastructural coordination from the project of regional integration, in the process distributing the contentious politics of the project to the seemingly apolitical domain of technics.

Uganda and Tanganyika administrators, fearful of the political implications of plans for infrastructural integration, rejected regionalists' efforts to outsource politics to infrastructures, using the banal language of technological and material constraints to make a political argument about the importance of "place-based knowledge," and the heterogeneity of listening audiences. In conjoining material constraints with the importance of "place-based knowledge," representatives of Uganda and Tanganyika ably reintegrated their political concerns into the debate.

In this, colonial administrators were following in the footsteps of African dissenters of the late 1920s who had expended a good deal of labor in demonstrating the impossibility of disaggregating the technical from the political. In so doing, these two groups called the bluff of administrators, demonstrating their savvy in reading plans for regional broadcasting as subtending technopolitical aspirations for a federated future. And so, by 1949, plans to use broadcasting as a means of enacting the region of East Africa and producing the "East African"

were abandoned. The politics were too complicated and could not be cordoned off from the technics, as conflicts with Tanganyika and Uganda, in particular, had demonstrated.¹³³ There was nothing to be done. “In view...of the attitude adopted by the Governments of Uganda and Tanganyika towards the introduction of a regional scheme, the reasons for which are fully appreciated, there appears to be no alternative...but to consider further developments on a territorial basis.”

The Kenya colony was the big loser here. A regional broadcasting network would have seen investments in high-powered transmitters that would have enabled Kenya to provision for African communities both within its borders and beyond, locating Nairobi at the center of a new administrative, political, and infrastructural unit. But by 1949 these aspirations had come to naught, leaving Kenya with only the paltry broadcasting network run by Cable and Wireless, and with no plans for the future. In the years to come, incomplete networking within the Kenya colony would create space for people to engage in other forms of scale-making as they mobilized radio technologies to tap into prospective futures that neither mapped onto the boundaries of the colony nor the prospective regional unit of East Africa. The following chapter addresses itself to these stories.

¹³³ Officer Administering the Government of Kenya to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, “Confidential,” August, 1950, BNA CO/875/64/3.

Chapter 4

“Tropicalising” Technologies: The Airwaves and the Formation of Communities of an “Intermediate” Scale

In the 1940s, infrastructural regionalists had hoped to construct a regional broadcasting network to cultivate new sensibilities in colonial communities. These administrators spoke easily of “the East African listener,” betraying their confidence that radio was capable of generating colonial subjects of a new sort.¹ As this suggests, while during the war broadcasting was used, in the main, to “steady native opinion,” it was also a future-driven infrastructure freighted with pedagogy—an “instrument of advanced administration” and a tool “of mass education.”² Programs were to convince communities of the beneficence of colonial governance, and usher in a period of expertly guided “development.” As E. R. Davies proclaimed over the airwaves in a 1941 broadcast, postwar radio must: “ventilate and explain to the African this plan of development in all its aspects and the methods by which it is proposed to carry it out.”³ Radio, many believed, could usher both persons and landscapes into a new and developed future. Following the war, this vision of development along social welfarist lines expanded to embrace all branches of government. With this shift in ideology came cadres of “experts” who were responsible for guiding transformations in agriculture, health, and education.⁴ These new

¹ Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

² “A Broadcast Given from Nairobi on Friday, 8th August, 1941,” by Mr. E.R. St. A. Davies in Charge of the African Section of the Kenya Information Office, “Some Problems of Broadcasting to Africans,” Kenya National Archives [Hereafter KNA] AHC/10/68; Excerpt of report from Committee appointed by the Secretary of State to report on Broadcasting in the colonies. M.F. Hill, Information Officer. “Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office, with the Cooperation of Messrs, Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the Improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” KNA HAKI/13/276 or CS/2/8/121 – Information and Propaganda

³ E.R. St. Davies, Acting Information Officer to the Chief Secretary, Secretariat, Nairobi, “The Kenya Information Office After the War,” 8 June, 1943. HAKI/13/136, “Information and Propaganda: Organisation and Establishment, Postwar Organization, 1943-47.”

⁴ D.A. Low and J.M. Lonsdale, “Introduction: Towards the New Order, 1945-63, eds. D.A. Low and Alison Smith, in *History of East Africa, Vol. III*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 13.

initiatives were to extend the reach of the state through the centralized coordination across fields of governance, with “all levels of activity” firmly “interlocked.”⁵

For those working in the field of information, however, postwar developmentalist aspirations would have appeared familiar.⁶ As early as the mid-1930s administrators had forecast radio’s role in enacting “social welfare,” and ushering in a new phase of expertly guided development across the colonial world.⁷ It was not until the 1940s, though, that metropolitan monies were available to offset the cost of these prospective social and material transformations.

In chapter 3, I focused on the 1940s and documented how the Colonial Office’s (CO) hopes of enacting a regional network as the technological framework subtending a new political order failed in ideological terms. This chapter turns to the 1950s and works at the interstices of material constraints, the consolidation of a social welfarist vision of development, and popular forms of claims-making to understand the broadcasting network that the Kenya Information Office (KIO) finally succeeded in assembling by the end of the decade.

If in the 1940s administrators spoke of the “East African listener,” by the 1950s the appropriate scale of social and political attachments had different coordinates. In this twilight moment, as I argue, the colonial government hoped to use broadcasting to guide, constrain, and mold the social and political worlds available to Kenyans by generating a scale of attachment that was beyond the “tribe” but before “all-embracing citizenship.” With this came a change in language policy, with Kiswahili being reframed as the language not of the region, but of the Kenya colony. The government’s aspiration to use radio to generate subjects of an “intermediate” scale would prove to be an uphill battle. In the years following the war, and

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶ Discussions of development along social welfarist lines in the domain of broadcasting predates what the scholarship typically frames as being the emergence of social welfarist thinking, which scholars firmly locate in the postwar period. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, eds. *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Frederick Cooper “Modernizing Bureaucrats, Backward Africans, and the Development Concept,” in *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 64-92.

⁷ Extracts from Letter Received from the Uganda Information Officer (Not authored), Kampala, Uganda, 11 November, 1943 “Broadcasting Station for Uganda,” HAKI/13/276; the Anglican Church shared this position, viewing mass education as a means of securing “social welfare.” ACKA/ET/AEC/1 - African Education Council, 1920-56. This was always contradictory. Administrators had to be careful that in “projecting a favourable picture of Britain...too much emphasis [was not laid] on the extensiveness of our social services and other material advantages which the Africans do not share.” Overseas Planning Committee: Plan of Propaganda to British East Africa (Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda, Zanzibar, N. Rhodesia & Nyasaland) 2, July, 1943, CO 875/9/21

absent a plan for regional broadcasting, the Kenyan Information Office had let its infrastructure and programming languish.

1949, the year regional broadcasting was formally off the table, was a bad one for the state to be without a robust broadcasting network. The strikes of the late 1940s, in tandem with the Mau Mau "rebellion," and the Egyptian Revolution a few years later appeared to threaten the integrity of the political unit that was the Kenya colony. These events convinced the administration that expanding its broadcasting network was a matter of urgency.

The state's aspiration to engender a new and more robust parochialism through Kiswahili-language broadcasting and bounded by the borders of the colony was complicated in practice. From the perspective of designers there were three considerations with which technologists would have to contend. First, Kenya was a distinct atmospheric zone. Second, Kenya was a distinct topographical zone. Compounding these two issues was a third: historical policies of austerity had resulted in a broadcasting network that was incomplete. In the early days of broadcasting, absent metropolitan investments, the state had mobilized Cable and Wireless as an infrastructural prosthetic, rendering the state dependent on private infrastructures. By the 1950s, administrators were forced to acknowledge that this entanglement mitigated the state's capacity to develop a network of broadcasting as a "public service." With the entrenchment of a social welfarist vision of development, these relations of infrastructural dependence produced a contradiction between material capacity and ideology, contradictions that African communities leveraged in demanding their inclusion within the infrastructural state.

The stakes of these material constraints would only heighten throughout the 1950s. As people started tuning in to broadcasts from various global elsewhere on their shortwave receivers, the state played catch-up as it worked to deploy radio broadcasting to shape the scales of social and political belonging thinkable to colonized communities. These external concerns articulated with internal transformations, as administrative reforms placed downward pressure on communities to increasingly view a landed and ethno-linguistically bounded mode of identification as being the surest means of securing their futures. Taken together, these cross-cutting projects of scale-making convinced the administration of the need to regain control over the informational worlds of communities who thought of the Kenya colony in rather ambivalent terms when they discussed the boundaries of 'home.'

Listeners seized on this opportunity, conjuring up the anxieties of the colonial state as they called the government to task, demanding that the state recognize their linguistic difference and provision them with vernacular-language broadcasts. In so doing, they drew on colonial discourse, framing the infrastructure of radio broadcasting as a public good to which all should have access. Inclusion in the infrastructure of broadcasting, they argued, was a key metric of recognition within the shifting terrains of the Kenya colony. Taken together, these conditions required radio technologies and the infrastructures of broadcasting be “tropicalised.” Tropicalisation, however, required more than simply retooling existing technologies, as we shall see in this chapter and the one to follow; it also required mobilizing the labor of African knowledge workers and experts and acceding to the popular demands of would-be listeners.

Broadcasting “Development”: Radio and Fashioning of Subjects of an “Intermediate” Scale

Administrative hopes to use broadcasting as a tool of social welfare were guided by emergent conversations surrounding the danger of “the masses.” Indeed, across the colonial world, colonial governments hoped to use policies of “social welfare” to offset popular forms of discontent.⁸ When it came to radio, pursuing “development” through “mass education” over the airwaves was precisely designed to function as a prophylaxis against the specter of disorder. These newly mediated messages, heavy with developmentalist promises for the future, might be capable of shoring up the center of an anxious colonial state.

This would prove to be no easy task. Years of infrastructural neglect in Kenya, as elsewhere, had resulted in a state that was lumpy in its reach. Colonial administrators had before them a difficult task, then, as they set to work convincing colonial communities of the benefits that would come from administrative interventions into their daily lives in the absence of smoothly tarmacked roads, access to clean water, and an electrical grid. Radio broadcasting seemed, to some, to offer a solution. The new developmentalist aspirations of the colonial state

⁸ Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

would be brought into the intimate spheres of Kenyans' everyday lives over the airwaves. Radio, in other words, could temporarily act as a suture, closing the gaps generated by long-term infrastructural neglect, bypassing largely absent harder infrastructures and services all the while enabling the education and "development" of the masses living in Kenya's cities and throughout the countryside. In this capacity, administrators hoped, radio could act as an infrastructural prosthetic, propping up this ideologically dense but infrastructurally thin developmentalist state. At one level, then, efforts to enact radio in this period both indexed the change in direction of colonial policies *and* exemplified colonialism on the cheap. This was colonial austerity in the age of social welfare.

Administrators were particularly anxious about the social and political implications of what they referred to as ongoing "social changes." These changes, they argued, had generated discontent that could be scaled up, leading to "social upheaval," a potential for rupture that they attributed to the emergence of "mass consciousness."⁹

It is no surprise, then, that the pedagogic function of radio was matched by its purported disciplinary capacity. As the Chief Native Commissioner (CNC) wrote: "African broadcasting" offered "tremendous opportunities...[for] controlling and regulating...[Africans'] social, economic, and political advancement."¹⁰ As this framing suggests, the colonial state appreciated that people's social and political worlds were set against an expanded scale in the years following the war. And this was threatening, particularly as it led to a misdirection in blame with people, ascribing "responsibility...[to] groups or individuals, especially those in authority."¹¹ The goal was not to repress these reactions but to guide and mold them, not least by shaping the scales of social and political belonging thinkable to colonized communities.

⁹ "Mass Education in African Society," Colonial Office: Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, Colonial No. 186, (Distributed by British Information Services An Agency of the British Information Services, An Agency of the British Government. New York: 30 Rockefeller Plaza), 7. These transformations had been thoroughgoing, the report argued. "Another phenomenon perhaps not wholly unrelated to the changes of which we have just spoken is the changing attitude in the face of evil conditions. In the past that attitude might be described as one of social fatalism which led the people to tolerate with patience conditions of misfortune and even injustice. They were accepted with the same fatalistic resignation as fire and flood and earthquake." With this coming to an end, administrators complained, people were blaming the government for "misfortune," which, of course, was completely appropriate.

¹⁰ N.A. to Hon C.S. Hon C.N.C., 11 March 1940, KNA AE/34/63 "Posts and Telegraphs: Wireless; Broadcasting; To Natives

¹¹ "Mass Education in African Society," Colonial Office: Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, Colonial No. 186, (Distributed by British Information Services An Agency of the British Information Services, An Agency of the British Government. New York: 30 Rockefeller Plaza).

Radio listening was to “broaden the outlook” of audiences, turning “the African into a self-governing and responsible citizen.”¹² Citizenship proper was not, of course, on the table in this period, instead the Committee imagined an intermediary status. As the Report noted:

The realization of citizenship begins in a small unit where common loyalty and common interests are expressed in daily activities and mutual service. Within these small units people hold tenaciously to what may appear as a narrow sectionalism, operating behind barriers which divide them from their fellows. Contact with the modern world is breaking down these barriers and expanding the social and political horizons of the people. But the conception of common citizenship is vastly wider. It may be that intermediate behind the small sectional units and all-embracing citizenship we shall have to envisage some form of ‘national units.’ It is going to be a delicate task to enlarge the narrower loyalties until they have reality and meaning in a wider circle.¹³

And so, educative radio programming was to offer listeners a scale of belonging that was “intermediate”—after “the small sectional units...[but before]...all-embracing citizenship.”¹⁴ The Committee was not altogether wrong in its assessment here. The politics of intermediacy were, indeed, “delicate.” What it seems to have missed, however, as we shall see, was that the meaning of “narrower loyalties” would gain their definitional and affective strength precisely up against a “wider circle.”

The Committee was not totally naïve, though. Its members expected that efforts to use “mass education” to enact subjects of this intermediate scale could engender other, potentially

¹² Ambrose C. Coghill, "Mambo Leo: A Memorandum on the Education of East African Natives by Means of Mobile Cinema Projection Units," N.D., KNA DC/MUR/3/10/2

¹³ “Mass Education in African Society,” Colonial Office: Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, Colonial No. 186, (Distributed by British Information Services An Agency of the British Information Services, An Agency of the British Government. New York: 30 Rockefeller Plaza), 8.

¹⁴ The report continued: “we must not omit consideration of the political aspirations which have emerged in some parts of the Colonial Empire in vigorous form and are spreading over far wider areas. The force of those aspirations has been accentuated by the magnitude of the struggle in which we are now involved and also by the certainty that the issue of that struggle will decide the common destiny. There is a universal sense of a common interest in the decision, which makes all men responsive to the same forces even though the form of response may differ widely. Thus the stage is set for the conception of a common citizenship which begins to acquire reality and expression. This common citizenship is not to be envisaged as a benevolent concession from above: it is the practical outcome of common trial and common effort. This ideal and all that it entails may well be the keynote of all progress within the colonies as well as in their political relations with the people of Britain.” And so, people had to be guided. “The principles of local government, understood and practised by many African communities in the past, will have to be ‘modernised’ to meet new conditions, and the wisdom of the old men will have to be interwoven with the new learning to make a real and not an artificial basis for local democracy. In many rural areas the traditional forms of recreation have lost their attraction and new ones must be devised to lighten the dullness of village life.” “Mass Education in African Society,” Colonial Office: Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, Colonial No. 186, (Distributed by British Information Services An Agency of the British Information Services, An Agency of the British Government. New York: 30 Rockefeller Plaza), 8.

cross-cutting, projects of scale-making. Language occupied a central space in these discussions. Broadcasting, the committee argued, would undoubtedly “have a profound influence on the development of... language,”¹⁵ but it conceded that efforts at linguistic standardization would be routinely thwarted by what they referred to as “political factors and parochial attitudes.”¹⁶ Despite these problems, for administrators it was self-evident that first Kiswahili, and later English would become the *lingua franca* of the Kenya colony, dominating both education and radio broadcasting. But in the meantime, as we shall see, people’s tastes had to be accommodated, as nothing could “make people listen in to programmes which do not appeal to them.”¹⁷

Listeners, as this suggests, could not be presumed to exist *a priori*. They were not a pre-existing pool, but rather a potential that had to be cultivated in order to be tapped. And yet information workers remained undaunted. Responding to critics’ claims that the expansion of broadcasting was premature, seeing as Africans had not demonstrated an interest in the medium, G. S. S. Hutchinson, Manager of Information Services, Kenya, was indignant: “This is not,” he retorted, “a valid argument...The existence of broadcasting facilities creates the demand for them,” not the other way around.¹⁸ Hutchinson, as we shall see, was not altogether wrong in his assessment, but questions remained: How was a desire for listening to be cultivated? And what forms of listening were most desirable? What kind of broadcasting network would give complete coverage? And what kind of receiver was best placed to accomplish these goals? Neither these questions, nor their answers, were ever simply ideological.

¹⁵ M.F. Hill, Information Officer, Kenya excerpted from “Proceedings of a Conference of Information Officers Held on the 21st to 24th May, 1941 in the Railway Conference Room, Nairobi.” KNA HAKI/13/170.

¹⁶ “Mass Education in African Society,” Colonial Office: Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, Colonial No. 186, (Distributed by British Information Services An Agency of the British Information Services, An Agency of the British Government. New York: 30 Rockefeller Plaza), 8.

¹⁷ “Mass Education in African Society,” Colonial Office: Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, Colonial No. 186, (Distributed by British Information Services An Agency of the British Information Services, An Agency of the British Government. New York: 30 Rockefeller Plaza), 8.

¹⁸ G.S.S. Hutchison, “Broadcasting in the Colonies,” 31 August 1948, KNA HAKI/13/276. He continued: “and it should not...be debated whether or not a demand now exists where there are no facilities but whether or not there is a need to increase the medium through which African population[s] can be educated.”

Materializing an Infrastructure and the Problems of “the Market”

In 1954, the Kenya Broadcasting Commission published a report on the future of broadcasting in the Kenya colony. When these technologists discussed the future of radio broadcasting, they speculated about the utility of two wavelengths: medium and short. Medium waves were the cheaper option. But traveling closer to the earth’s surface, and contacting the ionosphere closer to their point of origin, they could service a more constrained geography than shortwaves. Moreover, the capacity of these waves to propagate through the air was contingent on atmospheric conditions. And wavelengths in “tropical Africa,” experts remarked, were burdened by higher noise levels, which presented an acute problem by reducing “the effective range of medium wavelengths to a small fraction of their range in temperate regions” and making “long wavelengths altogether unusable.”¹⁹ The propagation of wavelengths in the “tropics” was also subject to seasonal variation, with radio noise intensity reaching the maximum in March and April and October and November—“the periods of the ‘Long’ and ‘Short’ rains respectively.”²⁰ Medium waves were not only subject to meteorological and atmospheric interventions, however. So, too, were they subject to topographic variation.

The Great Rift Valley, running some 7,000 miles from northern Syria to central Mozambique, was one such topographical intervention. The terrain of the Great Rift varies, ranging from salt flats some 152 meters below sea level to a series of towering mountains, some of which reach 17,000 feet.²¹ Just north of Nairobi, the site of Kenya’s main transmitter in these years, the rift reaches its deepest point. The presence of this ancient rift presented problems for medium waves, which travel along the “surface of the earth,” making issues of topography of paramount importance, since the frequencies, while able to surmount “minor hills up to 1000 ft or so...[were] stopped by mountains.” But it was not simply vertical interventions that had to be considered but also the “electrical conductivity of the ground over which the wave must travel,”

¹⁹ Atmospheric noise refers to natural variations caused by shifting weather patterns, specifically lightning discharges. “Cheap Wireless Receivers for Colonial Peoples,” N.D. British National Archives [hereafter BNA] Colonial Office [hereafter CO] 875/31/1 “Receivers for Colonial Peoples: Policies” (1948)

²⁰ W.E.O. Varley, Engineering Division, British Broadcasting Corporation, “The Broadcasting Survey of the British East African Territories, 1946” BBC, E1/21 countries African East African Broadcasting 1943-1947

²¹ Kenya Broadcasting Commission, “Report of Kenya Broadcasting Commission, June 1954.” File: Cable and Wireless Archive [hereafter CW], DOC/5 1774/1, Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

for moving over dry, “sandy soil reception becomes poorer...while over marsh or water (which has high electrical conductivity) reception remains good to much greater distances.”²²

Shortwave seemed to circumvent some of these problems. Traveling at a higher frequency than medium waves, and bouncing off the ionosphere at a greater distance from their sites of transmission, shortwaves have a unique spatial reach. But shortwaves remained vulnerable to atmospheric changes more common in the tropics. As the 1954 Commission noted: “The useful energy from a shortwave transmitting aerial travels skywards until it meets reflecting layers, some 200 miles up, which return it to the earth for reception.” But, reflecting layers varied: “daily, seasonably, and over an 11-year cycle” occasionally disappearing “altogether during periods of electrical disturbance in the atmosphere.”²³ In addition, shortwave frequencies were overcrowded and subject to competition. And while different geographies could, theoretically, share a single short wavelength for use at different times, Africa was in the “unfortunate position of being in competition with Europe.”²⁴ But modes of transmission could not be considered without considering modes of reception. Not only were shortwave receivers costlier than medium wave, but they were “more elaborate” and “less easy for the unskilled user to tune.”²⁵ Shortwave technology may have been more expansive, in sum, but it was also more complicated and more expensive.

During the war, the administration had settled on a compromise. Nairobi and its immediate hinterlands would be serviced by mediumwave, with the rest of the colony (and beyond) relying on shortwave.²⁶ And so, during the war, Nairobi began running broadcasts for African communities in Kikuyu, Dholuo, Kikamba, Luhya, Luganda, Kinandi, Kisii and Kiswahili.²⁷ These efforts notwithstanding, it was widely acknowledged that broadcasts failed

²² Kenya Broadcasting Commission, “Report of Kenya Broadcasting Commission, June 1954.” File: Cable and Wireless Archive [hereafter CW], DOC/5 1774/1, Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

²³ Kenya Broadcasting Commission, “Report of Kenya Broadcasting Commission, June 1954.” File: Cable and Wireless Archive [hereafter CW], DOC/5 1774/1, Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

²⁴ “Broadcasting, East Africa,” 1949, BNA CO 875/68/6.

²⁵ “Cheap Wireless Receivers for Colonial Peoples,” BNA CO 875/31/1 “Receivers for Colonial Peoples: Policies” (1948)

²⁶ G.G.S. Hutchinson, “Broadcasting in the Colonies,” 31 August 1948, KNA HAKI/13/276.

²⁷ M.F. Hill, “Memorandum on Broadcasting to Africans in Kenya,” KNA AHC/10/63

“to ensure satisfactory reception over considerable areas.”²⁸ But the issue of technics were never divorced from the issue of politics.

The self-same affordances of shortwave that made it the most optimal mode of broadcasting in East Africa concurrently made shortwave technologies objects of concern.²⁹ Indeed, the capacity of shortwaves to bounce off of the ionosphere and thus travel great distances brought to the fore questions of the forms of social and political affinity enabled by “listening in” on a shortwave receiver.³⁰ As the Report noted: “Short wave transmissions...might be subject to severe interference by the numerous and frequently no doubt more powerful short wave stations of other countries.”³¹ Despite the fact that there was “some degree of international control in the allocation of transmission frequencies,” this was “by no means...completely effective.” This was not mere prognostication. As the Commission reported, as we shall see, foreign transmissions were being received in “increasing numbers in all countries, and especially in Africa.”³² Airwaves, evidently, could not be constrained by the same logic of territorialized control that animated colonial imaginaries. Indeed, it was widely acknowledged that foreign broadcasts bleeding into Kenyan airwaves were “outside the direct control of the Kenya Broadcasting Service.”³³ And so, discussions over topography and airwaves, ideal transmitters and receivers were not merely technical questions, but issues that, as one astute observer noted, verged on “higher politics.”³⁴

But there was a third register of materiality with which administrators and technologists had to contend: long-standing policies of colonial austerity. From the outset, proponents of broadcasting in Kenya had been limited by the pecuniary structure of the Colonial Office. Until the postwar period, individual territories were expected to cover their own costs. These

²⁸ H.L.G. Gurney, Chief Secretary to the Governors’ Conference to the Hon Chief Secretary. 14 January 1943. KNA HAKI/13/276.

²⁹ Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225-248.

³⁰ The reference to “listening in” comes from a 1948-49 Nyanza Intelligence Report DC/KSM/1/1/16 is

³¹ Kenya Broadcasting Commission, “Report of Kenya Broadcasting Commission, June 1954.” File: Cable and Wireless Archive [hereafter CW], DOC/5 1774/1, Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

³² Kenya Broadcasting Commission, “Report of Kenya Broadcasting Commission, June 1954.” File: Cable and Wireless Archive [hereafter CW], DOC/5 1774/1, Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

³³ Kenya Broadcasting Commission, “Report of Kenya Broadcasting Commission, June 1954.” File: Cable and Wireless Archive [hereafter CW], DOC/5 1774/1, Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

³⁴ G.S. Hutchison to J.H. Reiss, 27 October, 1949. KNA AHC/10/63 - Information and Propaganda - Wireless Broadcasting (1949)

constraints had convinced early administrators of the wisdom of allowing C&W to gain a monopoly over commercial broadcasting in the 1930s (see Chapter 3). But by 1949 things had changed. Coming on the heels of the Colonial Development and Welfare Acts of 1940 and 1945, for the first time financial aid from “Imperial sources” were made available to “promote the growth of broadcasting in the Colonies.”³⁵ Colonial Secretary Creech Jones was emphatic on the importance of this development, writing in a circular of March 29, 1949 that there was an “urgent need” for the “wide development of Colonial broadcasting.”³⁶ The availability of these monies was contingent on their being used to forward a vision of radios as “instruments of social and educational advancement.” The infrastructure, administrators argued, was uniquely poised to act as a technology of “development.”³⁷ All seemed to agree on this point. To this end, £1,000,000 was made available for colonial broadcasting schemes.³⁸

But the Colonial Office was not willing to take on the full financial burden of developing a robust radio network in its colonial holdings. As one administrator wrote: in choosing between the “broadcasting and receiving sides,” the Colonial Office had decided to concentrate “upon the former,” leaving the issue of receiving technologies to “the market.”³⁹ And this created problems. Indeed, the incongruous forms of scale-making that shortwave technologies seemed to hold out took on particular urgency due to the treasury’s refusal to make monies available for the design and construction of receiving sets.

It was left to administrators to communicate these technopolitical concerns to manufacturers as they discussed the parameters of the appropriate receivers for East African

³⁵ “Kenya. Broadcasting Development. Provision of Studies and Communal Listening Facilities, Grant of 27,130” CO 875/68/6 “Broadcasting, East Africa” (1949)

³⁶ Arthur Creech Jones, Confidential Circular, “Broadcasting in the Colonies” 875/31/1 “Receivers for Colonial Peoples: Policies” (1948); see also Charles Armour, “The BBC and the Development of Broadcasting in British Colonial Africa, 1946-56,” *African Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 332 (July 1984): 359, for a discussion of how Creech Jones foreground the importance of expanding broadcasting across Anglophone Africa.

³⁷ “Kenya. Broadcasting Development. Provision of Studies and Communal Listening Facilities, Grant of 27,130” CO 875/68/6 “Broadcasting, East Africa” (1949); HAKI/13/279. Here, one administrator argued that the “The purposes of broadcasting to Africans can be described as educational, administrative and strategic.”

³⁸ “Kenya. Broadcasting Development. Provision of Studies and Communal Listening Facilities, Grant of 27,130” CO 875/68/6; See also CO/875/64/3 “Broadcasting, Kenya.”

³⁹ “Cheap Wireless Receivers for Colonial Peoples,” CO 875/31/1 “Receivers for Colonial Peoples: Policies” (1948) “The market” is the term administrators used in this archive. Department of Information, “Annual Report, 1955,” KNA HAKI/13/251

listeners.⁴⁰ While some argued that “pre-set tuning” might offer one solution, ensuring that “whomsoever possesses such a receiver cannot be ‘got at’ by propaganda from other parts of the world,” others argued for centrally controlled broadcasting in the form of communal listening sites or wired broadcasting.⁴¹ The latter had the advantage of being a closed system. This would be a boon for “broadcast programmes...brought from the studio to the listener by wire, instead of by ordinary wireless transmission, [eliminated the problems of] interference, fading, and distortion.” Neither “weather conditions...geographical situation, nor ‘man-made static’ ...[would] affect the broadcast programme carried by wire.”⁴² But most importantly, with wired broadcasting there was “no risk of interference from unwanted programmes broadcast on a nearby wave band.”⁴³ The advantage, in other words, was that “Central Control” was in “complete charge of every programme at every stage.”⁴⁴ These proposals turned on the proposition that a simple technological fix could constrain the social and political futures colonized communities could access over the airwaves, a form of infrastructural attachment building that could delimit people’s access to a competitive radio world. These options had the added advantage of circumventing the “problem” of users whose “inquisitive nature” led them “to pull [apart] the pieces of most kinds of European equipment that comes within...reach.”⁴⁵

But Kenya’s human geography, itself the product of colonial labor policies, mitigated against the use of wired broadcasting as well as medium wave. Kenya’s African population, administrators noted, tended to live in less concentrated settlements in the countryside, making “the proportion of the total populations, which...[could be] economically...served” by either medium wave or radio rediffusion “much smaller than in Europe or many other countries.”⁴⁶ Finally, there was the problem of infrastructural neglect, which left few rural areas electrified by

⁴⁰ The first indication that there was an Imperial need for “cheap wireless receivers” was made known to manufacturers at an interdepartmental meeting convened under the War Office in 1946. “Cheap Wireless Receivers for Colonial Peoples,” BNA CO 875/31/1 “Receivers for Colonial Peoples: Policies” (1948)

⁴¹ To C.M.A. Gayer, Public Relations and Social Welfare Dept, Kampala, from Kenya & Uganda Customs Collector, Kampala. 19 May, 1949. BNA CO 875/68/3 - Broadcasting, Propaganda (1949-51). This, it was acknowledged, would always be “a danger when the ordinary short or medium-wave frequencies are used.”

⁴² N.A. “Rediffusion” (Broadcast Relay Service Limited), BNA CO 875/40/3

⁴³ N.A. “Rediffusion” (Broadcast Relay Service Limited), BNA CO 875/40/3

⁴⁴ N.A. “Rediffusion” (Broadcast Relay Service Limited), BNA CO 875/40/3

⁴⁵ “Cheap Wireless Receivers for Colonial Peoples,” BNA CO 875/31/1 “Receivers for Colonial Peoples: Policies” (1948).

⁴⁶ “Cheap Wireless Receivers for Colonial Peoples,” CO 875/31/1 “Receivers for Colonial Peoples: Policies” (1948)

the 1950s. These areas, it was noted, were likely to remain dark for “some considerable time.”⁴⁷ This would have to guide the design of receiving sets, as any radio put in circulation could not depend on a direct energy supply and would thus have to be battery operated.⁴⁸

And so, the Colonial Office labored to pressure commercial manufacturers into designing sets specifically suited to “the tropics.” By and large, these efforts failed, confirming “a widely held impression that...[radio manufacturers] are not, as a whole, progressive, imaginative, or inclined to take risks.”⁴⁹ Market-making operated differently in the colonies than in the metropole, where the design and manufacture of receivers could be “left to the ordinary process of demand and supply.”⁵⁰ In the colonies, by contrast, both supply and demand were mere prospects.

The issues were threefold. First, receivers produced for African listeners had to be affordable, and within the reach of an African “clerk class” whom, administrators argued, could not afford sets exceeding £5.⁵¹ Second, all technical components would have to be “tropicalized to resist the inroads of insects, dust, and damp” if they would be able to operate in the region.⁵² But most importantly, manufacturers had to be “encouraged to undertake the expense of experiment in design or of building [a] new prototype for a market which seems to him potential rather than actual.”⁵³ The trick would be to get manufacturers “to realize that such a poor population could and would buy radio sets.” This required cultivating a pool of listeners as a market, as developmentalist subjects, as consumers.

These arguments for market-making were not framed as anathema to radio’s purported function as a “public service.” Manufacturers needed only “see the vast potential market for the

⁴⁷ W.E.O. Varley, Engineering Division, British Broadcasting Corporation, “The Broadcasting Survey of the British East African Territories, 1946.” British Broadcasting Corporation Written Archive [hereafter BBCWA], E1/21 Countries African East African Broadcasting, 1943-1947.

⁴⁸ W.E.O. Varley, Engineering Division, British Broadcasting Corporation, “The Broadcasting Survey of the British East African Territories, 1946.” BBCWA, E1/21 Countries African East African Broadcasting, 1943-1947.

⁴⁹ “Cheap Wireless Receivers for Colonial Peoples,” BNA CO 875/31/1 “Receivers for Colonial Peoples: Policies” (1948).

⁵⁰ “Cheap Wireless Receivers for Colonial Peoples,” BNA CO 875/31/1 “Receivers for Colonial Peoples: Policies” (1948).

⁵¹ “Cheap Wireless Receivers for Colonial Peoples,” BNA CO 875/31/1 “Receivers for Colonial Peoples: Policies” (1948).

⁵² “Cheap Wireless Receivers for Colonial Peoples,” BNA CO 875/31/1 “Receivers for Colonial Peoples: Policies” (1948).

⁵³ “Cheap Wireless Receivers for Colonial Peoples,” BNA CO 875/31/1 “Receivers for Colonial Peoples: Policies” (1948).

poor man's radio *and* the part which radio could play in the development of the colonies."⁵⁴ If this market of consumers could be cultivated, it would open a "world-wide market for British industry in this field."⁵⁵ In other words, policies of colonial austerity ensured that colonial broadcasting as a tool of social welfare was always wrapped up in projects of market-making in colonial East Africa.

But striking a balance between public and private interest, between market-making and the social good was in no way seamless. And these entanglements were particularly acute in Kenya. Indeed, even with the availability of monies for transmission, the administration was bound by early agreements made with Cable and Wireless Services, the company that had secured a monopoly over commercial broadcasting, which would eventually expire in 1959.⁵⁶ Following the enforced merger of companies, both cable and wireless, the British East African Broadcasting Co. had been absorbed by C&W. The terms of the British East African Broadcasting Co.'s contract with the government of Kenya had stipulated that the firm offer colony-wide broadcasting. This clause had extended to Cable and Wireless upon its absorption of the shoestring operation. As a result, C&W was responsible for offering services to settlers and South Asians throughout its tenure in Kenya. Over the years, C&W's reach had grown. In 1931, the number of license holders in Kenya was just over 300. By 1959, this number had risen to 30,000.⁵⁷

With the outbreak of the War, and with a regional broadcasting network on the horizon, the Kenyan administration had opted to rent C&W transmitters rather than construct its own infrastructure to provision services for African communities. This right had been guaranteed in the initial contract, which granted the government the use of C&W equipment and studios for "public purposes" at a rate of SHs 20 per half hour.⁵⁸ Insofar as it was dependent on C&W's

⁵⁴ Harry Franklin, "Draft Report on the Saucepan Special: The Poor Man's Radio For Rural Populations," BNA CO 875/60/1 "Broadcasting: Cheap Short-Wave Receivers for Colonial Peoples."

⁵⁵ Harry Franklin, "Draft Report on the Saucepan Special: The Poor Man's Radio For Rural Populations," BNA CO 875/60/1 "Broadcasting: Cheap Short-Wave Receivers for Colonial Peoples."

⁵⁶ It's worth noting that the actual contract was set to expire in 1956, a deal that was extended until 1959 because the colonial state had not come up with a viable post-monopoly scheme. From Noel Sabine to Roger G. Turnbull, Chief Secretary, the Secretariat. 26 April, 1955. KNA AHC/10/80

⁵⁷ "Kenya Broadcasting: History of Cable and Wireless Limited Activities," CW DOC/6/326/1, Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

⁵⁸ Carla Heath Wilson, "Broadcasting in Kenya Policy and Politics, 1928-1984," Dissertation. (Urbana, Illinois, 1986), 65.

networks, though, a company whose own bottom line was capital gains, administrative ambitions regarding broadcasting were always subordinated to the market-driven interests of the company. And this relationship of infrastructural dependence translated into incomplete coverage across the Kenya colony, with some areas enjoying “fairly good reception, whereas many others had extremely poor reception or none at all.”⁵⁹ It was not simply in material terms that this relationship of infrastructural dependence was a liability, but in ideological terms as well.⁶⁰

Indeed, administrators and metropolitan “experts” routinely complained that C&W’s bottom line of capital gains threatened to undermine radio’s purported status as a “public good.”⁶¹ The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), for its part, lamented that C&W refused to rebroadcast BBC programs that it did not consider to be of “general interest.”⁶² According to the BBC, this was based on a “narrow conception of the responsibilities” of the company, a “conception which...[had] no regard for certain responsibilities placed by Parliament on the BBC.”⁶³ Among these was the responsibility to broadcast items deemed important to the “Commonwealth,” even if they did not “comprise the most popular programmes.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ From the Chief Broadcasting Engineer to the Clerk of the Aberdare County Council, March, 1960. KNA AHC/18/18. The Chief Broadcasting Engineer would defend the quality of KBS services following the withdrawal of C&W by reminding listeners how unsatisfactory C&W coverage had been.

⁶⁰ It is worth noting that the contours of this agreement were unique within the empire *and* were anomalous for C&W. Among Britain’s colonial holdings, Kenya was the first to have a regular public wireless broadcasting service directed specifically to Europeans and South Asians. As for Cable and Wireless, while it was the single largest telecommunications entity in the world, it was in Kenya alone that the entity offered “a completely programmed broadcasting service.” Kenya Broadcasting Commission Cable and Wireless, “Report of Kenya Broadcasting Commission, June 1954”. DOC/5/1774/1, Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

⁶¹ If the Government of Kenya was going to challenge C&W’s monopoly, it would have to demonstrate that C&W was unable or unwilling to provide services at a reasonable cost. Such as they were made, efforts to open up the informational landscape to other commercial providers, failed. See from Governor’s Deputy, Kenya to Secretary of State for the Colonies. 6 July, 1943. BNA CO 875/4/30.

⁶² The BBC took this responsibility very seriously. It often involved: “the broadcasting of programmes for which there is no active demand, or which...[ran] counter to the wishes of the majority. A readiness to undertake programmes for which there is no active demand” the BBC argued, was “essential for any broadcasting organization with ideals and a determination not to stagnate...such programmes must be heard, perhaps many times, before opinions are formed...this inevitably means that supply must constantly precede demand.” Broadcasting as a ‘public good’ mitigated against the application of market principles, such as consumer desire. As the report continued, if people “disliked a series of broadcasts...that would not in itself be considered a valid reason why the policy should be reversed or the programmes withdrawn.” So, in this regard, the path taken in the early years by the colonial administration was in line with those of the British Broadcasting Corporation. See “BBC, A Review of Listener Research Methods.” BNA CO 875/70/6.

⁶³ To James Miller, Colonial Office, from O.J. Whitley, Assistant Head of Colonial Services, BBC. BNA CO 875/64/3 "Broadcasting, Kenya"

⁶⁴ To James Miller, Colonial Office, from O.J. Whitley, Assistant Head of Colonial Services, BBC. BNA CO 875/64/3 "Broadcasting, Kenya."

This obstruction was not limited to white and South Asian listeners. Administrators held that C&W's monopoly over commercial broadcasting had impeded the state's ability to extend broadcasting to Africans communities as a "public service."⁶⁵ Part of the problem was that a notion of a single "public," made little sense in Kenya colony. Instead, the government thought of the public as a divisible unit, one that broke down along the lines of race and ethnicity. C&W had little patience for such arguments. Indeed, when the government appealed to C&W, requesting that it jettison licensing fees on receiving sets for Africans, C&W refused to compromise, arguing that the fees, though well beyond the reach of many would-be African listeners, were its main source of profit.⁶⁶ Licensing fees were not the only issue. C&W's infrastructures were also beholden to its commercial ventures. As one report noted: "Even in the case of the service for Africans Government is dependent on Cable and Wireless for the time allocated and there is danger of expansion being limited by the possible non-availability, at the optimum listening hours, of transmitters which may have other commercial commitments."⁶⁷ Constraints in time would, indeed, prove to be a problem in the years to come.

When C&W first secured its monopoly, and absent metropolitan investments, C&W's presence in the region seemed like a boon to the austere infrastructural state, allowing it to offset the costs and risks of the venture, all the while guaranteeing the state access to its network. By the 1950s, however, these relations of infrastructural dependency appeared, to many, to be a dangerous liability. Having examined the terms of the agreement between Cable and Wireless and the government, J. B. Miller remarked disparagingly that it was "clearly a makeshift arrangement." In this, the state was in a bind. C&W's position was protected under contract.⁶⁸

But administrators were always cautious about the degree of marketization that was desirable in its colonial holdings. Indeed, while creating a class of African consumers for manufactured receivers was amenable to colonial administrators, after consideration they outright rejected the possibility of initiating broadcasting to colonial subjects on a commercial

⁶⁵ Minute of JB Miller, 20, November 1951. BNA CO 875/64/3 "Broadcasting, Kenya."

⁶⁶ Carla Heath Wilson, "Broadcasting in Kenya Policy and Politics, 1928-1984," 73.

⁶⁷ G.G.S. Hutchinson, "Broadcasting in the Colonies," 31 August 1948, KNA HAKI/13/267.

⁶⁸ J.B. Miller, 21 September 1950, BNA CO 875/68/6.

basis.⁶⁹ Commercial broadcasting, some had argued, would offer a means of circumventing financial constraints, but the government found that, “after carefully considering the matter from every possible aspect, we have come to the conclusion that full scale sponsored commercial broadcasting would not be in the best interests of Kenya.” Administrators were particularly concerned, because, they claimed, listeners looked to radio broadcasting as “a Government service” presenting a “very real danger that any products advertised would be considered as having official blessing, and Government would tend to be blamed for any shortcomings found in them.”⁷⁰ The administration was not altogether wrong in its assessment that people viewed radio as a “Government service” in these years.

Others were more concerned by the possibility that “irresponsible and shady outfits” would try to enter the market by posing as respectable private firms.⁷¹ After much discussion, the Commission agreed that broadcasting in Kenya “should be controlled by a single, independent public corporation,” but that “‘spot’ advertising on a limited basis...continue.” The Commission was emphatic, though, that “other forms of commercial broadcasting should not be introduced.”⁷² The prerogatives of commercial broadcasting were simply out of step with the prerogatives of “public service” broadcasting. As the Commission wrote:

There is a clear conflict of interests between commercial broadcasting and what has *come to be known as* ‘public service’ broadcasting. Of its nature, the main object of commercial broadcasting must be to provide entertainment...the objects of ‘public service’ broadcasting are to provide a balanced programme of entertainment and information, while at the same time recognizing responsibility for education in the particular as well as the general sense, and the interest of the various groups, social, intellectual or political, which make up the community of the nation.⁷³

Commercial broadcasting conceived of only one type of listener: the consumer. Public service broadcasting, by contrast, was concerned with various interest groups, themselves internally

⁶⁹ To the Honorable Chief Native Commissioner, Kenya from the Postmaster General. 21 January 1950, KNA HAKI/13/293 - “Wired Broadcasts, 1950”; KNA AHC/10/80 “Information and Propaganda, Wireless Broadcasting, Commercial Broadcasting, Overseas Rediffusion Ltd. (1955)

⁷⁰ “Broadcasting Services: Note by Kenya,” KNA AHC/10/65 (May 1956); To Sir Geoffrey Northcote from GGS Hutchison, 20 August 1945, KNA AHC/10/68.

⁷¹ N.A. 26 October 1946, KNA HAKI/13/296 – Information and Propaganda, Use of Cinema, 1941-52

⁷² Kenya Broadcasting Commission, “Report of Kenya Broadcasting Commission, June 1954.” File: Cable and Wireless Archive [hereafter CW], DOC/5 1774/1, Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

⁷³ Kenya Broadcasting Commission, “Report of Kenya Broadcasting Commission, June 1954.” File: Cable and Wireless Archive [hereafter CW], DOC/5 1774/1, Telegraph Museum, Porthcurno.

differentiated. The government's insistence that radio broadcasting was a "public service," as we shall see, would become the foundation upon which people would demand that the government provision communities with broadcasts in vernacular languages, and in so doing grant them access to the infrastructure not as homogenous listeners, but as linguistically particular constituents.

In a moment of evident frustration one commercial firm queried the administration, writing, "[is] there something rather odd and exceptional in the idea of conducting a service to the public on a profitable basis?"⁷⁴ Here he hit the nail on the head. While today private capital is widely held to be the animus for infrastructural expansion as a means of securing development (see chapter 6), in this period, and in the context of an emergent social welfarist model of development, administrators felt that there was indeed something "odd" about the prospect of leaving the "public good" to the whims of the market.

These difficulties notwithstanding, listenership was on the rise in these years. By the mid-1950s, the Saucepan Special had entered the market. This shortwave receiver, designed by Harry Franklin, an Information Officer posted in Northern Rhodesia, was specifically designed to withstand the conditions in the "tropics:" "clumsy handling by...set owner[s], the hazards of long transportation...extremes of temperature and humidity, the ravages of white ants, borers, etc."⁷⁵ Tropicalizing this technology, however, required more than merely modifying its technical components. It had to be "tropicalized" in "cultural" terms as well. This was the reason for the set's color: blue. Franklin, based on his experience in Northern Rhodesia, had concluded that "one tribe or another [was] superstitious about every other colour."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Noel Sabine to R.G. Turnbull. C.M.G., Office of the Chief Secretary, 11 August 1955. KNA AHC/10/80 - Information and Propaganda, wireless Broadcasting, Commercial Broadcasting, Overseas Rediffusion Ltd. (1955)

⁷⁵ Berec Battery Export Company to Mr. Miller, Esq. 1 June 1951. BNA CO 875/60/2

⁷⁶ Peter Lister, "Report on the Saucepan Special," 7 July 1951. BNA CO 875/60/2. 'The Saucepan Special': A Light in Darkest Africa"; See also, Chapter 8 of Harry Franklin, "Draft Report on the Saucepan Special: The Poor Man's Radio For Rural Populations," BNA CO 875/60/1 "Broadcasting: Cheap Short-Wave Receivers for Colonial Peoples" This chapter, titled, "A New World Market for Britain."



Figure 1 The "Saucepan Special"

In 1951 the government claimed that broadcasts were reaching 1.5 million listeners per year, this out of an estimated population of over 6 million.⁷⁷ Evidently, the “pump had been primed” and people were “listening in.”⁷⁸ The set was sold for £5, and by 1955 it was reported that Africans were buying up the “quantity of cheap wireless sets on the market” in “large numbers,” with 1953 estimates putting this number at 5,000.⁷⁹ In those years, the government was only broadcasting in Kikuyu and Kiswahili, and even the reach of these programs from C&W’s transmitters in Nairobi and Mombasa were unsatisfactory. But listenership was, evidently, on the rise.

As promised, shortwave broadcasting had fulfilled its role as an infrastructure of connectivity, as a means of linking geographically dispersed populations. Indeed, the airwaves were heavy with new messages in the 1950s, messages that invited people to generate attachments of “intermediate” scales, albeit ones with different geographical and conceptual coordinates than either the Kenya colony or the region of East Africa. Concurrently,

⁷⁷ “Extract from Report on Information Services Kenya, 1949” BNA CO 875/64/3.

⁷⁸ “Broadcasting Services: Note by Kenya,” May 1956, KNA AHC/10/65

⁷⁹ J.E. King to Illegible, BNA CO 875/60/2’ “Department of Information, Annual Report, 1955” KNA HAKI/13/251; Myles Osborne, *Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya: Loyalty and Martial Race among the Kamba, c. 1800 to the Present*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 90.

administrative transformations placed downward pressure on “minority” groups to consolidate modes of identification bounded in ethno-linguistic terms. This, it seemed to many community leaders, was the surest way to secure their future place in the coming nation-state. Broadcasting became part of these debates as communities, increasingly drawn together by language, demanded that the state infrastructurally recognize their particularity in the form of dedicated vernacular-language broadcasts. The administration had rushed to establish the Kenya Broadcasting Commission to address these demands. And, the Commission conceded, the issues were complex.

“Broadcasting” Affinity: Radio and the Development of Networks of Other “Intermediate” Scales

Upon concluding its research in 1954, the Kenya Broadcasting Commission reflected on the future directions of radio broadcasting in the Kenya colony, writing:

A complex society like that of Kenya, with its three major groups [white, Asian, and African] and its many languages, creates special problems for broadcasting; and these problems can only be solved by a complex, and therefore expensive, system of broadcasting. It was clear from the evidence put before us that, as far as Africans are concerned, while Swahili is understood in most areas, there are important tribal groups which would prefer, and, would only derive full benefit from, broadcasting if it were given in their own vernaculars.⁸⁰

Crucial here was the admission that popular demands for vernacular-language programming would have to shape the broadcasting network of the future. Indeed, as we shall see, the invocation of preference of desire as demand had, by the mid-1950s, decidedly political overtones.

The Kenya colony had been wracked by a series of labor actions in the 1940s, culminating in a general strike in 1947, which transcended the parochial imaginary of the Kenyan state as laborers spread the strike from Mombasa to Nyanza. This movement was not only capacious in spatial terms, but demonstrated the capacity of labor organizers to draw on globally circulating discourses as they made bids for inclusion in regimes of labor that proffered protections to

⁸⁰ Mr. J. Grenwell Williams, R.W.P. Cockburn, W.A. Roberts of the BBC. “Report of Kenya Broadcasting Commission, June 1954.” KNA JA/12/115

metropolitan workers.⁸¹ In so doing, colonial communities drew on and consolidated affinities that transcended the geographic boundaries of the colony, in the process demonstrating the limits of colonial conceptions of the appropriate scale of social and political organization in its colonial holdings. The 1947 strike had, indeed, been the initial prompt, reinvigorating conversations about the need to expand the state's broadcasting network on a territorial basis. But dockworkers were not alone as they worked to rescale their social and political worlds. At the forefront of administrative concerns, in this regard, were two other events that held out the promise of rescaled futures: Mau Mau and the Egyptian Revolution.

In 1952, the government declared a state of emergency in response to what government officials first referred to as Mau Mau. Various described as an anti-colonial struggle, a civil war, a class struggle that pit young, marginalized Kikuyu men and women fighting to achieve "self-mastery" against an older generation of wealthy men who had forgotten their obligations to social juniors, Mau Mau was a movement of moral and material reform (see Chapters 2 and 5).⁸² Men and women fighting government forces and "loyalists" from their strongholds in the forests of Central Kenya and the Rift Valley firmly rooted their critiques within a Kikuyu epistemology of "civic virtue." While the language of Mau Mau was Kikuyu, though, the government feared that the movement could be rescaled, transcending ethnic boundaries as it spread to other ethnolinguistic communities.⁸³

In the same year, the Egyptian Free Officers, staged a coup, ushering Egypt into a period of wholesale transformation. Soon thereafter, Egypt began beaming vernacular-language radio programs to the region. Taken together, these events seemed to press in against the boundaries of the Kenya colony, concurrently threatening to make Kenya's borders irrelevant. The integrity of the political unit itself appeared, to many, to be at stake. These events seemed to demand the

⁸¹ Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁸² John Lonsdale, "The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty, and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought," in *Unhappy Valley, Vol. II*. John Lonsdale and Bruce Berman, 315-468 (Ohio University Press, 1992).

⁸³ In the Chapter that follows, I address how the government mobilized African knowledge workers, and vernacular notions of individual progress, or *wiathi* (self mastery), as it sought to use radio as a tool in the fight against Mau Mau. But in this section I pursue a different tack. By considering the 1950s through the lens of the contested politics of broadcasting, I argued, we can situate Mau Mau as but one project that sought to redraw the boundaries of belonging with which the colonial state had to contend in these years. To this end, in the following I bracket Mau Mau (and Central Kenya more generally) to focus on other spaces where projects of competitive scale-making were in the offing: specifically, Kenya's Swahili Coast.

mobilization of a radio network not as an infrastructure of expansion, but as an infrastructure of containment; a new network offering the means of constraining the imaginaries of Kenyan communities. These twin contexts gave communities a point of leverage when they demanded that government initiate vernacular-language programming in their mother tongues. Indeed, if in the early 1950s the state had hoped to use an expanded broadcasting network as a technopolitical infrastructure capable of enacting the colony with Kiswahili as the language of “intermediacy,” communities’ demands reformatted the technopolitics of broadcasting as they argued that their linguistic particularities should guide the siting of new transmitting towers and shape decisions surrounding programming. What would emerge was a technopolitical network geared towards forwarding parochial interests, to be sure, but it was being driven from below.

In Mombasa, anxieties about the emergence and fortification of extraterritorial networks were rife in these years. In the early 1950s, the Mombasa District Annual Report noted that the “direction” of the “Arab community...is becoming established on an East African rather than on a territorial basis.”⁸⁴ Institutional and political connections were being drawn between Zanzibar and Mombasa, with the “East African Arab Congress” organizing meetings in Zanzibar in 1953.⁸⁵ While “Arabs” on the Coast were not, themselves, internally homogenous, there being a “serious rift in the Arab community,” many sought closer relations with Zanzibar and argued with increasing urgency for the sovereignty of the Sultan over the Coastal region.⁸⁶

But years of infrastructural neglect ensured that regaining control over people’s informational worlds would prove to be no easy task. With the collapse of plans for a regional broadcasting network following the war, the administration had not simply halted its upkeep of its broadcasts, but had actively scaled back broadcasting, with broadcasts to Kenyan Africans, using C&W transmitters, trebling around 9 hours per week. By 1951 broadcasts directed to Africans were limited to Kiswahili and Kikuyu broadcasts alone, with the latter receiving a mere 30 minutes per week—this, in part, based on expectations that first Swahili, and then English would come to supersede vernaculars as the language of communications in the Kenya colony.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ “Mombasa District Annual Report, 1951-59,” CQ1/19/29 or DC/MSA/1/6

⁸⁵ “Mombasa District Annual Report, 1951-59,” CQ1/19/29 or DC/MSA/1/6

⁸⁶ “Mombasa District Annual Report, 1953,” PC/COAST/2/1; Brennan, “Lowering the Sultan’s Flag: Sovereignty and Decolonization in Coastal Kenya,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (2008): 840.

⁸⁷ “Report on the Use of Vernaculars in Broadcasting with Special Reference to Kikamba.” 16 September, 1953, AHC/10/68; To Sir Geoffrey Northcote from GGS Hutchison, 20 August, 1945, AHC/10/68; To the Secretary of State for the Colonies from the Governor’s Deputy. “CONFIDENTIAL” 25 August, 1950. KENYA: Broadcasting

A decline in programming was matched by government directives to actively dismantle the network that had been in operation during the war. To the consternation of many in the western part of the colony, administrators and inhabitants alike, in 1950 Nairobi opted to remove government sets from the Welfare Centers dotting Nyanza's landscape.⁸⁸ By the end of the year, the 30 receivers that had been dedicated to Africans had been withdrawn, supposedly leaving all remaining sets in the hands of South Asians and white settlers.⁸⁹ For many, the rationale behind this decision was inscrutable. 1948 returns showed that Africans in increasing numbers were listening in at "Welfare Centres, Information Rooms, and Schools," leading one administrator to remark on the successful work that had been done to "popularize vernacular broadcast programmes."⁹⁰ And yet, by the end of the year vernacular language broadcasting had been jettisoned.⁹¹ Listeners and local administrators were incensed. Broadcasting to the Coast received somewhat more airtime. Particularly following the General Strike of 1947, which saw the launch of Sauti ya Mombasa, to be renamed, Sauti ya Mvita, or "Voice of the Coast," a Swahili-language program operating in a coastal variant, Ki-Mvita.⁹²

In 1948, the government expanded programming on the Coast from a mere 15 minutes to 40 minutes, and "audiences had increased very considerably."⁹³ By many accounts, Sauti ya Mvita was popular. But the state's fears were only momentarily assuaged by this rise in

Development, Provision of Studios and Communal Listening Facilities, Grant of 27,130." CO/875/64/3
 "Broadcasting, Kenya." Confirm ABS exists in 1951.

⁸⁸ K.J.A. Hunt, District Commissioner, Central Nyanza to the District Commissioners, North Nyanza, Kakamega, South Nyanza, Kisii, Kericho. "Wireless Sers" 18 December, 1950. DC/KSM/1/28/54

⁸⁹ D.A. Shirreff, DC, Central Nyanza to the PC, Nyanza Province, 1952. "Provision of Wireless Sets for Africans." DC/KSM/1/28/54; The Luo were not the only group affected by this change in policy. By 1949, broadcasts in Kisii and Nandi were discontinued: "The reason for the cessation of these programmes being that listener attendance figures tended to show that their expense was not justified." "Extract from Report on Information Service Kenya, 1949" CO 875/64/3. It was C.H. Williams, PC, Nyanza Province, to the CNC who wrote that the remaining sets were in hands of Asians and Europeans in the region. C.H. Williams, PC, Nyanza Province, to the CNC. "Wireless Sets – Nyanza Province." 28 October, 1952. DC/KSM/1/28/54.

⁹⁰ From R.M. Woodford [it looks to read] to the District Commissioners, African Schhols, Municipal African Affairs Officers, All Information Rooms "Outside Speakers for Vernacular Broadcasts During 1949," 13 January, 1949. DC/KSM/1/28/54.

⁹¹ K.J.A. Hunt, District Commissioner, Central Nyanza to the District Commissioners, North Nyanza, Kakamega, South Nyanza, Kisii, Kericho. "Wireless Sers" 18 December, 1950. DC/KSM/1/28/54; "Report on the Use of Vernaculars in Broadcasting with Special Reference to Kikamba." 16 September, 1953, AHC/10/68.

⁹² It seems that the administration amped up its informational work on the Coast in general following the 1947 strike. CQ/10/9 – Provincial Administration – Mombasa, Internal Security Scheme; "Extract from Report on Information Service Kenya, 1949." CO 875/64/3.; "Record of a Meeting Held in the Secretariat on 3rd December, 1954 at 2.30 p.m.," AHC/10/66; Carla Heath Wilson, "Broadcasting in Kenya Policy and Politics, 1928-1984," Dissertation. (Urbana, Illinois, 1986), 103.

listenership. Extending control over inland communities in places like Nyanza would come to appear, in the main, to be beset by the problem of too few shortwaves. On the Coast, the problem was the inverse. These communities were subject to altogether too many signals. And here, the Egyptian Revolution was at the fore of administrators' minds.

On July 23, 1952, the Egyptian Free Officers staged a coup that led to the ouster of King Farouk, who was viewed by many as being a puppet of the British, and an ineffectual ruler besides. From the outset, Gamal Abdel Nasser, coup leader who would become president in 1956, offered a vision of the future that was decidedly unbounded. As he wrote in the *Philosophy of the Revolution*:

We should first of all agree upon one thing before we proceed further and that is to define the boundaries of place as far as we are concerned...If I were told that our place is limited by the political boundaries of our country I...do not agree...the era of isolation is now gone. Gone also are the days when barbed wires marked the frontiers separating and isolating countries, and every country must look beyond its frontiers to find out [from] where the currents that affected it spring.⁹³

For Nasser, Egypt was uniquely placed to foment these border-transcending attachments, situated as it was at the crossroads linking Africa to the Middle East. What was required was an infrastructure of connection, one that enabled the materialization of this "united struggle."⁹⁴ Nasser imagined radio broadcasting as being just such an infrastructure. As Radio Cairo proclaimed, broadcasts directed to the Swahili Coast aimed to use the airwaves to link "the fighting people of Africa with the Arab peoples who are also fighting for freedom, peace and prosperity."⁹⁵

To this end, in 1953, Nasser launched "Voice of the Arabs" or "Saut el Arab." This Arabic-language broadcast was beamed on shortwave, its messages traveling over the airwaves and finding a home at nodal sites across continents. As the *New York Times* anxiously reported: it could be "heard and understood by the restive peoples from Algeria to Uganda and from Iraq

⁹³ Gamal Abdel Nasser, *Philosophy of the Revolution*, (Smith, Keynes & Marshall, 1959), 60.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹⁵ Colin Legum, "Cairo Bid to Lead African Nationalists," *The Observer*, November 27, 1955, p. 4.

to the remote sheikhdoms at the southern tip of Arabia.”⁹⁶ These programs broadcast a message that imagined a scale of political affinity that transcended the boundaries of the territory. These messages readily reached the Swahili Coast, and immediately people were listening in.⁹⁷ Nasser hoped to use radio broadcasting as a means of scaling up and extending his political project; generating attachments between people and Radio Cairo’s network seemed to offer the revolutionary government an infrastructure of anti-imperial revolution.

The content of these broadcasts was diverse, ranging from critiques of American neo-imperialism, to support for Mau Mau, to condemnations of the apartheid state in South Africa.⁹⁸ Transcripts of the speeches of African nationalists, such as Kwame Nkrumah, were put up over the airwaves.⁹⁹ A new lexicon of critique was disseminated as listeners were referred to, often by Nasser himself, as “my brothers.” Broadcasts spoke of a united future as seemingly discrete struggles were linked. Out of this would emerge a “new African personality” primed to enact an emergent concept: “African unity.”¹⁰⁰ This was a scalar move designed to secure a new, non-territorialized vision of connection, one that did not turn on flattening the particularities of listeners, but worked to suture people’s heterogeneous experiences together and put them to the project of anti-imperial struggle. In geographic terms, this vision oriented people towards the north. In ideological terms, this vision oriented people towards an independent future, though not

⁹⁶ Osgood Carruthers, “‘Voice of Arabs’ Stirs Mideast: Broadcasts Are Now Most Potent Propaganda Aimed at West and the U.S. Cairo Relationship Against METO Request from Jordan Links Undefined Arab Radio.” *New York Times*, Jan 15 1956 E5.

⁹⁷ James R. Brennan, “Radio Cairo and the Decolonization of East Africa, 1953-1964,” in *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives*, ed. Christopher J. Lee. 173-195 (Ohio University Press, 2010).

⁹⁸ “Daily Report on the Programmes of Cairo Radio Monitored by Special Branch, Coast Province, Kenya.” 5 April, 1958; “Daily Report on the Programmes of Radio Cairo Monitored by Special Branch, Coast Province, Kenya. Talk: Colonialism and Imperialism in Somaliland i.e. British Somaliland, French Somaliland, Ethiopian Somaliland and N.F.P.” “Daily Report on the Programmes of Radio Cairo Monitored by Special Branch, Coast Province, Kenya. Talk: Somaliland Demand for Freedom & Unity,” 13, September, 1958; “Daily Report on the Programmes of Cairo Radio Monitored by Special Branch, Coast Province, Kenya. Talk: A Brief History of Slave Trade in Africa.” BB/1/204.

⁹⁹ Kamil Mukalah of the Islamia [sic] Congress, “Africa Awake,” “Daily Report on the Programmes of Cairo Radio Monitored By Special Brance, Coast Province, Kenya,” 24 August 1958, KNA BB/1/204.

¹⁰⁰ Kamil Mukalah of the Islamia [sic] Congress, “Africa Awake,” “Daily Report on the Programmes of Cairo Radio Monitored By Special Brance, Coast Province, Kenya,” 24 August 1958, KNA BB/1/204. This sentiment appears to have been widespread. As one broadcast to Somali listeners pleaded: “stop quarrelling and cursing each other. Instead be one hand and one voice and fight against imperialism, occupation and supporters of imperialism.” “Daily Repot on the Programmes of Cairo Radio Monitored by Special Branch, Coast Province, Kenya,” 24 August 1958 KNA BB/1/204.

one necessarily framed by the borders of the colonial states, which people thought of with ambivalence when they considered the parameters of home.

As new audiences tuned in, anxieties among administrators heightened. Reporting on a 1954 trip to the Coast, then Governor of Kenya Evelyn Baring gave a lengthy description of the state of broadcasting in the region. “The broadcasts which have been made [in Kenya] are widely listened to and by all accounts are a great success in Mombasa. But at present in all the North Coast and in most of the South Coast it is impossible to pick them up.”¹⁰¹ It was estimated that on average 20,000 people were listening in, no paltry amount, but it was estimated that there were a prospective 100,000 listeners. The 80,000 being missed could potentially be brought into the listening fold if only the signal were stronger.¹⁰² And these material constraints had dire political ramifications. This technical lumpiness had created space for other deeply troubling forms of listening as broadcasts emanating from “both New Delhi and Cairo... [were] easily heard.”¹⁰³



Figure 2 African Affairs Department, Annual Report, 1952.

¹⁰¹ To the Chief Secretary from the Governor, N.D. KNA AHC/10/66

¹⁰² To the Administrative Secretary from The Provincial Commissioner, Coast Province, 28 March 1955. KNA AHC/10/66

¹⁰³ To the Chief Secretary from the Governor, N.D. KNA AHC/10/66

Here, the Governor overstated the popularity of Nairobi-based programming on the Coast. And the limited impact of Nairobi's broadcasts was not unique to the 1950s. The quality of reception on the Coast—both in terms of medium and message—had always been problematic. In the 1940s, despite the installation of loudspeakers for communal listening in Mombasa's markets, it was reported that Sauti ya Serikali was "hard to hear."¹⁰⁴ Indeed, as elsewhere, when administrators debated prospective solutions to what they banally referred to as the "problem" on the Coast, they were forced to confront the limited reach of Nairobi's incomplete network. In 1948, it was noted that the "broadcasts from Nairobi are transmitted on two low power transmitters, one on the medium wave length, giving a regional service within 10 miles of Nairobi, and the other on the short waves, giving fairly adequate coverage in most parts of the Colony." But, the report continued, "reception from Nairobi is poor in Nyanza Province and the Coastal districts."¹⁰⁵

The limited reach of these transmissions was not the only problem. From the outset, information experts had struggled to develop messages for broadcast that would appeal to Muslim communities living on the Coast. And often, they failed. People on the Coast argued that BBC's programming was "too classical and high brow." The music was also not liked, alienating would-be listeners who would have preferred to hear broadcasts of readings of the Koran.¹⁰⁶ Criticisms of both the BBC's Arabic and Nairobi's Swahili-language programming persisted through the 1950s.¹⁰⁷ In 1954, "Arab" women living on the Coast complained about the broadcasts directed at them, arguing that "such broadcast talks conflict[ed] with their customs."¹⁰⁸

From the earliest days of broadcasting, observers had warned that the administration would need to be attentive to the proclivities of listening communities. This was a key component, "men on the spot" had argued in the 1940s, of "tropicalising" the technology of radio broadcasting. Indeed, on the heels of the first experimental broadcasts in Kikuyu, one S. le

¹⁰⁴ Municipal Board of Mombasa: Annual Report of the African Affairs Department, 1948, UY/13/11

¹⁰⁵ G.G.S. Hutchinson, "Broadcasting in the Colonies," 31 August, 1948, KNA HAKI/13/276 or CS/2/8/121 – Information and Propaganda

¹⁰⁶ "Notes on Mr. Hutchinson's Visit to the Coast," June 1942, Mombasa. KNA HAKI/13/128

¹⁰⁷ "Kenya Intelligence Committee: Appreciation of the Arab Situation at the Coast, October 1956, CO/822/804/2 as cited in James R Brennan, "Radio Cairo and the Decolonization of East Africa, 1953-1964," in *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives*, ed. Christopher J. Lee. 173-195 (Ohio University Press, 2010).176.

¹⁰⁸ "Mombasa District Annual Report, 1954," KNA PC/COAST/2/1/90.

Mesurier Lavers wrote to the Director of Civil Intelligence. He argued for the “the psychological value of” vernacular broadcasts, which allowed communities to feel they had their “own broadcast.” This value was derived from the importance people attributed to having their linguistic and cultural uniqueness realized, of seeing “something being done for them specifically by the Government of the colony.”¹⁰⁹ The government had paid no heed. Other broadcasting networks, as we shall see, were more attentive.

If the Governor overestimated the popularity of government broadcasts, it seems he underestimated the popularity of those coming from Cairo. Other observers offered a corrective. Not only were the broadcasts emanating from transmitters sited in various elsewhere “easily heard,” but people on the Coast were “avidly” seeking them out as they used their shortwave receivers to tune in to Saut el Arab, with a smaller number listening in to Arabic broadcasts from Omdurman and All India Radio.¹¹⁰

The infrastructural weakness of the Kenya Information Office, in tandem with a lack of capital, required a makeshift solution. On the Coast, this took the form of Sauti ya Mvita. The problems of broadcasting on the Coast, both in terms of the limited reach of transmissions from the Nairobi station and the historical inability of British Information Officers to generate programming that appealed to Coastal communities, ensured that this station was largely autonomous, run by “volunteers” who were given a free hand in developing programming, this on the agreement that broadcasters would not introduce “politics” over the airwaves.¹¹¹ These conditions ensured that the directions this station took were largely guided by prerogatives of the African information workers that peopled its one shabby office, which was overseen by the Municipal African Affairs Officer.

These knowledge workers were largely pursuing their own vocations when they decided to devote their time and energies to Sauti ya Mvita. As Sheikh Hyder Kindy, a Swahili man born on the Coast, and a career civil servant and Information Officer recalled: “Volunteers were called for and a few enthusiastic Muslims came forward to offer their services.”¹¹² Their aspirations in

¹⁰⁹ S. le Mesurier Lavers, Saint Andrews School, Turi, to The Director of Civil Intelligence, 12 November 1939, AE/34/62

¹¹⁰ “Strengthening of Information Services in Coast and Nyanza Provinces,” 22 August 1955, KNA AHC/18/70 – “Nyanza and Coast Province Broadcasting”

¹¹¹ Hydar Kindy, *Life and Politics in Mombasa*, (Nairobi: East Africa Broadcasting House, 1972), 164.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

this were decidedly “intermediate.” As Kindy recalled: Those that volunteered felt “that this would give them an opportunity to propagate their religion through this powerful medium.”⁵⁷⁴ Administrators had hoped to use Kiswahili as the language of intermediacy, but a secular Kiswahili, not one bisected by religious affiliations. Suffice it to say that the incomplete networking of the state not only created space for other forms of listening, but also required that it mobilize the work of African knowledge workers and experts, “volunteers” who used their position within this lumpy network to pursue their own projects of scale-making.

The labor of these men was eclectic. Kindy recalled the team extracting news bulletins “from the *Mombasa Times*” from whence they were translated into Kiswahili, and taping music from the BBC and, later, Cairo.¹¹³ While it was to be the voice of the Coast, *Sauti ya Mvita* clearly serviced a rather more constrained audience. The initial half hour program was divided into an “opening with the Zanzibar National Anthem, a Koran reading of about five minutes and then a news bulletin, after which there would be some music—mostly Arabic and Swahili songs.”¹¹⁴ To capture both Swahili and Arabic-speaking Muslim populations, *Sauti ya Mvita* began broadcasting in both languages and administrators were pleased with the results, arguing it was “proving increasingly effective in diverting attention from Arabic broadcasts from Cairo and other foreign stations.”¹¹⁵

But the politics of the Coast were complicated in these years. As Kindy recalled, while his aspiration had been to use *Sauti ya Mvita* to “propagate” Islam in Eastern Africa, he was in an awkward position, rejected by Africans for being ‘too Muslim,’ and by Arabs for being ‘too African.’¹¹⁶ The stakes of these politics would heighten by the late 1950s, when Muslims on the Coast began calling for *Mwambao*, or Coastal autonomy, as against the threat of “up country Africans.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, if Kiswahili was imagined to be the language of an intermediate scale framed by the borders of the colony, at the scale of the Coast, as we shall see, Kiswahili mapped onto a kind of identity politics framed against a different set of geographic and religious coordinates, politicizing Kiswahili broadcasting in critical ways.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 164-165.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹¹⁵ “Mombasa District Annual Report, 1953,” KNA PC/COAST/2/1/84 –

¹¹⁶ Kindy, *Life and Politics in Mombasa*,

¹¹⁷ “Mombasa District Annual Report, 1957,” KNA PC/COAST/2/1/102

And while *Sauti ya Mvita* had gained popularity in these years, largely due to the African knowledge workers attached to the station, a dearth in funding ensured that the technics remained a problem. As Kindy recalled:

There was no doubt that *Sauti ya Mvita* programmes were extremely popular wherever they were heard throughout the province. It was therefore unfortunate that the transmitters then placed at our disposal by Cable & Wireless Ltd. had insufficient power to permit our broadcasts being heard over a wider area of the Coast.¹¹⁸

The stakes of these limitations were high. In 1955, and despite efforts to improve the strength of the transmitting station, Mombasa's signal was routinely swamped by other, and often hostile, stations. The competitive nature of this radio sphere was only to increase in the coming years. These conditions, however, created an unexpected opening for people to make claims for their infrastructural inclusion on the state.

Indeed, the technopolitical anxieties of the state were not lost on leaders on the Coast. Powerful Sheiks and Liwalis actively leveraged administrative fears when they argued that if Nairobi wanted to regain control over people's imagined futures, they would need to cater to Arabic-speaking populations. To do so, the state would need to install a more powerful transmitter in Mombasa.¹¹⁹ This demand for infrastructural inclusion would ultimately be realized in 1957, when a transmitter was finally installed at the Coast. But here the state again found itself playing catch-up.

By 1954, Radio Cairo had expanded its programming, launching *Sauti ya Cairo*, a Kiswahili-language broadcast designed to reach Kiswahili speakers in Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda, and the Belgian Congo.¹²⁰ These programs responded to the demands of Muslim listeners, and opened with recitations from the Koran. Initially thirty minutes long, daily news, political commentary, and cultural programs followed readings from the Koran. By 1955, the program was forty-five minutes in length, which was increased to an hour in 1958 and, finally,

¹¹⁸ Kindy, *Life and Politics in Mombasa*, 173.

¹¹⁹ Governor to Chief Secretary, 22 November 1954, KNA AHC/10/66

¹²⁰ Osgood Caruthers, "Cairo Broadcasts Irk London, Paris: Inflammatory Talks to Africa Incite Natives to Revolt against 'Imperialists,'" *New York Times*, 1 March 1956, P. 2.

an hour and a half by 1961.¹²¹ By 1957, the Voice of Free Africa, by many accounts the most virulent in its critiques, joined the queue.¹²²

Administrators and foreign observers were alarmed at the vitriol of the messages crossing into British airspace. As *The New York Times* wrote: “Cairo Radio, burdening all wave-lengths from dawn until after midnight in almost every language of the area, wheedles and cajoles, browbeats and foments the restive and unhappy peoples in every corner of the area.”¹²³ Even those not actively listening to the broadcasts were subject to their influence, as the “effect of the radio’s claims and reports...were spread rapidly and elaborated through coffee-house gossip.”¹²⁴ Radio Cairo’s strategy did not turn on flattening the particularities of colonized persons’ struggles. Instead, its broadcasts invited listeners to situate their grievances against a larger frame of reference by holding the particularities of their experiences in the same analytic frame of those of colonized communities located further afield. The goal, in other words, was to tether together nodes of discontent, and to invite listeners to see these nodes as not distinct, but as a function of the self-same system. Of this, administrators were well aware. “Considerations in determining action [regarding the future of broadcasting and in light of Radio Cairo’s programs] are the political atmosphere [sic] in the Sudan, Somalia, Zanzibar and Egypt...[there is a] need to counteract this influence as soon as possible,” wrote the Chief Secretary in 1955.¹²⁵

Cordoning off nodes of discontent within the British empire was a core concern of the British in these years.¹²⁶ It was a strategy that, they hoped, could scale, operating with the same logic within the space of the Kenya colony as it would across the Empire. Radio Cairo threatened this strategy as listeners were united not necessarily by the simultaneity of their listening, nor by the homogeneity of the programming, nor by their geographic contiguity, but by programming that both addressed the particularities of their struggles and particularity of the struggles of those located across the colonial world. The message of unity in difference was what appeared most threatening to colonial powers.

¹²¹ Brennan, “Radio Cairo,” 177.

¹²² James Brennan notes that colonial officials were beset by fears that, as the broadcast claimed, this program was being broadcast from Kenya’s White Highlands. Brennan, “Radio Cairo,” 178.

¹²³ Osgood Caruthers, Special to the NYT “Cairo Radio Stirs Restive Peoples: Air Barrage Covers a Broad Area,” *The New York Times*, July 6, 1958. E5.

¹²⁴ Seaghan Maynes, “British Jam Cairo Radio to Halt Rumors” *Daily Boston Globe*, November 17, 1956. P. 2.

¹²⁵ Notes of Chief Secretary, signed Ag. A.S. N.D. AHC/10/66; CO 1036/22

¹²⁶ See Bruce Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination*, (Ohio University Press, 1999).

The Suez Crisis raised the stakes within this competitive radio sphere. And the British, pursuant of informational isolation, deployed brute force, bombing Radio Cairo's transmitters within days of their invasion of Egypt.¹²⁷ Initially, this appeared to have "worked." But within a few days "repairs" had evidently been made, and the signal was "heard again at the Coast." People resumed listening in.¹²⁸ Efforts to "lure" listeners away from Radio Cairo "and its various attractions" had 'failed.'¹²⁹

Evidently, it was true, the airwaves knew "no frontiers," and radio was indeed capable of inviting people to participate in scalar imaginaries that were both larger and smaller than the boundaries of the colony.¹³⁰ And this was precisely the fear. Indeed, administrators in this period were anxious that a form of unity based on a shared commitment to Islam could scale up, leading to the formation of broad-based Coastal sentiment as listeners fortified attachments among their struggles, making it "politically very important that... [Kenyan programs] reach Moslems throughout the Coast area."¹³¹ While broadcasts from Nairobi were audible in Mombasa, they could not be heard beyond a few miles of the Island. This was not, evidently, a problem for shortwave broadcasts emanating from Delhi and Cairo.

The constellation of issues brought together by Radio Cairo's broadcasts mirrored its technics, which were as expansive as they were nodal. The strength of its signals, broadcast from at least 11 shortwave transmitters in the Nile delta area by 1958,¹³² in tandem with the "truly remarkable increase" in shortwave receivers amongst African communities, lent Radio Cairo an aura of invincibility.¹³³ And Nasser was not wrong in attesting to the unique geographic position Egypt held in fomenting new attachments in the region. As noted by the *New York Times*, Radio

¹²⁷ Director of Information, "Strengthening of Information Services in Coast and Nyanza Provinces," KNA AHC/10/66; G.W. Jamieson for the Assistant Chief Secretary, "Broadcasting from Mombasa," 16/11/1956, KNA AHC/10/66; See also Brennan, "Radio Cairo," 176.

¹²⁸ G.W. Jamieson for the Assistant Chief Secretary, "Broadcasting from Mombasa," 16/11/1956, KNA AHC/10/66

¹²⁹ G.W. Jamieson for the Assistant Chief Secretary, "Broadcasting from Mombasa," 16/11/1956, KNA AHC/10/66

¹³⁰ E. Hilton Young, "Report of the Commission on Closer Union of the Dependencies in Eastern and Central Africa," (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1929), 130-131.

¹³¹ Governor to the Chief Secretary, N.D. KNA AHC/10/66.

¹³² "The Activities of Cairo Radio and Their Impact on Territories to Which They Are Directed," "Appendix" CO 1035/22, claimed there were 14 transmitters: 3 high power medium wave, 6 low power medium wave. And 5 high power short wave. See also Osgood Caruthers, Special to the NYT "Cairo Radio Stirs Restive Peoples: Air Barrage Covers a Broad Area," *The New York Times*, July 6, 1958. E5.

¹³³ Department of Information to Secretariat "African Broadcasts," 15 July 1954, KNA AHC/10/68

Cairo had “become the most far-reaching voice to be heard between Longitude 20 and Longitude 60 East and from Latitude 40 North to below the Equator.”¹³⁴

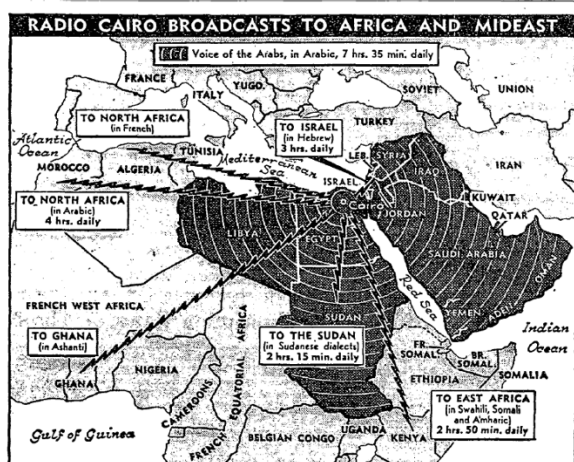


Figure 3 Osgood Caruthers, *Radio Cairo Stirs Restive Peoples: Air Barrage Covers Broad Area*, *The New York Times*, July 6, 1958. E5.

By 1958 Radio Cairo was broadcasting in over 20 languages, including Somali and Amharic.¹³⁵ But Radio Cairo’s efforts to firmly tether its programming to the lives of prospective audiences were not limited to considerations of language. Radio Cairo expended a good deal of effort generating programming that would come across as firmly embedded in the lives and concerns of the communities listening in on their shortwave receivers. While hyperbolic, a sense of the labor of this knowledge work was offered by Ray Vicker of the *Wall Street Journal*:

Each program is preceded by long studies. Included are studies of the customs of each people to whom a broadcast will be beamed. Attention is paid to the time they sleep and awake, the time they start and end work and the average time-distance between work and home. This helps decide the time the program will be beamed. Other studies delve into the political position of the country, its economy, the type of government and major problems occupying the attention of the people...Each program is presented by a native of the country to which the message is beamed, assuring that all idiom and methods of presentation will be authentic to listeners.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Osgood Caruthers, Special to the NYT “Cairo Radio Stirs Restive Peoples: Air Barrage Covers a Broad Area,” *The New York Times*, July 6, 1958. E5.

¹³⁵ Ray Vicker, “Cairo Radio: It Promotes Nasserism With Lies, Hate, and Obscenity,” *Wall Street Journal*, Aug 14, 1958, p. 6.

¹³⁶ Ray Vicker, “Cairo Radio: It Promotes Nasserism With Lies, Hate, and Obscenity.” *Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 1958. P. 6.

Having mobilized African knowledge workers from across the communities it addressed, Radio Cairo worked to embed its programming in the “warp and woof” of everyday life.¹³⁷ In a strange twist of irony, one perhaps not recognized by information workers in the 1950s, this was precisely the kind of ethnographic knowledge, the kind of embeddedness, that “men on the spot” had argued for in the 1940s, when they debated how best to generate attachments between African communities and government-run, vernacular-language broadcasting (see Chapter 3).

While this was a politics of connection that recognized popular desire for linguistic and cultural differentiation, the central message was clear. As Osgood Caruthers of the *New York Times* wrote in 1958, while Radio Cairo had:

many voices...depending on local situations and their relation to Nasser's policies, one theme never varies...That is that the foreigners – ‘white dogs,’ imperialists, bloodsuckers and colonialist oppressors...who have dominated most of the area for more than a century, must either leave voluntarily or be driven out.¹³⁸

The technological reach of these stations, for many administrators, seemed both to proceed and to be generative of newly thinkable political futures; the reach of the medium portending the message.

This is not to say that audiences were made up of single-minded listeners. Indeed, people were savvy in their listening habits, preferring to piece together information provided by myriad different media houses, rather than accept without question the messages of a given one. As noted by one administrator in 1956 following a trip to the Coast, where he visited “various coffee houses,” people were listening to a “tremendous number of programmes from the Arab world...including the BBC.”¹³⁹ This was not, in other words, passive listening. And these were not passive listeners. Theirs was an open, though discriminating, informational world.

While administrators framed the problem of Radio Cairo as being at once political *and* technological, the only acceptable potential solutions were framed in explicitly technopolitical terms. What was needed was the mobilization of new technological networks, networks capable

¹³⁷ M.F. Hill, Information Officer, “Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” KNA HAKI/13/276; See also CO 875/2/14

¹³⁸ Osgood Caruthers, Special to the NYT “Cairo Radio Stirs Restive Peoples: Air Barrage Covers a Broad Area,” *The New York Times*, July 6, 1958. E5.

¹³⁹ KNA AHC/10/66

of materially foreclosing the political languages and potential futures thinkable to listeners. “You are well aware,” wrote the Provincial Commissioner, “of the reasons for improving the local broadcasting along the Coast...Increasing numbers are listening to Radio Cairo and Radio India... a substantial improvement to this service [is]...urgently necessary for political reasons.”¹⁴⁰ Initially, the Government proposed a technopolitics of time, arguing that they need only increase the hours being broadcast over C&W’s transmitters “from a total of 47 hours a week to more than 80 hours.”¹⁴¹ But this ambition was beset by problems. Not only were airwaves crowded, but so too was the clock.

Historically, Kenya’s Swahili broadcasts to the Coast ended at 7:30 p.m.¹⁴² Egypt, wise to the African Broadcasting Services’ schedule, ran programs that began at 7 p.m., continuing until 9 p.m.¹⁴³ Extending the broadcasts to 9 p.m., one administrator noted, was essential, and had been “made doubly urgent by the opening up of Swahili broadcasts from Saut el Arab, the Cairo station...[which contained extremely] undesirable material.”¹⁴⁴ But even this seemingly simple fix was not feasible. And again, the Government’s relationship with Cable and Wireless remained an impediment. The company, responding to Government requests to extend broadcasting times, indicated that it was unable to lease the government its equipment in the evening hours. These transmitters, the company explained, were occupied at night when they were used to transmit to Australia. This was a commercial agreement, and it was protected under contract.¹⁴⁵

The government would have to strike out on its own in technological terms if it was to succeed in political terms. And, as the administration was soon to learn, simply extending the hours of broadcast would not suffice. It was contending with other, more sophisticated, technical networks, which transmitted “on a wave length so close to that used by ourselves at the Coast

¹⁴⁰ Provincial Commissioner, Coast Province to the Administrative Secretary, 28 March 1955, KNA AHC/10/66

¹⁴¹ “Extension Made in Radio Time,” *East African Standard*, 15 November 1954, KNA AHC/10/68.

¹⁴² Michael Blundell, “African Broadcasting,” 15 July 1954, KNA AHC/10/68; “Memorandum – Request for Funds to Purchase Two Transmitters,” KNA AHC/10/68.

¹⁴³ From Department of Information to Secretariat “African Broadcasts” July 15, 1954. AHC/10/68
According to reporters, Radio Cairo had assembled a vast network of knowledge workers as it prepared its broadcasts for international consumption. See Ray Vicker, “Cairo Radio: It Promotes Nasserism With Lites, Hate, and Obscenity.” *Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 1958. P. 6; See also CO 1035/22.

¹⁴⁴ KNA AHC/10/68 or 66

¹⁴⁵ J.H. Reiss, Director of Information to Secretariat “African Broadcasts,” 15 July 1954, KNA AHC/10/68

that...[our] transmissions are frequently swamped.”¹⁴⁶ Not only did the signals from Egypt appear to be more “local” due to the clarity of their reception, of course, but the messages themselves seemed to be more firmly embedded in the local milieu to which they were directed. By all accounts an expanded material network was the only solution to the expansion in the imaginative scale of social and political futures Radio Cairo offered to audiences on the Coast. What was needed was a new transmitter of containment, one that would broadcast on a medium wavelength, receiving signals parallel to, but distinct from, the shortwaves coming from Cairo. In moving from discussions of expanding broadcasting time to discussions of expanding the infrastructural reach of the state’s broadcasting network, the colonial administration’s strategy shifted from a technopolitics of time to a technopolitics of space.

By 1955, Kenyan administrators contended that “the need for a Regional Transmitter at Mombasa...[was] almost an Emergency matter.”¹⁴⁷ But the labor and expertise required to get the new station up and running was lengthy, beset as it was by the problem of finding an appropriate site for the new transmitter, which required determining not only the quality of the soil, but reckoning with concerns over atmospheric “noise.” The staccato rhythm of infrastructural expansion was out of step with the temporality within which new relations of affinity were being forged. As one frustrated administrator wrote: “This is an extremely urgent matter, unfortunately it is also a highly technical one. We shall have to be very careful to avoid being bogged down in a morass of megacycles and kilowatts.”¹⁴⁸

Vernacular Broadcasting and the Politics of Infrastructural Inclusion

¹⁴⁶ Watkins Pritchford, Director of Information to the Chief Secretary. “Strengthening of Information Services in Coast & Nyanza Provinces,” 22 August, 1955, KNA AHC/10/66.

¹⁴⁷ Ag. A.S. to Chief Secretary, 1 April 1955, KNA AHC/10/66; The installation of a medium-wave transmitter in Mombasa had a number of politically expedient affordances. Not only would a mediumwave transmitter strengthen the reach of signals over the area, but it would circumvent the “problems” thrown up by the increased ownership of shortwave receivers, thereby which made it “all too easy for him to pick up the more powerful transmissions from Cairo, All India Radio and Omdurman.”¹⁴⁷ It was in this context that Emergency monies, monies presumably designed to staunch the “problem” of Mau Mau, were used to erect new transmitting sites both in Kisumu and Mombasa. J.H. Reiss, Director of Information, “A review of the functions, scope and organisation of the Kenya Department of Information,” KNA CA/16/117

¹⁴⁸ Ministry of African Affairs to Secretariat, “Egyptian Propaganda,” 25 July 1954, KNA AHC/10/68 “Information and Propaganda” Wireless Broadcasts to Africans. Nairobi.

If Radio Cairo offered listeners the possibility of generating new social and political attachments over the airwaves, domestic policies, too, encouraged people to engage in the work of consolidating and fortifying new attachments. In 1954, the colonial administration began implementing the recommendations of the Swynnerton Plan. Designed to increase agricultural outputs, the Swynnerton Plan advised that land be consolidated and tenure formalized. As old borders were redrawn, there was downward pressure on people to firmly root themselves within a logic of a territorialized ethnicized narrative of belonging.¹⁴⁹ This was matched by other transformations, most notably the 1954 Lyttleton Constitution, which created room for African and Asian participation within the government. National political parties were banned but political aspirants were invited to create parties bounded by locality. While mitigating against large-scale political mobilizations that were not bounded by ethnicity was one of the goals of the colonial government, the disproportionately low levels of African representation was bound to cause conflict.¹⁵⁰ Taken together these politics seemed to demand, as a form of protection, that people firmly tether themselves to ostensible homelands defined in ethnic and linguistic terms. The colonial state would seek to capitalize upon and direct this emergent and competitive realm of differentiation through broadcasting.

If in the late 1940s and early 1950s the administration hoped to use Kiswahili broadcasts to generate subjects of an “intermediate” scale, listeners had their own ideas about what scales of inclusion they hoped to access through the radio. In the mid-1950s one administrator reported that: “The most interesting feature of the period has been the clear indication that African listeners are no longer content with radio material which merely fills air-time. They have become increasingly critical in their selection of programmes and throughout have shown that they wish to help, by constructive suggestions, what they regard as *their own* radio station.”¹⁵¹ African listeners were, indeed, making their concerns and desires known.

In response to this renewed interest, the African Broadcasting Service (ABS) launched the “African Broadcasting Club” in 1954, and a listenership magazine called “Habari za Radio.”

¹⁴⁹ Derek Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival, A History of Dissent, c. 1935-1972*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), See especially Chapter 6, “Patriotism and Dissent in Western Kenya,” 127-251.

¹⁵⁰ David M. Anderson, “‘Yours in Struggle for Majimbo.’ Nationalism and the Party Politics of Decolonization in Kenya, 1955-64,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 40, No. 3: 549.

¹⁵¹ “Photographic, Broadcasting, Publications, Provincial Offices,” KNA HAKI/13/251 or CS/2/8/247 – Information and Propaganda, 1955-56

The Club was hierarchically structured, with “Group Leaders” being multilingual so that they could “monitor both Swahili and English programmes.”¹⁵² Full-fledged group leaders were to be marked as distinct. “Wherever possible, a small metal badge might well set off the Group Leader...and a photograph of the successful man, with his badge, will be published in HABARI ZA RADIO.”¹⁵³ Regular members, for their part, were to get “plastic badges.” Groups were to organize at the scale of the “neighborhood,” the object being to establish an “intimate feeling of belonging to and being identified with the programmes broadcast” by ABS.

In keeping with the intermediate scale that the Government hoped to cultivate, “Habari za Radio” was a predominantly Kiswahili-language monthly. Aside from information workers on the ground, the KIO used “Habari za Radio” to get a handle on listeners’ responses to government broadcasting. But it was also a space where listeners were invited to express their tastes and desires. And while there is good reason to be skeptical of this publication and what editorial oversight allowed to grace the pages of the magazine, there are equally good reasons to take this seriously as source. As Harri Englund writes, while government publications “may not furnish uplifting examples” of resistance narratives, “we must examine them as cultural and political artifacts in their own right.”¹⁵⁴ In the context of this publication, it was taken for granted that capital-P politics would not be permissible, just as politics were not permissible over the airwaves. And yet, what the administration seemed to view as the apolitical domain of language, from the perspective of listeners, was a deeply political domain of future-building.

In the letters pages, writers directed questions to the ABS staff and responded to their co-listeners. These letter-writers offered both critiques and praise of the government-directed broadcasts orchestrated in their name. Letter-writers were encouraged to see themselves as individuals involved in a collective project:

If you read the name of this page on top there, you will see "YALIYOSEMWA" Translation in English "the things they say." So, what are these things they say? And who are they? So, "they" are our readers, and the things they say are the many letters they write to us...If [you are not yet a listener and a letter-writer]...we urge you to be one of them.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² “Saucepan Radios,” DC/TAMB/3/18/4 – Saucepan Radios, 1949-57

¹⁵³ “Saucepan Radios,” DC/TAMB/3/18/4 – Saucepan Radios, 1949-57

¹⁵⁴ Harri Englund, “Anti Anti-Colonialism: Vernacular Press and Emergent Possibilities in Colonial Zambia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2015): 222.

¹⁵⁵ “YALIYOSEMWA (THE THINGS THEY SAY),” *Habari za Radio*, JUNE-JULY 1954

People would be rewarded for generating this knowledge. “Every month, in the middle section of this page, we will publish the letter that we think is THE BEST AMONGST ALL RECEIVED from our listeners. The writer of that best letter will receive a gift of ten shillings.”¹⁵⁶

This was a collective project designed to fortify and entrench a vision of radio broadcasting as a public good:

now we request you to write and tell what you think about us, if you think we are good we will be happy to hear you say that, and if you think we are bad people also you need to tell us why you think so, also we will be happy if you share your opinions on the best way to give you the news. Remember this work of RADIO, is yours, we only try to entertain you, relax you and advise you, and most importantly give you the true information, we want you to speak up, if you hear anything broadcasted by A.B.S is true, then, write short letters.¹⁵⁷

More verbose commentaries would be ignored, writers were warned. There were limits on space.¹⁵⁸

By the late 1950s, the magazine claimed to have a membership trebling around 750, a small group, but that it had a reading public of 5,000.¹⁵⁹ People actively responded to “Habari za Radio’s” solicitations for feedback, ABS claiming that it received thousands of letters per week from listeners. It had to be acknowledged, though, that the reach of the magazine, like the reach of the paltry broadcasting networks themselves, was incomplete.

Some areas of the Colony are conspicuous by a blank on the A.B.S. Club map here; we’d be glad of advice on the reasons for this. Is it that radio listening in those areas is low density? Or is HABARI ZA RADIO not reaching listeners there? Or is the trouble merely apathy?¹⁶⁰

Those that did write in, though, seemed to take seriously the claim that radio was theirs, and that it was a public service provided by the government. Over the years, the government had actively shored up this vision.

Indeed, while the Colonial Office had never been willing to subsidize “the receiving side,” leaving it to commercial manufacturers to design appropriately “tropicalised” technologies, broadcasts were brought to people in the Mobile Information Van (see Chapter 5).

¹⁵⁶ *Habari za Radio*, September 1954

¹⁵⁷ “YALIYOSEMWA (THE THINGS THEY SAY),” *Habari za Radio*, JUNE-JULY 1954

¹⁵⁸ *Habari za Radio*, October 1956.

¹⁵⁹ “Minutes of the Meeting of the Provincial Information Officers,” N.D., likely 1957, KNA AHC/8/73

¹⁶⁰ “Saucepan Radios,” KNA DC/TAMB/3/18/4 – Saucepan Radios, 1949-57

In the 1950s, African knowledge workers distributed "Saucepan Specials" to restaurants and community centers. In 1954, on the occasion of the Queen's Coronation, "loyalists" were given Saucepan receivers as gifts, which "African bodies" were to maintain; this, though, a means of making "Africans realize that broadcasting facilities are not always provided free by Government."¹⁶¹

By 1954, it was clear that an interest in radio had been achieved. "The market," administrators argued, could be left to do the rest.

In the past the Department has encouraged listening to its programmes by the provision of free listening facilities in the form of rediffusion services, public address points and the issue of sets to institutions and individuals. This policy was adopted as a measure to 'prime the pump' and build up a listening habit. With the present popularity of the programmes and the quantity of cheap wireless sets on the market which Africans are buying in large numbers, this object can be said to have been achieved. The Department will provide no further free listening.¹⁶²

People had been irritated by the contraction in the infrastructure of broadcasting in these years, which to many appeared to constitute a form of infrastructural exclusion. Technopolitics was, in these years, then, shaped less by technological intervention than by infrastructural and technological absence. Within the pages of "Habari za Radio" listeners reiterated the spirit of this critique, arguing that the government should subsidize their access to receivers.

Indeed, letter writers routinely called the government to task, asking that it provision receivers for listeners and make good on their claim that radio broadcasting was a public service. As J. M. Mwalimu wrote: "Me and my family don't have a radio, [I] am asking if ABS can lend us a radio? Or give [one to] me then I pay slowly."¹⁶³ Others tried to leverage their role as club members in working to secure receivers. Suleiman Abdullah, for example, wrote: "I am an A.B.S club member, but I don't know what to do because I don't have my own radio and my parents are poor [so] they can't get one...[I'm] asking if the A.B.S club officials would agree to buy me a radio then I shall be paying little by little every month."¹⁶⁴ The African Broadcasting Services'

¹⁶¹ PC, Rift Valley Province to Information Officer, 1953, KNA DC/TAMB/3/18/4 – Saucepan Radios, 1949-57.

¹⁶² "Photographic, Broadcasting, Publications, Provincial Offices," KNA HAKI/13/251 or CS/2/8/247 – Information and Propaganda, 1955-56.

¹⁶³ J.M. Mwalimu, "Maoni ya Wasikilizaji – Listeners Comments," September 1954.

¹⁶⁴ Suleiman Abdullah, "MSAADA WA KUNUNUA RADIO- HELP TO PURCHASE RADIO," *Habari za Radio*, February 1955.

response to these demands was tepid. It was simply no longer its responsibility to provision sets for its listeners.

The government had changed the terms upon which radio could be experienced as a public good. But it was based on this vision of the infrastructure, and the services that it proffered as “their radio,” that people made claims on the state. Nowhere was this clearer than in discussions surrounding the language of broadcast. It is clear from these letters that access to the infrastructure of broadcasting was, for these letter-writers, critical to their apprehension of whether the Colonial state was including them and their communities in “this work of radio.” And here listeners would be able to leverage their demands.

People living in Kenya’s Central Province complained that only Kikuyu speakers and Kiswahili speakers were accounted for in the programming. As Angelo Daudi of Meru wrote, “the problem arising is, our listeners don’t understand well Kiswahili and Kikuyu. So, I would like to ask if it is possible to get like 15 minutes of programming in [the] Meru language.”¹⁶⁵ The response was predictable. “In Kenya, there are 82 tribes.” Should the administration try to cater for each? “Or shall we ask everyone to learn Kiswahili and English so that we can be able to communicate together happily?” Kiswahili was to be the language of intermediacy. But here, many administrators seemed not to have understood the politics of language in light of political and administrative reforms.

Indeed, these demands were about more than simply having one’s language represented. Instead, letter writers’ concerns suggest that language had become a flashpoint in emergent discussions about the future nation-state and the place of minority communities in this prospective polity. As one Meru letter writer wrote following the introduction of a Kimeru-language program.

Mr. Murungi mixes Kimeru with Kikuyu during his broadcasts and as a result of this, everything gets mixed to such an extent that most of the listeners have lost interest in the programme. We are tired of his poor Kimeru broadcasts and especially his insistence in criticizing the handwriting of his listeners by saying that most of the letters are illegible.¹⁶⁶

This bastardized hybrid was not wanted by listeners, who demanded “clean Kimeru.” For many of these letter writers the stakes of such debates were not insignificant. By the mid-1950s, and

¹⁶⁵ Angelo Daudi, “Maoni ya Wasikilizaji – Listeners Views,” *Habari za Radio*, October 1954.

¹⁶⁶ “Letter,” *Habari za Radio*, 1959.

with independence a vague outline on the horizon, minority communities feared being swamped by majorities. For some, and in Central Province, these groups feared the domination of Kikuyu speakers. For others, and along the Coast, the question was whether the region would become an “Arab-Muslim” zone, or a Christian “African” one.

And people leveraged the fears of the colonial state in working to get it to accede to their demands. As Ole Aomo wrote:

I am a Maasai man, who lives in Narok, and I would like to say that because the Mau Mau have already entered my area, Maasai programs should be introduced for those who only know Maasai language and those who have already joined the Mau Mau so that they may be told the truth...[I] am sure this will help them.¹⁶⁷

If on the Coast, the threat of Radio Cairo offered listeners one such opportunity, in the interior Mau Mau offered another, people mobilizing the threat of the movement and its capacity to spread along the inscrutable lines of the “bush telegraph” in their bid for government recognition of their linguistic particularities.

In the 1940s demands for vernacular programming appeared to be evidence of “parochial pride,” demands to be variously addressed and ignored, but this did not appear to be the case by the mid-1950s. By this time, “parochial pride” was not something to be unraveled. Instead, it had been reformatted as a, if not the, most desirable scale of social and political identification. Vernacular programming, administrators hoped—and cultural patriots would join them in this (see below)—would shore up notions of community defined by place and language. It would be these modes of identification, not the space-scaling modes historically available to people that would take precedence. In the mid-1950s, one administrator reported that: “Nyanza Province were very keen on programmes in their vernacular languages,” and that the circumstances demanded that the “claims of Nyanza Province should receive...consideration alongside those from the Coast.”¹⁶⁸ And so, in 1953 Dholuo broadcasts were restarted for 15 minutes per day. Programs in Luhya, Kisii, Kinandi, Kikamba broadcast over communal sets followed.¹⁶⁹

By contrast to Radio Cairo’s strategy of forging connections across difference, then, the colonial state’s strategy was to deploy difference as a means of undermining emergent attachments. By 1953, these efforts were fortified as lorries arrived heavy with receiving units

¹⁶⁷ Ole Aomo, “Programs in Maasai,” *Habari za Radio*, February 1955.

¹⁶⁸ J.H. Reiss, 1954, AHC/10/66

¹⁶⁹ KNA CO 875/64/3 “Broadcasting, Kenya”

for communal listening. Discussions of creating a market for receivers were reignited, and information officers recommended that wireless sets be given to loyal chiefs to ensure that the technology became “known” and desired “in the African areas.” This, it was hoped, would lead to “increased sales to individuals.”¹⁷⁰

If “Habari za Radio” offered one platform for listeners to engage in comparative work as they measured their infrastructural inclusion as against various ‘Others,’ these issues also came in to the fore in more expressly political arenas. Despite the strategic widening of Kenya’s political sphere pushed through under the Lyttleton Constitution, African representatives were not invited to broadcast their opinions over the airwaves, and this caused no small measure of upset.¹⁷¹ As noted by Carla Wilson:

The AIS was responsible for explaining...[constitutional] reform and procedures for...[the] election to the public. However, African candidates were not permitted to make political speeches on the radio nor were the subsequently elected members permitted to make their opinions regarding government policies heard on the air even though Europeans had that privilege.¹⁷²

African representatives, Nyanza-born Tom Mboya, Member from Nairobi among them, were incensed.¹⁷³ Tellingly, Mboya argued that broadcasting was a public service, the public paying the costs of licensing fees, and so Elected Members, as members of the public, were “as much entitled as the Government to put forward...views on various aspects of Government policy and programmes.”¹⁷⁴ While Cable and Wireless had obstructed the state’s capacity to provision radio to African communities as a free “public service,” Africans being required to pay licensing fees, for Mboya this offered a point of leverage. African radio-owners had invested in the broadcasting infrastructure of the territory, whether it was privately owned or not, and so, they seemed to argue, it was partially theirs.

¹⁷⁰ Fortie E.V. Rose, [this is what it looks like] Executive Officer, African Information Services to the DC, North Nyanza, Central Nyanza, South Nyanza, Kericho, “Saucepan Radios,” 29 April, 1953. DC/KSM/1/28/54

¹⁷¹ Debate on Information Office Vote, Legislative Council Debates, Vol. 72, 12 June 1957, cols. 1276-1287. From Radio Dissertation.; AHC/10/65

¹⁷² Carla Heath Wilson, “Broadcasting in Kenya Policy and Politics, 1928-1984,” 122.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁷⁴ Kenya, Legislative Council Debates, Col. 1539. As cited in Wilson, “Broadcasting in Kenya Policy and Politics, 1928-1984,” 157.

Mboya was joined by others, such as Ronald Ngala. Born in 1922, in Gotani in Kenya's Coastal region, Ngala schooled first at Alliance High School and later at Makerere, where he received his teaching certification, thereafter becoming a teacher and later headmaster on the Coast.¹⁷⁵ In 1957, Ngala was elected to the Legislative Council as the Coast's representative. Following the promulgation of the Lyttleton Constitution, which formalized Ngala's status as a politician, the politics of the Coast amped up, making it a highly contested space and competitive forms of differentiation were the result. Swahili-Muslims and Arabs on the Coast feared being swamped by "up Country" Africans. Coastal Africans, for their part, feared domination both by Coastal Muslims and by larger African ethno-linguistic communities "upcountry," leading to what one administrator referred to as the increased "political awareness of local Africans."¹⁷⁶ Ngala, in spite of, or perhaps by virtue of, his own widely traveled itinerary, was an ethnic patriot (see Chapters 1 and 2). And like other ethnic patriots he set to work constructing a timeless history of the Giriama, *Nchi na Desturi za Wagiryama* "The Land and Tradition of the Giriama," which, importantly, he composed in Kiswahili.

Upon entry into the Legislative Council, Ngala began advocating for the particularities of Coastal African communities. In 1957, the District Annual Report noted:

March saw the first African elections to be held in this country when Mr. RG Ngala was elected as member for the Coast Constituency. Since the elections there has been a marked increase in political activity, particularly among Africans, who are treated to a weekly diet of nationalist politics at meetings held in Tononoka. Political interest reached its climax at the end of the year following the visit of the Secretary of state for the Colonies to Mombasa at the end of October. The constitutional settlement proposed by the Secretary of State aroused considerable opposition from the politically-conscious African and, as a result, other races in Mombasa have been woken out of their customary political apathy.¹⁷⁷

Ngala joined Francis Khamisi (Chapter 2) in giving speeches that were "full of nationalist and racial slogans."¹⁷⁸

Ngala was quick to link the need for the autonomy of African communities on the Coast to radio broadcasting. He argued that ethno-linguistic groups on the Coast needed to be represented by government-provisioned radio broadcasting. Why, he asked, did Sauti ya Mvita

¹⁷⁵ Clara Momanyi, *Ronald Ngala: Teacher with a Mission*, (Nairobi: Sasa Semia Publications, 2001).

¹⁷⁶ J.A.H. Wolff, "Annual Report, Mombasa, 1957" KNA PC/COAST/2/1/102

¹⁷⁷ J.A.H. Wolff, "Annual Report, Mombasa, 1957" KNA PC/COAST/2/1/102

¹⁷⁸ J.A.H. Wolff, "Annual Report, Mombasa, 1957" KNA PC/COAST/2/1/102

fail to live up to its name and create broadcasts that would appeal to all on the Coast?¹⁷⁹ His demands did not stop there. During a debate on information estimates undertaken during a LegCo session, Ngala argued that Sauti ya Mvita should dedicate more airtime to African listeners, in particular by broadcasting in Giriama and other Coast vernaculars.¹⁸⁰

Ngala was not alone in linking the future of broadcasting policy to the future political direction of the Kenya colony on the eve of independence. Giriama-speaking listeners writing to *Habari za Radio* were equally concerned that their linguistic particularities were not being recognized by the state. As one letter writer wrote: “The day before yesterday when we were listening to the news... [one listener]...asked us why ABS does not announce in Giriama. We are not able to give to him from you an answer to this question.”¹⁸¹ The response was predictable. “There are many indigenous languages in the whole of Kenya and without a doubt we cannot broadcast in every language... We have certainty that every Giriama is able to understand Swahili.” Ngala initially received a similar response, with the Chief Secretary indicating that the “provisioning of programmes for Africans was in hand, but that broadcasting in vernaculars would not be possible because of the limited funds available.”¹⁸² Here the administration missed the point. Comprehension was not at issue. Swahili-language broadcasting on the Coast appeared to these listeners to portend a future wherein the region would be dominated by the interests of Muslims, both “Arab” and “Swahili.” Swahili, for these men (and women), was not a language of an intermediate scale, but a language of partisanship. For these advocates, vernacular broadcasting might enable them to leverage their parochialism into political representation on the national stage.

In 1960, Ngala would join representatives of other minority constituencies to found the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), with himself as the leader. KADU, in keeping with Ngala’s radio politics, argued that independent Kenya should be a federated union, this the only way to prevent Kenya’s minorities from being swamped by the dominant ethno-linguistic groups. By the late 1950s, the balanced provisioning of services had become one register by

¹⁷⁹ M.N. Edwards to Chief Secretary, “Legislative Council Question No. 39,” 2 November 1957, KNA AHC/10/67 – Information and Propaganda

¹⁸⁰ E.C. Eggins to J.H. Reiss, Director of Information, 1957, KNA AHC/18/71 Mombasa Broadcasting Scheme, Policy

¹⁸¹ *Habari za Radio*, Vol 2, No. 1, Sept 1956

¹⁸² E.C. Eggins to John H. Reiss, Esq. Director of Information, 22 June 1957, KNA AHC/18/71

which communities interpreted their position in relation to the colonial state. The stakes of these relations were high with a future independent state an increasingly robust outline on the horizon. But Ngala's seemingly parochial politics in these years did not stop him from traveling to London with Nyanza-born Tom Mboya to protest colonial efforts to use the new constitution to bifurcate a nation-in-becoming. For many people at this time, politics was a game of hedging. Absent a secure future it was left to these leaders to play the game of both the particular (language/"tribe") and the general (nation/"African").

And demands begot other demands. In the mid-1950s, Somali-speaking listeners demanded Somali broadcasts provisioned for their communities living in the Northern Frontier Province. While in the past the claims of this historically marginal and marginalized population could have been ignored, by the end of 1957 it was clear that Radio Cairo's Somali language broadcasts were heavy with "vicious propaganda," which was being "listened to by the Somalis." And so, the price for ignoring claims for inclusion via the recognition of difference appeared to be impossible, making it of the "greatest importance" that a "good Kenya service be provided."¹⁸³

The specter of Mau Mau certainly haunted the colonial imaginary when administrators discussed the future of the colony and the role of broadcasting in shoring up what was perceived to be a beleaguered center. Broadcasting in Nyeri, it was noted, was "rehabilitation," whereas broadcasting on the Coast and Nyanza was "preventative." The airwaves heavy with colonial visions of the future touching down in communities to the east and to the west could be subtler. In these regions "many a pill," one administrator argued, could be "slipped in without their realizing it."¹⁸⁴ The state was savvy, too, in seeing that people in this twilight moment were responding to conflicting demands and the uncertainty of the moment. And so, it settled on conceding to these demands, hoping that the politics of infrastructural inclusion premised on popular demands for the recognition of linguistic difference in the domain of broadcasting could be beneficially divisive, allowing it to retain its fragile hold on a territorial unit: the Kenya colony.

¹⁸³ "Minute from Information Services for Somalis Convened Dec 1957," Jan 1958, KNA BB/1/204

¹⁸⁴ To the Acting Director of Information from Dean, Broadcasting Officer, "Introduction" 30, August, 1955, AHC/18/70.

Conclusion

By 1957, and following much anxiety and hand-wringing over the siting of new stations in both Nyanza and on the Coast, new transmitters had been installed in both regions to address what was banally referred to as the “problem” of each. On the Coast, the “problem” was “the impact upon it of outside propaganda,” namely “programmes from Cairo (Saut el Arab), All India Radio, and [those] from Omdurman.”¹⁸⁵ The problem with these broadcasts inhered not only in their message, but in the form of the medium itself, as the “stations use powerful transmitters working on a wave length close to that used by our Information Services with the result that the local broadcasts are frequently swamped and listeners tune in to the more powerful transmitters.”¹⁸⁶ The aim in installing the new transmitter had been to “establish broadcasting arrangements at the Coast so as to ensure that good reception of the local programmes...[was] provided without any interference from outside stations.”¹⁸⁷

While in the 1940s, administrators discussing the role of radio broadcasting in the colony and beyond labored to cordon off the technics from the politics, this was no longer the case by the mid-1950s, by which point the technics were self-consciously being deployed to affect political ends, in this case shoring up the borders of the Kenya colony in a moment of flux. As noted by then Director of Information, Watkins Pritchford:

the whole object of installing a medium wave transmitter is to try and ensure that listeners do not need to turn to the short-wave band at all. If we can keep them listening consistently on the medium wave band we can ensure that our programmes are not interfered with by outside stations and by avoiding the necessity for the listener to use short wave band at all we may be able to wean him away from the powerful shortwave broadcasts from Cairo, Omdurman and All India Radio.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ Memorandum by the Chief Secretary, Council of Ministers, “Strengthening of Information Services in Nyanza and Coast Provinces,” AHC/10/66.

¹⁸⁶ Memorandum by the Chief Secretary, Council of Ministers, “Strengthening of Information Services in Nyanza and Coast Provinces,” AHC/10/66.

¹⁸⁷ Memorandum by the Chief Secretary, Council of Ministers, “Strengthening of Information Services in Nyanza and Coast Provinces,” AHC/10/66.

¹⁸⁸ From Watkins Pritchford, Director of Information to the Chief Secretary. “Strengthening of Information Services in Coast & Nyanza Provinces,” 22 August, 1955, AHC/18/70.

While the media sphere remained saturated with threats, Cairo was the “principal antagonist” in this “radio war.”¹⁸⁹

But in settling on this plan, the administration had been forced to confront a series of potential material interventions, and develop an appropriately “tropicalised” network. Kenya’s unique topography, and meteorological conditions obtaining “in the tropics” ensured this. To this was the added problem of accessing receivers suitably designed for the region. The market was called upon to do this work. The arrival of the Saucepan Special, a small compact device, a “tropicalised” technology, seemed to be just what the administration had been hoping for.

But it was a shortwave technology. And it was over these small blue sets that people tuned in to programs that offered communities a set of potential attachments that were not bounded in territorial nor ethno-linguistic terms. Over the airwaves, Radio Cairo invited various communities on the Coast to see their struggles as linked to those living at a distance from themselves. Speaking in the language of listeners and attentive to their programing desires, Radio Cairo offered a vision of the future wherein difference could be the basis for unity, or at the very least temporary alliance.

But the vision of the future on offer through Radio Cairo was always refracted through more local political considerations and contests. The Coast, in these years, was a contested space. As discussions regarding independence amped up, Arabs on the Coast feared being swamped by “up Country” Africans as new constituencies were inscribed in law. Coastal Africans, for their part, feared domination both by Coastal Arabs and by the larger African ethno-linguistic communities of the interior, leading to an “increase in the political awareness of local Africans.”¹⁹⁰ This politics, though divisive, was more desirable to the colonial state than the politics being offered by Radio Cairo. The terms of the Lyttleton Constitution made as much clear. And so, the state sought to reinforce the parochial and ethno-linguistically bound focus of African political activity by mobilizing a new infrastructural network.

As A. M. Dean of the Department of Information wrote: “Present and possible future political trends in the Colony argue strongly in favour of Government owned Broadcast Service

¹⁸⁹ G.W. J. 16 November 1956. “Broadcasting From Mombasa,” KNA AHC/10/66

¹⁹⁰ “Annual Report, Mombasa, 1957,” PC/COAST/2/1/102

in all languages.”¹⁹¹ This was not simply inclusion, but an inclusion that turned on the capacity to capitalize on difference, to make it antagonistic. As one Coastal administrator wrote: “What we need to do...is to make both African and Arab feel that they were being well catered for, and even for each to feel that they are getting ‘a better deal’ than the other community.”¹⁹²

The animus for infrastructural expansion, however, was a response to homegrown demands for infrastructural inclusion premised on government claims that radio broadcasting was a “public good.” As infrastructural networks were variously expanded and rolled back, people engaged in comparative work as they calculated their relative access vis-à-vis an increasingly hard set of borders that separated themselves from various ‘Others.’ It so followed that people did not make claims on the state as homogenous listeners, but as linguistically particular constituents. Tropicalizing technologies was a colonial trope premised on a vision of incommensurable ‘Otherness.’ Listeners reformatted this vision when they argued that the Other public of which they were a part was not, in fact, the “masses,” but rather more discrete categories that demanded accommodation. This was a parochial technopolitics, to be sure, but it was guided from below.

We need to situate demands for vernacular-language programs in this light. This was a politics that linked recognition of difference to equal airtime, that linked political inclusion to access to infrastructures. The state had laid the groundwork for this. And these demands were, ultimately, heard loud and clear. The recognition of linguistic difference as a metric of inclusion was on the table so far as broadcasting was concerned. These demands mitigated against the linguistic telos that would have had first Kiswahili and then English as the *lingua francas* of the Kenya colony.

The postcolonial state largely built on colonial-era thinking regarding the utility of radio broadcasting. It, too, hoped to use broadcasting to enact developmentalist subjects of an intermediary scale, listeners now hemmed in by the boundaries of the nation-state. And the threats of alternative modes of scale-making did not end with independence, as the rise of KADU suggests. But the terms of the debate had changed. As feared by Muslims on the Swahili Coast,

¹⁹¹ A.M. Dean, Broadcasting Officer, Department of Information, Nairobi. “A Scheme for the Future Development of Broadcasting in Kenya.” August, 1955, AHC/18/70 The report continued: “It is considered most desirable, particularly in the case of Africans and Asians to encourage Medium Wave listening as opposed to Short Wave listening when undesirable foreign broadcast are frequently picked up during tuning.”

¹⁹² Hunt, Provincial Information Officer, Coast Province, KNA AHC/18/70.

Nairobi sought to centralize and standardize the state's administrative power. In this, too, it built on late-colonial practice. In 1959, the colonial government had unceremoniously shuttered Sauti ya Mvita.¹⁹³ The station was subsumed within the newly established Kenya Broadcasting Service (KBS), which was rebranded the Voice of Kenya (VoK) in 1964. While the VoK continued vernacular language broadcasting, it built on colonial aspirations and worked to leverage Kiswahili as the language not of the colony, but of the nation-state.

In trying to assemble a fractured and precarious unity, then, the postcolonial state martialled radio as an infrastructure to constrain people's imaginative futures, attaching them to the center of administrative power. This left little room for autonomous forms of action in the field of broadcasting. The creative work of men like Kindy and Ambrose Wakaria, of whom we will learn more (Chapter 5), was sidelined as the content of vernacular-language programming was increasingly administered from Nairobi. The politics of broadcasting in the independence period, in other words, continued to be shaped by the territorialized framework within which they had been actualized by the anxious colonial state in the 1950s. In the postcolonial period, as in the twilight years of colonial rule, difference would be recognized and accommodated, the borders of the then colony, now nation-state in becoming, were not up for debate.

This, then, was the framework against which interested firms deployed vernacular-language broadcasting in the liberalization period as tools of "political tribalism."¹⁹⁴ It is only up against this longer history that the frustration of communities, their receptivity to vitriolic and ethnicized broadcasting, must be cast. The sense of precarity that commercial broadcasters tapped into built on a more durable set of political formations, which linked inclusion within the body politic to access to infrastructures *not* as a means of asserting generic political inclusion, but as a means of staking out a position for access and inclusion premised on difference.

If this chapter focused, in part, on the forms of attachment building that emerged in the absence of a robust broadcasting network in the late 1940s and through the 1950s, the chapter to follow explores the prosthetic work that enabled the network, such as it did exist, to materialize in these same years.

¹⁹³ James Brennan, "A History of Sauti ya Mvita (Voice of Mombasa): Radio, Public Culture, and Islam in Coastal Kenya, 1947-66," in *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*, Rosalind I.J. Hackett, Benjamin F. Soares, Francis B. Nyamnjoh, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 30.

¹⁹⁴ John Lonsdale, "The Moral Economy of Mau Mau"

Chapter 5

“Tropicalised” Technologies: Making Broadcasting “Work” in Colonial Kenya

One morning in January 1944, a mobile information unit arrived on the compound of a Church Missionary Society (CMS) school, located in Maseno, in western Kenya. The engines signaled the arrival of the group as they made their way towards the school compound. Classes were in session, but the students knew of the unit’s impending arrival, hearing the caravan before they saw it. Samwel Okwako Libuko put to the page some of the excitement he felt on that day: “It was on Thursday morning when a motor car of mobile cinema came here.” When the van stopped, “many boys rushed out of their classrooms. Other boys peeped through the windows and doors.” The reason for these school attendees’ interest was clear to Samwel. Such “a motor car had not been seen by us for [a] long [time],” he reflected in his “composition.” This van, though, a “very large and clumsy bedford green van,” was distinct from other lorries of its kind.¹ As Vetus Oduor recalled, it was marked by performative “golden letters” which brought to these students’ “eyes the name ‘cinema.’”² This vehicle, the only one of its kind, was storied, rumors of its existence circulating through the countryside long before its arrival. As another student recalled on that day: “I have been hearing of the cinema, which has been shown by Mr. Champion for many days without seeing it myself. I was very pleased today when I saw a huge motor car, on which was written in capital letters ‘Mobile Cinema.’”³ Upon reading those letters Vetus “at once...knew what the lorries brought to us.”⁴

Others were less excited by the arrival of the unit. These young men, one student wrote rather skeptically, “pretended that they never cared for that motor car.” This student did not reflect on the reasons for this disinterest, but perhaps for some of these young people, novelty did not inspire excitement but distrust. Like Ambrose Wakaria (to be discussed below), these young

¹ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

² Vetus Oduor, “Soil Erosion,” KNA HAKI/13/298

³ Vetus Oduor, “Soil Erosion,” KNA HAKI/13/298

⁴ Vetus Oduor, “Soil Erosion,” KNA HAKI/13/298

people may have been taught to view European novelties with some circumspection by parents and grandparents at home.

These students were to be the audience of one of the many viewing parties staged by the information arm of the colonial state in the war years. This was not an event of equals, to be sure, but it was an encounter shaped at the “interface.”⁵ And these students were well aware that they were not the only ones consuming information, well aware of the fact that they were as much the viewers as the viewed. As Samwel wrote: “This peeping of the school boys might have surprised the gentleman who brought the cinema.” These tours, indeed, were as much concerned with gathering information as to the situation in African locations, and Africans’ responses to cinema and broadcasting, as they were with disseminating information to the myriad local communities that they visited.

As W. F. P. Kelly, who took over the unit from its first operator Arthur M. Champion, noted in his memoir, this work was highly valued. Operators’ observations were sent directly to the Chief Secretary, who appreciated the unique status of these “reports as being first hand accounts of what was happening in the districts by an outsider who would be meeting thousands and thousands of Africans and wandering about their country.”⁶ On occasion, this led to distrust. As Kelly wrote, both he and Champion were “known as...spies by the District Administration.”⁷

Initially, the administration imagined these units serving small audiences. Champion had changed all this. By obtaining “a non transparent screen which he erected some 12’ in height by means of a series of poles...by choosing natural amphitheatres and by marshalling the audience into a narrow segment so that they did not stray away from the reflection of the light he was able to show to audiences as large as 5,000.” People walked great distances, “almost fifty kilometers,” one elderly gentlemen recalled, “to see the...mobile.”⁸⁹

To use the language of the time, in rejigging the equipment such that it ‘worked’ in the Kenya colony, Champion had “tropicalised” the unit and its technologies. And this work of

⁵ Jane Guyer uses this term to highlight the contingency of interactions that occur in colonial spaces. Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004), 6.

⁶ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

⁷ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

⁸ Interview with Ambrose Wakaria, 22 June 2014.

⁹ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

“tropicalisation” took many forms. Sometimes set up on hillsides, or “little slopes,” at other times in the “big hall[s]” of schools, in the “godowns” of local businesses, or sometimes in “amphitheatres,” which made “first-class outdoor...hall[s].”¹⁰ The siting of the spectacles was important. What the crew sought was “favourable ground [which] enabled...a large number to see well.”¹¹ Broadcasts were accompanied by silent films (over which a commentator spoke), pedantic developmentalist lectures, educative performances, and the distribution of broadsheets.¹²

Not only did these spectacles have distinctive spatial coordinates, they also tended to follow a fixed temporal regime. As Champion wrote:

The performances generally start at 6.30 p.m. preceded by a few items consisting of band music, songs in English, Kikuyu and Kikamba on the loudspeaker and the reading of the introductions in the appropriate language of two or three of the films takes place before showing...After that one or two local films follow with running commentary only...We conclude [at] about 8.p.m. as a rule.¹³

The regimented nature of this routine was in line with the developmentalist-cum-disciplinary effect that administrators hoped these events would produce. Not only were attendees to be ‘taught’ how to reform everyday life and so achieve “development,” but the administration hoped to cultivate attendees as spectators of a particular sort: quiet, attentive, interested.

Not only was the unit regimented by the clock, following the rhythm of sun’s descent, but the timing of these trips was shaped by the seasons. As Kelly wrote: “normally we stayed in Nairobi during the month of April when the long rains were at their height and again in November for the short rains.” For African knowledge workers and experts, these were periods of reprieve, enabling them to tend to their *shambas*, to take holiday, to visit family.¹⁴ During these periods Kelly “would travel around on the tarmac roads in the vicinity of Nairobi showing to various institutions such as the two breweries at Ruaraka, [and] the schools at Pumwani”

¹⁰ Arthur Champion, “Report of the Government Cinema Unit For the Week Ending Sunday, September 22nd.” KNA HAKI/13/328

¹¹ Arthur Champion, “Report of the Activities of Government Cinema Unit Up To Week Ending August 25th 1940,” HAKI/13/328

¹² “Report of the Activities of Government Cinema Unit Up To Week Ending August 25th 1940,” KNA HAKI/13/328.

¹³ Arthur M. Champion, “Report of Activities of the Government Cinema Unit Week-Ending August 18, 1940.” KNA HAKI/13/328

¹⁴ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

among other locales.¹⁵ As this suggests, the itineraries pursued during the rains were not accidental. Kelly was only able to do his work during these months by virtue of the presence of tarmacked roads. The unit, in other words, was dependent on another infrastructure whose lumpy reach was similarly borne of policies of developmental austerity: roads (see Chapter 1).

The awkward tempo of these visits, though, also accounted for their novelty, enabling this “clumsy” van to draw such impressive crowds. Indeed, one can imagine the spectacle of these visits. Staged in largely un-electrified regions of the country, the glow of the screen, the projection of voices, and the large crowds of viewers must have marked these occasions as exciting events. It is no wonder that they were storied; rumors of the van’s arrival generating expectant excitement across the countryside. Novelty, though, was not the final goal.

The administration hoped to use the van to cultivate regular listeners to its broadcasts. The unit itself, it seems, was never to be a permanent feature of the broadcasting apparatus. Instead, it was conceived of as a stop-gap solution, temporarily addressing the problem of the limited reach of the state until such a time as the airwaves were heavy with broadcasts emanating from Nairobi. And lofty ambitions were pinned on broadcasting, which administrators in London imagined would play a key role in enacting an emergent developmentalist ethos. Indeed, as early as 1936, as we will recall, the Committee on Broadcasting in the Colonies wrote:

We envisage the development of Colonial Broadcasting - and its justification - not as an instrument of entertainment for Europeans and quasi-Europeans ... but as an instrument of advanced administration...for the enlightenment and education of the native populations and their instruction in public health, agriculture etc.¹⁶

In the beginning, administrators imagined radio-listening would be a domestic affair because “private listening on personally owned sets in the house is...the best form of listening.”¹⁷ This was, then, a universalist vision of technologies. A vision that held technologies to be easily transposed to new spaces, having the same effect no matter where they were dropped down. But administrators accepted that it would be “a very long time before one can hope for...[the] ideal

¹⁵ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

¹⁶ Committee on Broadcasting in the Colonies as quoted in M.F. Hill, Information Officer, “Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” KNA HAKI/13/276 or CS/2/8/121 – Information and Propaganda.

¹⁷ British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to Reiss, 4 July 1952, KNA AHC/18/7 – Broadcasting in the Colonies, Broadcasting Policy

[of domestic listening] to be reached in Africa”¹⁸ In this networked future, government development initiatives would travel over the airwaves, rather than the roadways, with centrally produced broadcasts from Nairobi reaching into the lives of communities living throughout the territory. To this end, during the war Nairobi began running broadcasts for African communities in Kikuyu, Dholuo, Kikamba, Luhya, Luganda, Kinandi, Kisii and Kiswahili.¹⁹ These efforts notwithstanding, it was widely acknowledged that broadcasts failed “to ensure satisfactory reception over considerable areas.”²⁰

And so, in the meantime, the Government hoped that, “through the medium of a wireless receiving set attached to the van,” the problems thrown up by the lumpy reach of the state could be mitigated, as the van brought government messages and entertainment “to audiences which would not otherwise be reached by the vernacular broadcasts from the Nairobi Station.”²¹ Administrators, then, acknowledged that material constraints would make domestic listening over personally owned sets impossible. This was an acknowledgement that seamless radio broadcasting, like brick-and-mortar schools, electrification, and local clinics, were not possibilities in the immediate or near future.

For all intents and purposes, then, the mobile information van *was* radio in this period. It *was* broadcasting. This van was a tropicalized technology designed to bridge the gap between an emergent developmentalist ideology and the particular material world of the Kenya colony, shaped as it was both by Kenya’s unique geography and by long-standing policies of colonial austerity (see Chapter 4). To use a technological anachronism, the Kenya Information Office (KIO) hoped to use the van to “leapfrog” over non-existent harder infrastructures, all the while ushering the colony and its people into a developed and developmentalist future. In this regard, and like radio broadcasting itself (see Chapter 4), the unit was imagined as an infrastructural prosthetic, a means of temporarily addressing the limited reach of the state until such a time as material networks conformed to the state’s aspiration for seamless infrastructural reach.

¹⁸ British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to Reiss, 4 July 1952, KNA AHC/18/7 – Broadcasting in the Colonies, Broadcasting Policy

¹⁹ M.F. Hill, “Memorandum on Broadcasting to Africans in Kenya,” KNA AHC/10/63

²⁰ H.L.G. Gurney, Chief Secretary to the Governors’ Conference to the Hon Chief Secretary. 14 January, 1943. KNA HAKI/13/276.

²¹ Governor Henry Moore to the Information Office, N.D. KNA HAKI/13/328

Perhaps because these events were staged at central nodes, and drew crowds from quite far afield, they were often heterogeneous and lively in character. In Nakuru, for example, one 1940 visit drew a crowd of “between 2,000 and 3,000 natives...of mixed tribes.” This linguistically diverse group demanded that “Kiswahili, Jaluo and Kikuyu languages were all made use of.” This, Champion noted, “appeared to give general satisfaction.”²² At other times, all the films were accompanied by running commentary in Kiswahili alone.²³

Not only did heterogeneous populations often watch and listen side by side in this period, generating a kind of multilingual and polyphonic space, but the content was anything but exclusively ‘local’ in character. As Ambrose C. Coghill wrote: “the keenest interest and curiosity are aroused in new scenes of unfamiliar peoples, lands and customs, giving rise to a desire for reading and a wider knowledge of the world.”²⁴ This interest in the broader world was intimately linked to the developmentalist mandate of these tours in the minds of administrators. As Coghill continued: “There can be little doubt that the use of selected films would rapidly make the minds of the Africans in the Reserves sympathetically disposed towards the acceptance of improved conditions of life.”²⁵

The work that went into orchestrating these events was routinely elided in Information Officers’ reports. But these visits were carefully staged happenings that depended on the input and practiced labor of African knowledge workers and experts. These men were responsible for making the messages legible to viewers and listeners, such as the school-goers at Maseno. It was these men, for example, that gave “introductions in the appropriate language” and who offered “running commentary.” African technical experts, for their part, were responsible for maintaining and repairing imperfectly tropicalised technologies, negotiating worn out parts, and otherwise “jumping into the breach” in the context of routine failure.

In what follows, I excavate the critical role these knowledge workers and experts played in making information—broadcasting included—‘work’ in colonial Kenya. As we saw in the preceding chapter, durable policies of colonial austerity worked as a critical counterpoint to the

²² Arthur M. Champion, “Report of the Government Cinema Unit for the Week Ending September 29, 1940.” KNA HAKI/13/32

²³ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

²⁴ DC/MUR/3/10/2 - Cinema and Stage

²⁵ DC/MUR/3/10/2 - Cinema and Stage

ideal of seamless infrastructural reach in the field of radio broadcasting. Here I explore the lumpy network that did emerge, a network that was not only incomplete but that was marked by perennial breakdown, which took two forms: material and conceptual. Not only were the technical components upon which the unit depended routinely in a state of disintegration and disrepair, but the ideological and developmentalist ambitions wrapped up in new media forms were also perennially on the brink of “failing.” In the minds of administrators, importantly, these registers of breakdown were not held to be distinct.

New media technologies not only brought new administrative possibilities to the fore, but raised critical questions regarding the relationship between medium and message. Indeed, administrators were certain that the breakdown of technics would lead to a breakdown of the messages on offer. The maintenance and repair of both imperfectly tropicalized technologies, and the messages that propagated through the airwaves, was essential. The Information Office called on African knowledge workers and technologists, these colonial “middle figures” and experts of both technics and culture, to the task of acting as critical maintainers of both ideology and technology.²⁶ In this, they were called to the task of acting infrastructurally, called to the task of engaging in prosthetic work in a context where colonial networks were arterial at best. Central to this maintenance work was the labor of translation. I argue that the work of translation—and the anxiety it generated for administrators and missionaries—turned on the widely held perception that content need not only be translated in linguistic terms but in conceptual terms as well.

As this suggests, this work was never *simply* prosthetic, it never simply filled the gap. Not only was the prosthetic work of African experts and knowledge workers essential to making this information network “hang together,” such as it did, but it was also value-generating. The importance of these contributions would be tacitly acknowledged during Mau Mau, when the Kenya Information Office tasked African knowledge workers with generating content that would resonate with communities in the countryside and, the administration hoped, with the young men and women fighting in the forest. During Mau Mau, this cultural expertise was appropriated by the state, scaled up, and put to the ongoing task of “tropicalising” Kenya’s media infrastructures.

²⁶ Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon: Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

And yet, the value of this expertise was rarely formally acknowledged by the state. Durable conditions of austerity had created the conditions wherein African infrastructural workers were routinely simply expected to act *like* infrastructures.

But it was precisely this critical work of translation that rendered African knowledge-workers powerful cultural brokers and authors of culture. As I will demonstrate, from this intermediate position, knowledge workers in particular leveraged their roles in the colonial hierarchy as they fulfilled their vocations, engaging in their own projects of culture-building. In so doing, they rescaled their prosthetic work within this lumpy system, turning new media forms into their own prosthetics with which to generate new attachments with “their listeners.” Ambrose Wakaria was one such knowledge worker. It is to his story to which we now turn.

I met with Ambrose Wakaria in Ngong Town, a large peri-urban city on the outskirts of Nairobi. Wakaria was rumored to be the oldest serving broadcaster in Kenya, and I had gotten his contact information from Henry Makhoka, the current director of broadcasting at the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), some weeks earlier. Like Ruaraka, Ngong Town might have been included on Kelly’s Nairobi itinerary during the short rains. Falling to the East and West of Nairobi, each of these locations was flanked on one side by Nairobi’s historically white suburbs. If Ruaraka boasted large populations of African laborers working at the breweries active there, Ngong would have been an ideal place to site events for laborers working on the region’s white farms.

I was accompanied on my mission by another informant, Wanyika Gatibi, a taxi driver who had been driving around Nairobi and its environs for many years. Born in Nyeri, in Kenya’s Central Province, Gatibi was enthusiastic to take me on this journey. From my perspective, we were about to meet with the oldest living Kenyan broadcaster; for Gatibi we were meeting an expert in Gikuyu culture. Indeed, Wakaria has something of the status of celebrity among Kikuyu men over the age of 50.

We met Wakaria at a two-story bar, something of an enigmatic staple in Kenya, off the main strip. Wakaria was sitting at a small square table set for four by large sliding glass doors which led to the verandah outside. Sitting down, I introduced myself and Wanyika who had decided to sit in on the meeting. Picking up the menu, I indicated that people should order what they wanted. This overture, a gesture, though not a gift nor payment—something I would later

learn was resented—I offered in exchange for the opportunity to speak to Ambrose. It was late in the afternoon. Scanning the menu, I asked if he’d like a chai or, perhaps, a beer. He told me he’d start with tea. Business happened over tea, the consumption of alcohol marking business successfully concluded. This, he indicated, was in line with durable visions of work that he located in Gikuyu culture.²⁷ Chai having arrived, we began our conversation.

Wakaria was born “in Nairobi” in 1928, in a part of the city that is today called Ridgeway. These were all Kikuyu lands then, he told me, gesturing out the windows behind him. His parents were early Protestant converts, joining the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the early 1920s. Before Ambrose’s birth they had a “Christian wedding,” paid for largely by his father who worked as a cook in what is today called Westlands.²⁸ When Europeans stole his family’s land, he continued, he and his family moved to Kiambu. Like many in his position, his father’s decision to join the church had led to conflict within the family.²⁹ Indeed, Wakaria spoke at good length about how his father’s conversion had caused a critical rift with his grandfather, who was skeptical of European intentions in the region and equally suspicious of the Church. Ambrose’s grandfather was particularly irked by his son’s decision to send Wakaria to the mission school. “My father was very much interested in schools...[and] my grandfather could not allow me to go to school,” Wakaria recalled. And so, the two were at an impasse. Wakaria grew up in the midst of this tension but walked the line with seeming equipoise. On holidays, he told me, his parents sent him to his grandfather to “cool him down.” “So, you were a peacemaker then?” I asked. “I was a child, but my father wanted to make peace with the father.” And so, Wakaria did as he was told.

His father’s conversion and relative affluence brought Wakaria first to a CMS mission school, and later, in 1942 when he reached Standard Four, to boarding school. Wakaria’s relationship with his education was fraught.³⁰ While he enjoyed history and agricultural courses, the teachers were harsh, “terrible” he told me, “beating us all the time.” Following high school, Wakaria attended classes in pharmacology at the King George Hospital, but he was “chased” for

²⁷ John Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty, and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought,” in *Unhappy Valley, Vol. II*. John Lonsdale and Bruce Berman, 315-468 (Ohio University Press, 1992).

²⁸ Interviews with Ambrose Wakaria, 2014.

²⁹ Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004).

³⁰ Interviews with Ambrose Wakaria, 2014.

fighting with other students.³¹ Wakaria's mobile itinerary, though, enabled him to pursue his life's work. Indeed, it was due to his own unusual trajectory that he landed his position at the Kenya Information Office (KIO) in 1950. And it was through this work that he had gained his expertise (and celebrity status) as the authority on all things Gikuyu. Men like Wakaria were both the voices and the ears of the information arm of the colonial state. But they were also researchers and experts of "culture," lay ethnographers whose knowledge the colonial state routinely mobilized as it fine-tuned its information apparatus. Men like Wakaria, then, critical translators and professional knowledge workers, occupied positions of relative power. The colonial state viewed these men, and the knowledge they bore, with apprehension.

A Fragile Development

Wakaria, like many African knowledge workers, got his start working for the Mobile Cinema Unit. Often getting their training under the watchful eye of Arthur M. Champion, the lives, experiences, and expertise of these men is fragmentary in the archival record. But this in and of itself tells us something of the hierarchical nature of Kenya's knowledge economy. Importantly, their labor emerges less in the day to day operations of the unit than in moments of 'indiscipline' and 'breakdown.' The archival traces emerging in the context of indiscipline tell us something of the strictures under which these men performed their work, and their emergent status as a social category. Archival traces emerging in the context of breakdown reveal how critical their work was to the operations of the Kenya colony's lumpy information apparatus.

If Wakaria's own itinerary was relatively unique, the same was true of the British information workers under whom men like Wakaria worked. Champion, like Wakaria, was something of an enigmatic figure. He had been educated at Clifton College, located in the port city of Bristol. Following graduation, he became a Royal Engineer, joining the Kenya Administrative Service around 1909. He first worked in Kitui District, a place for which he apparently developed a deep affection.³² From Kitui he acted as a District Commissioner in both

³¹ Interviews with Ambrose Wakaria, 2014.

³² W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. "Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema," 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

Meru and Nyeri. In 1931, he won a gold medal from the Royal Geographical Society for his exploration of Teleki's Volcano, located at the Southern tip of Lake Rudolf.³³ Champion, though, was an avid observer of people as well as place, coupling his administrative duties with a penchant for lay ethnography. In 1944, following his retirement, he wrote "Native Welfare in Kenya."³⁴ In it, he lay out his ambivalent feelings regarding the role of Christian education in the region. He argued that Christian conversion had led to undue rifts, with the mission educated constituting a separate community within a "sea of paganism."³⁵ Education had stripped these persons of 'culture,' producing a damaging segregation that separated the mission educated from the strictures of social life that were essential for maintaining what, to him, would have otherwise been unchanging cultural practices.³⁶ Champion, we can imagine, would have had a good deal to say about the conflicts that structured Wakaria's own upbringing.

And yet, Champion appreciated the possibilities for "development" that many at the time located as being the special purview of the Kenyan Information Office. Perhaps, for Champion, there was something about the leveling aspirations of the unit. Unlike the Church, the unit served all that were willing to walk the many miles to the central nodes where the events were typically staged. Though nodal, in theory the unit's reach was sociologically all embracing; a tool of "mass education." This contrasted with the Church, which required a spatial commitment to the lands of mission stations and often an avowed disavowal of the unconverted. In 1940 Champion became the first mobile unit operator, crisscrossing the country in the single van serving the territory from which he broadcast 'news' (with African broadcasters providing translation), screened films (with African knowledge workers providing commentary), and, with his crew, organized live performances (wherein African assistants executed performances, Champion himself limited to the sidelines).

For Champion, maintaining the integrity of the group as a unit was key to its success. As Kelly recalled, Champion moved "round [the countryside] with a large tent for his staff and a

³³ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. "Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema," 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

³⁴ A.M. Champion, "Native Welfare in Kenya" September 1944, Anglican Church of Kenya [hereafter ACK] Archives, Nairobi.

³⁵ A.M. Champion, "Native Welfare in Kenya" September 1944, Anglican Church of Kenya [hereafter ACK] Archives, Nairobi.

³⁶ A.M. Champion, "Native Welfare in Kenya" September 1944, Anglican Church of Kenya [hereafter ACK] Archives, Nairobi.

smaller tent for himself.” Despite this separation in the quarters of repose, he was evidently attached to “his staff,” which consisted of “the Machakos driver a Kamba called Katele and his assistant and...two interpreters.” Moses, the Kikuyu interpreter, spoke Kikamba as well as Kiswahili fluently, while John, “the Luo,” spoke Kiswahili as well as his own “mother tongue Dholuo.”³⁷ The linguistic specialization of these knowledge workers was a critical component of their expertise.

The unit of which Champion was a part traveled widely. By all accounts, Champion’s visits were wildly popular, with every district “anxious to have a prolonged visit from the Mobile Cinema Unit.”³⁸ This would have been the team that the students at Maseno recounted in their “compositions.” Incomplete infrastructural networking demanded that broadcasting be brought to communities living across Kenya’s varied topography. But for audiences, the unit’s arrival bore with it the possibility of temporarily traveling to various global elsewhere. As Bartholomew Orwa wrote:

Yesterday, about twelve o-clock...I saw a big lorry on which the word CINEMA was printed. I asked some of our boys why it comes. Most of the boys told me that he comes to show us how the war [was proceeding] and many things which are done in England and other parts of the World on the Cinema.³⁹

For this viewer, the unit was a window through which the wider world became visible and audible. This was a place of pleasure and excitement. Orwa continued:

I was very happy when I saw Mr. Champion...I did not take my dinner because of the strange things which [would]...be shown. The first thing which made me interested was Gramophone. This made me stand and dance, and I said in my heart that this was the only thing which I should hear till I shall leave the place.”⁴⁰

For Orwa, the music amplified over the speakers was the main attraction. As Orwa intimated, he hoped this would be both the beginning and the end of the content on offer that day. But music was merely the initial draw, which would have been followed by propaganda films, often designed to shore up popular support for Britain’s war effort, and on many occasions, a crew member would have tuned into broadcasts from the Nairobi station.

³⁷ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

³⁸ Arthur Champion, “Report of Tour,” Feb 18-Mar 2, 1941, HAKI/13/128

³⁹ Bartholomew Orwa, “Composition,” KNA HAKI/13/328.

⁴⁰ Bartholomew Orwa, “Composition,” 17 October 1940, KNA HAKI/13/328.

On this occasion, music was followed by a film on a “Bukura Farm,” which boasted a “garden” with “many crops,” and “good milking cows,” as J.E. Obala recounted, one of the best of which was milked “by a brown boy.” Obala continued his composition, writing:

This boy was trained in the veterinary farm...He used all the methods he learnt at the Veterinary School like using a clean bucket[,] washing his hands before milking, washing the cows udder and rinsing the bucket with hot water. All of these made it sound to correlate the crops work and the animals work.”⁴¹

This developmentalist vision reflected an emergent rationality that, following the war, would see the rise of new cadres of “experts” and new genre of “expertise” that sought to reshape the colonial world and effect “rationalized” development. But this vision got its first lease on life with new media technologies, tools of both “development” and “advanced administration.”⁴²

While teams of experts would make their way into the countryside following the war, in the war years this message was spread, evidently, in nodal form. Despite this lumpiness both in time and across space, these performances offered viewers a vision of a seamless, well-integrated development apparatus. As Obala’s observations attest, these performances were designed to “correlate the crops work and the animals work.” They were, in other words, tasked with linking up the branches of the state concerned with different aspects of an emergent developmentalist ethos. In this instance agriculture and veterinary work were presented as intimately linked—now rationalized, they unfolded together as an integrated and coordinated totality.

Administrators offered these developmentalist shows as representations of reality, but the austere fiscal policies of the colonial state rendered these ambitions chimerical—they were spectral and experimental at best, the match between image and reality, between referent and referred, tenuous. This was not a “real” shamba, but the “Bukura Farm Institute,” a “12 acre model holding” to which “married couples were invited to live” so as to get a “good idea of how they should look after their own land back on the land unit.” This, then, was a representation of an ideal reality, rather than a reflection of existing conditions. As Kelly, writing of the Bukura film some years later, reflected: “This made an excellent propaganda film to show, but...did not

⁴¹ J.E. Obala, “Composition,” KNA HAKI/13/328

⁴² Excerpt of report from Committee appointed by the Secretary of State to report on Broadcasting in the colonies. M.F. Hill, Information Officer. “Draft Memorandum on the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office, with the Cooperation of Messrs, Cable & Wireless, Ltd., with Certain Proposals for the Improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” KNA HAKI/13/276 or CS/2/8/121 – Information and Propaganda

work out in practice.” The couples living on the farm complained that “it was all very well for governments to have these farms because there was no risk attached if the crops failed.” By contrast, if the couples used the proposed agricultural methods on their own plots and the crops were to fail, they “faced starvation.”⁴³

Viewers and listeners routinely read these experiments against their own experiences. As the developmentalist aspirations of the state continued making inroads into the lives of communities in the countryside, people grew increasingly wary of the new expert knowledge to which they were being subjected, drawing instead on more enduring ideas regarding the meaning of the social good and the means of securing it. As one administrator reflected, while it was important to note the “advance of civilization,” most people were “ultra conservative and distrustful of European ideals and ideas, with the exception of a growing worship of the ‘almighty dollar.’”⁴⁴ In supporting this argument, the officer cited a letter of complaint. The complainant asked why people had been “encouraged to plant maize and cotton to replace our old crops.” This advice was at odds with durable agricultural knowledge, “that our old crops such as wimpi, matama and mwele,” give “more food in bad years.” The letter writer was incensed: “Why are we told to do things that are wrong?”⁴⁵ Africans brought to bear their own knowledge and expertise in the fields of agriculture as they evaluated these schemes. Just as word of the mobile unit preceded its arrival, so too did rumors of failed agricultural experiments and development initiatives gone awry.

Popular responses to government broadcasts and films must be considered in light of experiences such as this. People were skeptical of these new mediated forms and the messages they bore. This raised the stakes for government-initiated information work. Government films and broadcasts were to offer viewers and listeners a vision of this integrated developmentalist thinking as an already existing reality, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. The unit was, in other words, to mitigate not only against the uneven infrastructural reach of the state—to operate

⁴³ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

⁴⁴ W.S. MacLellan Wilson, “Confidential – Notes on Impressions Gained After 3 Months Tour of the Machakos Reserves with the Government Mobile Cinema from 23rd April 1946 to 28th July 1946,” 31 July 1946, KNA HAKI/13/229.

⁴⁵ W.S. MacLellan Wilson, “Confidential – Notes on Impressions Gained After 3 Months Tour of the Machakos Reserves with the Government Mobile Cinema from 23rd April 1946 to 28th July 1946,” 31 July 1946, KNA HAKI/13/229.

as a material prosthetic—but its contents were to convince and cajole audiences in the face of conceptual breakdown. The unit’s operations had to offer proof of concept. In both material and conceptual terms, African experts would be asked to fill the breach, to act as critical maintainers, repairers, and translators of both technics and culture. In this regard, their labor is best conceived of as prosthetic work.

Medium as Message: Mechanical Breakdown, Prosthetic Work, and the Cultivation of Technical Expertise

In 1943, after three-and-a-half years as head of the Government Mobile Cinema Unit, Champion retired, being replaced by W. F. P. Kelly.⁴⁶ Kelly was coming off three years working as a District Officer in Northern Province, a place of “hardship as well as danger.”⁴⁷ Although Kelly felt ambivalent about “the idea of government propaganda in the bad sense,” he appreciated what he described as the “educative value of showing films to the Africans.”⁴⁸

For Kelly, his new role joined together his professional ambitions and his desires for administrative intimacy in a moment of flux (see Chapter 3). “The Officer-in-charge of the Mobile Cinema has one of the most interesting jobs in the Colony,” he wrote. “He sees more of the country and the people than anyone else, and has the most leisure to digest his experiences. Nothing could be better for an officer who having spent years in the Secretariat, feels he has lost contact with reality, than to spend a few months with a Mobile Cinema.”⁴⁹

For Kelly, the success of the mobile information unit turned on using technologies to produce a sense of “awe” in colonial audiences, an effect of what Brian Larkin has referred to as “the colonial sublime.”⁵⁰ This was not an un-curated effect, but was an expressed goal of British information workers in this period—we might recall here the golden letters written boldly across the side of the van that were cause for such excitement, but also ambivalence, at Maseno in 1940.

⁴⁶ “Government Mobile Cinema Annual Report, 1944,” KNA HAKI/13/309.

⁴⁷ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

⁴⁸ W.F.P. Kelly, District Officer, 1936-63. “Chapter V: The Mobile Cinema,” 5 in *Kenya Memoir*, Kelly MSS.Afr.s.2229:1, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library.

⁴⁹ “Government Mobile Cinema Annual Report, 1944,” KNA HAKI/13/309.

⁵⁰ Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).7.

When it came to technologies, though, this sense of awe was to be produced by backgrounding, rather than foregrounding, their mechanics. Kelly worked to strengthen this effect when he replaced Champion. While the “method of exhibition” had remained substantially the same, he was proud of the “improvements” he had made. Importantly these “improvements” did not pertain to content, but to form. He had raised the height of the screen, thereby enabling the projector to be located some distance from the screen itself. This reconfiguration was undertaken to minimize popular apprehensions of the mechanics of the operation, not least by minimizing the “noise of the generator.” This was critical. “From this eminence...[the show] can be heard for several miles, the crowd can be silenced at will, and, when silent, the commentator can introduce all kinds of modulations into his voice.”⁵¹ As was the case with the Bukura farm, in other words, the “success” of these shows, administrators believed, required minimizing the fact that they were, in fact, representations. New media technologies were supposed to awe, yes, but they were also to be received as transparent lenses onto reality.

Kelly’s interventions were an improvement on the old system of harder, more interventionist discipline. The rejigging of new technologies arriving from the UK had rendered it possible to allow the spectators to “laugh, talk, and enjoy themselves within limits without that continual blowing of whistles by...Tribal Police...an irritating feature of the old shows.”⁵² This was an attempt to move from discipline to ideology. And these shows, he assured the administration, were a great success, with average audiences reaching 2,300.⁵³ The system remained unwieldy, he admitted, but was sufficient for the time being. In the future, though, he imagined a unit that was “less elephantine and more mobile.”⁵⁴ In reconfiguring the unit Kelly was following in the footsteps of his mentor, Arthur Champion. It had been Champion that impressed on him the importance of actively tropicalizing this imperfectly tropicalized unit by navigating its imperfections, actively responding to its breakdowns, and improving on its design. But again, as was the case with the Bukura farm, while an emergent developmentalist ethos guided Kelly’s hope for a seamless system, these hopes were aspirational, located in a distant and never realized future, rather than in material conditions of everyday life. And trying to police

⁵¹ “Government Mobile Cinema Annual Report, 1944,” KNA HAKI/13/309.

⁵² “Government Mobile Cinema Annual Report, 1944,” KNA HAKI/13/309.

⁵³ “Government Mobile Cinema Annual Report, 1944,” KNA HAKI/13/309.

⁵⁴ “Government Mobile Cinema Annual Report, 1944,” KNA HAKI/13/309.

this line between representation and reality, trying to ensure that representations were taken as reflections of reality, required the input of constant labor and vigilance.

Commentators, and their “modulations” of voice, were critical to bridging the gulf between representation and reality. These men, administrators acknowledged, were essential to ensuring that programing was listened to and that these visits did not fall out of favor, being “completely forgotten.”⁵⁵ The KIO mobilized African knowledge workers, in other words, to mitigate against the possibility of the conceptual breakdown that would be the result of a visible (or audible) disjuncture between the state’s aspirational developmentalist future and the material present. Critical, too, were African technical experts who were responsible for ensuring that imperfectly tropicalized technologies ‘worked’ in the novel material setting that was the Kenya colony. This work, importantly, was obscured in Kelly’s representational practices, as had been the case with Champion.

Indeed, like Champion before him, Kelly expended few words on the African men staffing the unit, offering a picture of non-experts, of the any man, of an easily replaced laborer. Consider the following report from Kelly’s 1944 safari log: “The work of the African staff has been satisfactory considering they are not qualified electricians or mechanics.”⁵⁶ Far from being middle figures, these men are not even presented as having been cogs in the unwieldy operation that was the mobile information unit. And this trend was not limited to Kelly. As William Sellers, an Information Officer based in Nigeria, and one of the central personalities in the distributed knowledge economy that was the world of colonial information, wrote: “The vans will be required to operate over long periods *without skilled servicing*.”⁵⁷

However, reading official reports for moments of interruption reveals that African crew members, far from being dispensable, were critical to the operation of the unit. The long distances traveled over poorly cut roads were hard on bodies, hard on equipment, and hard on morale.⁵⁸ It is precisely in the context of breakdown that these experts and their expertise become visible. That this work becomes visible in the context of breakdown suggests just how much the unit’s capacity to function depended on these otherwise unremarked upon individuals. The work

⁵⁵ “Government Mobile Cinema Annual Report, 1944,” KNA HAKI/13/309.

⁵⁶ “Government Mobile Cinema Annual Report, 1944,” KNA HAKI/13/309.

⁵⁷ W. Sellers, “Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa,” December 1951, *Colonial Cinema*

⁵⁸ “Government Mobile Cinema Annual Report, 1944,” KNA HAKI/13/309.

of maintenance and repair in the context of breakdown was not only essential, it was creative. And breakdown was routine.

As one monthly report recounted: “This week’s performances have been somewhat marred by a defect in the loud speakers which has begun to assert itself,” leading to a “complete breakdown of our arrangements for amplification of the human voice.” This defect, he continued, “would not assert itself or perhaps be a defect at all under conditions in England.”⁵⁹

Administrators routinely attributed breakdown to imperfectly “tropicalised” technologies. And this was not limited to mechanical technologies. Film reels, too, had a different shelf-life in the “tropics.” Degradation, noted one report, was the result “many factors.”⁶⁰ Climatic conditions were partially to blame, but so too were the craggy road infrastructures over which mobile units were expected to travel. These “[b]ad and dusty roads” caused “heavy wear and tear on the films,”⁶¹ causing “a considerable amount of slacking” to take place “on reels of film...[leading] the adjoining surfaces...rub against each other at every jolt on the road.”⁶² These media were simply not designed for these conditions.

In the face of these imperfectly tropicalised technologies a series of workarounds became essential. In this case, a report noted that there were: “various devices for securing films tightly on their reels to stop them from rubbing in transit. *An efficient and cheap* one is a thin cross section of an old motor-car inner tube. A loop of tape on this home-made elastic band will make removal easy.”⁶³ Innovation was thus essential to the work of maintenance. And these innovations had to be both “efficient and cheap.” The need for such workarounds were both generated and constrained by policies of colonial austerity. But that did not render them unstudied. Indeed, technical workarounds of the kind described here were essential to making broadcasting ‘work,’ and the perceived stakes of ‘failure’ were high.

Administrators were convinced that mechanical mishaps would unduly shape the messages received, that an interruption in medium of conveyance might interrupt the messages on offer. Sellers was insistent on this point: “A very simple error on the part of the operator may

⁵⁹ Arthur Champion, “The Government Mobile Cinema Unit Report for Week – Ending October 20th 1940,” October 20, 1940, KNA HAKI/13/328.

⁶⁰ N.A. “Replacement of Prints,” *Colonial Cinema*, March 1945

⁶¹ N.A. “Replacement of Prints,” *Colonial Cinema*, March 1945

⁶² N.A. “Replacement of Prints,” *Colonial Cinema*, March 1945

⁶³ N.A. “Replacement of Prints,” *Colonial Cinema*, March 1945

cause some part of the equipment to fail at a time when its satisfactory operation is essential.”⁶⁴ And such interruptions would have durable effects, without a doubt retarding the “development of broadcasting in East Africa for many years.”⁶⁵ As F. H. Knight reported, absent the dedicated maintenance of imperfectly tropicalized technologies, deterioration was inevitable, the results of which were “obvious to the audience.” Audiences’ evaluations of breakdown were a major source of concern, for seldom did “they blame the projector.” Instead, the audience left with “a poor opinion of either the film, the projectionist, or the mobile cinema generally.”⁶⁶ Audiences had expectations, expectations for seamless presentation that the administration sought to live up to. And if “high standards” were not achieved, the “film show” and thus the efforts to use the mobile to usher in “development” would not be “a real success.”⁶⁷ This made the daily work of African crew members critically important. Indeed, officials’ reports notwithstanding, these men were technologists who fine-tuned their practice on the road. And this practiced labor had rendered the crew expert maintainers.

These technical experts routinely repaired the Megavox, changed worn out tires, tinkered with imperfectly tropicalized loudspeakers and amplifiers, tuned the wireless receiving set, managed the van-engine generator and the Bell and Howell 16 mm projector, and spliced together films when they broke. If policies of colonial austerity, in tandem with the unique material conditions obtaining in the Kenya colony, demanded the use of the van to run over the colony’s rough-shod roads as an infrastructural prosthetic, these were workarounds that required careful management.

And the hierarchies that critically shaped this world of information demanded that the crew should shoulder this burden. The “responsibility of maintaining the equipment in good conditions,” wrote Sellers:

falls upon the operator...[who] will, it is hoped, recognize his responsibility and set up a regular routine which will enable the equipment to be maintained in good condition. In this way, he will become familiar with the entire equipment and be

⁶⁴ W. Sellers, “Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa,” *Colonial Cinema*, December 1951,

⁶⁵ E.F. Twining, W.K. Brasher, C.A.L. Richards, “Broadcasting Investigations,” Entebbe: Printed by the Government Printer, Uganda),

⁶⁶ F.H. Knight, “Projector Maintenance,” *Colonial Cinema*, December 1949.

⁶⁷ F.H. Knight, “Projector Maintenance,” *Colonial Cinema*, December 1949.

able to replace or readjust minor parts without causing delay in an itinerary or the expense and miles of travel by a skilled mechanic or electrician.⁶⁸

There was a disjuncture between the actual daily work of African crew members and colonial representational practices, which were rooted in a deep-seated ideology that held there to be something incommensurate between Africa and technologies, between Africans and technological expertise. This impeded administrators' capacity to see technological expertise where and when it was happening.⁶⁹ And yet, evidently, African operators were routinely saddled with the task of maintaining and repairing persnickety technologies.

While the Bell and Howell was widely viewed as being an ideal projector for the region, as it worked "well under tropical conditions," it was a complicated technical object.⁷⁰ As Knight wrote in an article titled "Projector Maintenance:" "The portable film projector is a highly complex precision instrument, and consequently requires...careful handling and maintenance."⁷¹ Without this work of maintenance, which, he lamented, was all "too frequently" ignored, the equipment would be subject to the particularities of the "tropics." This "very roughest treatment" allowed "dust and dirt" to accumulate.⁷² These conditions demanded the mobilization of specialized knowledge, without which the "projector's steady journey on the downward path" was assured. In other words, these African crew members were responsible for making imperfectly tropicalized technologies "work."

If African experts and technologists were responsible for maintaining and rejigging imperfectly "tropicalised" technologies, they were also responsible for negotiating worn-out parts—the material stuffs of policies of colonial austerity. After complaining about a series of mechanical upsets, one Officer noted that not a single show had been delayed, admitting that credit was due to his "native driver who ...[had] jumped into the breach."⁷³ This act of jumping into the breach, I have shown, was routine. And it was prosthetic work. In the context of the habitual breakdown of non-tropicalized technologies, African technologists were routinely asked

⁶⁸ W. Sellers, "Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa," *Colonial Cinema*, December 1951,

⁶⁹ And these visions shaped the archives with which we engage.

⁷⁰ R.W. Harris, A.R.P.S., of the Colonial Film Unit, "16 mm. Bell and Howell-Gaumont 601," *Colonial Cinema*, June 1950.

⁷¹ F.H. Knight, "Projector Maintenance," *Colonial Cinema*, December 1949.

⁷² F.H. Knight, "Projector Maintenance," *Colonial Cinema*, December 1949.

⁷³ Arthur Champion, "Report of Mobile Cinema Unit Up to Week Ending October 6, 1940," 8 October 1940, KNA HAKI/13/328.

to close the breach, to use their skills to make broadcasting ‘work.’ In this instance, the “driver/operator,” one of the few technical experts I can track in this partial archive, was Katele. And he had worked with the mobile unit’s first operator, Champion, since the earliest days of the operation—navigating the treacherous roads of the colony as the unit moved, operating, maintaining, and repairing the “generator and projector” along the way. Conditions obtaining in the field demanded this. And by the time of this report, Katele had been working with the unit for many years.

The expert work of these men, in other words, far from being unexceptional, was practiced. It was expertise borne of experiences in negotiating Kenya’s topography, navigating its uneven road infrastructures, and repairing the unit’s worn out parts. It is against this material backdrop that we should interpret one Officer’s reflections, when he wrote that the unit’s staff routinely undertook “duties which one feels are much more responsible than their education and experiences warrants.”⁷⁴

Despite the central role played by African knowledge workers and technical experts, however, not only was their import perennially elided in official correspondence, but they were inadequately remunerated for their labors. In 1940, while African translators for broadcast were all recruited from other government departments in order to “ensure a satisfactory degree of reliability and responsibility,” they were not compensated for their work.⁷⁵ This generated no small measure of conflict, with the Information Department complaining that the seriousness of its mandate was being undermined by the reliance on “voluntary workers.”⁷⁶ Once remuneration was standardized, African knowledge workers were making just above what semi-skilled laborers were making in Nairobi, this despite the outsized role that their knowledge work played in the world of colonial information.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Arthur Champion, “Report of the Government Cinema Unit For the Week Ending Sunday, September 22,” KNA HAKI/13/32.

⁷⁵ Officer In Charge, Kenya Information Office, “African Translators and Announcers.” 30 August 1940, KNA AE/34/64 - Posts and Telegraph, 1940-41.

⁷⁶ Officer In Charge, Kenya Information Office, “African Translators and Announcers.” 30 August 1940, KNA AE/34/64 - Posts and Telegraph, 1940-41.

⁷⁷ Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 188.

Message as Medium: Conceptual Breakdown and the Prosthetic Labor of African Knowledge Workers

African knowledge workers—those men responsible for translating government scripts into vernacular languages, conducting research with communities on the ground, reporting back on Africans’ responses to government information work, and elucidating the situations in African locations—were relatively autonomous in executing their responsibilities. They were largely “in charge of the unit and responsible for the conduct of the show.” And they were in positions of authority, making announcements and commentaries to explain policy and the rationale behind development campaigns. They were also to act as a sounding board of public opinion, rendering reports to the KIO.

The central importance of these men was directly related to their work of translation. And this work of translation was required in both linguistic and conceptual terms. Just as the unit’s technical components were perennially subject to breakdown, so too were the messages the unit bore. Just as the unit’s technical components required rejigging, so too did the developmentalist vision on offer. In the field of translation, then, administrators leaned heavily on the cultural expertise of knowledge workers like Wakaria. But Wakaria’s role was not limited to that of conceptual suturer. Indeed, it was precisely due to the state’s reliance on Wakaria, and people like him, that knowledge workers were able to routinely repurpose colonial media technologies as they pursued their own vocations.

In the case of Wakaria, his role as a researcher and broadcaster enabled him to engage in his own project of culture-building and renewal, rendering new media technologies *his* prosthetics, extensions he mobilized as he called to order new communities of listeners, listeners increasingly bound together by language. But before we return to Wakaria, it is critical that we locate the important role of translation in this work, and how issues of translation emerged as the central pivot of administrative and missionary concern.

Savvy administrators betrayed their understanding of the centrally important role played by these knowledge workers as they undertook this critical work of translation. As noted by one administrator: “There can be no evangelism without evangelists – no propaganda without

propagandists. A good African propagandist is as rare as a good European one.”⁷⁸ The comparison of African information workers to African evangelists is telling. As all were aware, the success and spread of Christianity in the region, and of Protestantism in particular, turned on the knowledge, the work, and the commitment of these critical intermediaries. It was for this reason that the Church had expended so much labor on the work of translating the Bible into vernacular languages, the requisite not only for teaching would-be catechists to read, but also for enabling these men to spread the “Word.” Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that when issues of translation came up in relation to media, those affiliated with the Church had a lot to say.

Indeed, the history of radio broadcasting in Kenya is linked to the history of the Anglican Church in the region in critical ways. Reverend Leonard Beecher of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) was heavily involved in orchestrating the production of broadcasts to African communities in the Kenya colony.

By 1941, the Information Office had recruited Beecher to undertake the work of translating scripts from English to Kikuyu.⁷⁹ In the same year an ad-hoc Translation Bureau was established as a joint effort between the administration and CMS.⁸⁰ Five African translators were engaged under the direction of Beecher to undertake translations from English into Kikuyu, Kikamba, Bantu-Kavirondo, Swahili, and Nandi languages.⁸¹ Miss Clarke of the Union of Seventh Day Adventists, for her part, supervised Dholuo translations.⁸² In the beginning, African programs consisted of two half-hour weekly programs in each of the vernaculars, with an additional fifteen-minute daily program in Swahili.⁸³ Kisii and Taita were given one program per week each. Though Beecher was convinced of the “value of the Christian contribution to African Broadcasting,” it was work, he felt, that took him from what ought to be his primary duty: translating literature.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Dickson, Cpt. General Staff Intelligence, “Mobile Propaganda Safari in Uganda,” 24 March 1943, BNA CO/875/8/8

⁷⁹ “Religious Broadcasting: A Communication from Miss Wrong on his Subject,” Anglican Church of Kenya Archives [hereafter ACKA] CMO/CMS/1

⁸⁰ “Memorandum of the Translation Bureau Attached to the Information Office,” KNA AHC/10/68.

⁸¹ “Memorandum of the Translation Bureau Attached to the Information Office,” KNA AHC/10/68.

⁸² “Memorandum of the Translation Bureau Attached to the Information Office,” KNA AHC/10/68.

⁸³ “Memorandum of the Translation Bureau Attached to the Information Office,” KNA AHC/10/68.

⁸⁴ “Religious Broadcasting: A Communication from Miss Wrong on his Subject,” ACKA.CMO/CMS/1; See also Leonard Beecher to Hill, December, 1940, KNA AE/34/64.

Louis Leakey, for his part, had been a vocal celebrant of radio as a tool of governance, “development,” and social transformation from the outset. Leakey was born in 1903 at his father’s mission station in Kikuyuland.⁸⁵ Growing up among Kikuyu peers, Leakey underwent a modified version of initiation at the age of 13. Fluent in Kikuyu, he spent his life mediating—often to his own advantage—between Kikuyu communities and the colonial government.⁸⁶ It is perhaps no surprise then that Leakey was at the forefront of voices arguing for the important role radio could play in correcting “wild rumors” during the 1939 broadcasting “experiment” undertaken amongst Kikuyu communities in Kiambu and Pumwani (see Chapter 3).⁸⁷ In this, Leakey was being somewhat self-congratulatory, acting as he did as the “announcer for the Kikuyu broadcasts.”⁸⁸

In mobilizing the labor of missionaries and their kin, the government built on long-standing politics of austerity that conjured up missionaries’ sense of purpose as they worked to use the Church as yet another infrastructural prosthetic, tethering missionaries to state-directed projects of development. Yet this was not merely colonialism on the cheap. Administrators understood Beecher and Leakey’s participation as being essential to generating new attachments between communities and new media, a capacity that turned on, in the case of Beecher, his deep “knowledge of the African.”⁸⁹ But if the administration hoped to use the Church to fortify its developmental ambitions via the use of media, missionaries brought their own ideas—ideas borne of this supposed intimacy—with them as they circulated into the world of colonial information.

In particular, missionaries brought with them ideas regarding language gained through their experiences as evangelizers. The way missionaries conceptualized language was never divorced from conversations regarding social change, two thorny domains of practice and policy that were intimately linked in the minds of these men and women. From the outset, administrators imagined that, in the future, broadcasting would be undertaken in Kiswahili, itself a stop-gap solution with English ultimately replacing Kiswahili as the single language of

⁸⁵ Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, “Louis Leakey’s Mau Mau: A Study in the Politics of Knowledge,” *History and Anthropology*, Vol. 5, No.2 (1991): 150.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁸⁷ Louis Leakey to the Commissioner of Police, KNA AHC/10/74

⁸⁸ KNA AE/34/62, Posts and Telegraphs; Wireless; Broadcasting; to Natives (1938-39)

⁸⁹ “Memorandum of the Translation Bureau Attached to the Information Office,” KNA AHC/10/68.

broadcast (see Chapters 3 and 4). Missionaries, far from advocating for the wisdom of cultivating English as a would-be future *lingua franca*, emphasized the importance of reforming and standardizing vernacular languages. In the domain of literature, missionaries and African converts had devoted no small measure of energy to the work of translation, rendering the Bible accessible to the literate among their congregants. In part these divergent visions of language turned on competing ideas of development. By contrast to administrators, who held a teleological vision of development as being intimately tethered to English-language learning, missionaries held that paths to development could be linguistically heterogeneous.

This belief was born of missionaries' conception of language, which saw a direct correlation between culture and language, between the formation of complete persons and the maintenance of linguistic inheritances. As a member of the Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies wrote:

the mother tongue is of primary importance. The mother tongue is the true vehicle of mother wit. Another medium of speech may bring with it, as English brings with it, a current of new ideas. But the mother tongue is one with the air in which a man is born. It is through the vernacular (refined, though not weakened, by scholarship and taste) that the new conceptions of the mind should press their way to birth in speech.⁹⁰

People's internal transformations, as this suggests, were imprinted in language. Language was thus not simply the vehicle for expressing reality. Instead it registered changes in, and in turn reshaped, reality. In this, missionary ideas surrounding language were not dissimilar from the future-driven, though spectral, weight administrators granted to messages carried over the loudspeakers attached to the van.

Evangelists, though, were often at odds with the government when it came to language, particularly in the postwar period when administrative energies turned towards centralizing and streamlining administrative practice (see Chapter 3). The Anglican church, for example, was a central critic of the administration regarding the limited knowledge of people in the employ of the state in either the rudimentaries of Kiswahili, in the case of mainly African askaris, and vernaculars, in the case of administrative officers.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Excerpt from "Language in African School Education," Anglican Church of Kenya Archives [hereafter ACKA] ACKA/ET/AEC/1 – African Education Council, 1920-1956

⁹¹ "For the Meeting of the Languages Board to be Held on the 6th June, 1959," in "Government Language, 1951-60, ACKA/PBOW/16 - "Communications."

What they shared with administrators, however, was the belief that language was critical to forging a sense of group, of community. Vernacular languages, for missionaries, were critical tethers that enabled people to unify around core concepts and values. Language was not a reflection of culture, then, it was culture:

A man's native speech is almost like his shadow, inseparable from his personality. In our way of speech we must each, as the old saying runs, drink water out of our own cistern. For each one of us is a member of a community. We share its energy and its instincts; its vernacular, through our folk-speech, whether actually uttered or harboured in our unspoken thoughts, that most of us attain the characteristic expression of our nature and of what our nature allows us to be or to discern...It is the mother tongue which gives to the adult mind the relief and illumination of utterance, as it clutches after the aid of words when new ideas or judgements spring from the wordless recesses of thought or feeling under the stimulus of physical experience or of emotion.⁹²

A Gikuyu Anglican representing African interests on the Advisory Committee on Education was in partial agreement with this position. He argued that children trying to learn any secondary language would be at a disadvantage if they did not first have a real understanding of their vernaculars.

It is difficult to see how a child can acquire any real understanding and command of English if he has never been trained to express himself with ease and freedom in his mother tongue. A first essential step towards raising the quality of language teaching in general and indeed the teaching of all subjects, is a recognition of the primary importance of the vernacular.⁹³

For this representative, vernacular language acquisition was not incommensurate with the learning of other languages. But, he continued, noting that Kiswahili was *not* Africans' second language of choice but English, comprehension of which, he argued, was an "African's right," it being the "only door...that is precious in the common inheritance of the peoples of the Empire."⁹⁴ This was not, then, an argument for parochialism, but an argument that advocated for the development of linguistic facility along at least two contiguous registers. Indeed, it seems quite possible that, for men such as this representative, these inheritances did not evidence different or

⁹² "Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies. Memo on Language in African School Education," ACKA/ET/AEC/1 - "African Education Council, 1920-1956."

⁹³ "Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies. Memo on Language in African School Education," ACKA/ET/AEC/1 - "African Education Council, 1920-1956."

⁹⁴ Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, Memorandum of Language in African School Education, 1942-45. ACKA/ET/AEC/1 - African Education Council, 1920-1956

even incommensurate scales of attachment. There was a politics of linguistic and conceptual multiplicity, a world of potential wherein multiple scales of belonging—in linguistic, social, and political terms—were simultaneously at play (see Chapter 4).

But not all African evangelists agreed with this position. Many viewed Kiswahili, not English, as being a key *lingua franca*, as being the language of the state to come. As an anonymous writer penned in a letter to the Committee, demands for the abolition of Kiswahili in education turned on an “alarming tendency among educationalists to think of education as being for examinations instead of for the purposes of developing a community. Swahili is a necessary part of a country such as this, containing so many tribes and tongues, with people at so many different stages of development.”⁹⁵ For this letter writer, Kiswahili would be the language of a new cosmopolitanism, located not in global elsewheres but within the polyglot social worlds of the Kenya colony. As he continued: “If people will only realize that township life and consequent mixing of tribes and tongues is going to spread, they would realize too that in Swahili we have a priceless means of inter-communication and of imparting information and instruction.”⁹⁶

The position of this writer was borne of an emergent broadcasting infrastructure:

In many schools now Swahili is becoming a popular study... This change is possibly due to the increasing use of Swahili in broadcasting, [and] in the newspaper *Baraza*, which is so widely read and quoted, and to the wider world brought to the notice of the tribes by the war and the fact that so many of their men have seen the value of Swahili in their contacts with fellow soldiers.⁹⁷

Whether the use of Kiswahili in broadcasting was fundamentally reshaping the linguistic landscape of the Kenya colony during the war years is hard to ascertain. It is clear, however, that peoples’ experiences fighting in the war had contributed to their visions of the role that language could play in binding together community.

The key point here, though, is that neither position advocated for monolingualism. Critiques, such as they did exist in the case of Kiswahili, turned not on a defensive parochialism

⁹⁵ “Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies. Memo on Language in African School Education,” ACKA/ET/AEC/1 - “African Education Council, 1920-1956.”

⁹⁶ “Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies. Memo on Language in African School Education,” ACKA/ET/AEC/1 - “African Education Council, 1920-1956.”

⁹⁷ “Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies. Memo on Language in African School Education,” ACKA/ET/AEC/1 - “African Education Council, 1920-1956.”

(see Chapter 4 for a contrast), but precisely on the limited social and political worlds to which it gave people access. As members of the Local Native Council (LNC), Fort Hall, wrote: “Swahili [simply] does not exist outside East Africa.”⁹⁸ It was the state and missionaries, though operating from different vantage points, that held out a parochial vision of languages as constraining structures that would dictate, albeit in different terms, the desirable scale—here in the singular—of social and political inclusion. If for administrators, vernacular language broadcasting, for example, was a stop-gap solution in preparation for the days of monolingualism for some listeners, Wakaria likely among them, register switching was not a stop-gap position but a desired state.

Irrespective of one’s position, issues of language were always a matter of concern, and rarely a matter of fact when it came to questions of broadcasting.⁹⁹ The problem, in part, was fundamental, turning on the realization that direct one-to-one translation was impossible. Nor was translation simply a linguistic feat, a consideration that itself required “unremitting attention to every detail between the preparation of the original English script...and the eventual delivery to the microphone,” but an achievement that required the painstaking labor of translating concepts. As it pertained to Europeans working for the Information Office, this was widely acknowledged. As a member of the Translation Bureau noted: “Mr. Beecher’s work is by no means limited to the checking of translations. The preparation of African broadcasts does not only involve their molding into a form of English capable of proper translation into the vernaculars...It also requires that the broadcasts should be attractive and informative.”¹⁰⁰ This was completely uncharted terrain, as “the task of broadcasting to Africans is a new one.” This demanded experimentation and research, because “only by constant trial and error can a successful form of broadcast be established.”¹⁰¹

In pursuit of this work of conceptual translation, the KIO recruited African knowledge workers. While some reported that “translator-announcers” took “to broadcasting like a duck to

⁹⁸ “Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies. Memo on Language in African School Education,” ACKA/ET/AEC/1 - “African Education Council, 1920-1956.”

⁹⁹ Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225-248.

¹⁰⁰ “Memorandum on the Translation Bureau Attached to the Information Office,” KNA AHC/10/68

¹⁰¹ E.R. A. St. Davies to Rev J. L Beecher, 24 April 1941, KNA AHC10/68

water,”¹⁰² others acknowledged that being an effective broadcaster was not a given but a skill. As Champion recounted, “the absence of competent personnel for the technical work...combined with a particularly incompetent announcer...who has neither the voice nor the mentality for the job” could positively destroy a tour.¹⁰³ These criticisms of personnel brought into full relief how reliant the unit was on the crew’s work and expertise. As Champion himself admitted, these experiences had clarified for him “how dependent the success of our demonstrations is on...well read introductions and intelligent and well timed commentary.”¹⁰⁴ The goal was to create something unique, “something that was real African propaganda and not just an adaptation of mechanical European propaganda.”¹⁰⁵

On the one hand, the need for African knowledge workers to undertake conceptual translation was in line with a colonial ideology which spoke easily of an “African Mentality.” As the Provincial Commissioner of Nyanza wrote:

To succeed in getting information across to the African, we must employ Africans for the purpose. We believe that we have a knack of presenting subjects and wonder why they do not penetrate the African perception, it is because we ‘think’ differently. I recollect an advanced African telling me once that he was sorry his education had not continued, though he was earning a good living, ‘because he was just beginning to understand how Europeans think,’ and considered that in time he might have been of considerable help to his people in ‘translating’ our thoughts and teachings. This brings me to the point that to succeed in ‘reaching’ the Africans we must employ Africans for the purpose, and allow them to translate very freely any subject which is to be presented.¹⁰⁶

As this suggests, the skilled work of translation required shuttling meaning across what were perceived to be divergent epistemological fields. These traces suggest something of the delicate knowledge work undertaken by Africans working for the information department. They had to do more than be the voices of translation; they had to make legible the messages of their European interlocutors.

¹⁰² Miss Wrong, Secretary of International Committee on Colonial Literature for Africa (1941), ACKA/COM/CMS/2

¹⁰³ Arthur Champion, “The Government Mobile Cinema Unit – Report for Week Ending October 20, 1944), KNA HAKI/13/328.

¹⁰⁴ Arthur Champion, “The Government Mobile Cinema Unit – Report for Week Ending October 20, 1944), KNA HAKI/13/328.

¹⁰⁵ Gurney, “Mobile Propaganda Safari in Uganda,” BNA CO/875/8/8

¹⁰⁶ Memo by PC Nyanza, KNA PC/NZA/2/7/92.

And this was difficult to achieve. In 1940, the Advisory Committee on Information noted:

The Information Officer...was dissatisfied with the Vernacular Broadcasts. He said that on the previous day he had caused the Kikuyu script to be translated back into English and this had revealed serious discrepancies with the English script, which itself was not good. The Information Officer added that he had issued an instruction that in future no script in a vernacular was to be broadcast until the translation had been checked with the English script by a European.¹⁰⁷

Ensuring quality work required time and vigilance. As Hill noted on joining the KIO as an Information Officer on November 1, 1940: “I found that the preparation of the original English script was often unsatisfactory and frequently lacking in [an] appreciation [of]...the form and style essential to effective translation into the vernacular language[s].”¹⁰⁸ Ensuring a match between English and vernacular versions of broadcasts was essential. But as missionaries would have known, creating such symmetrical translations was near impossible in linguistic or conceptual terms.

The easiest and least threatening fix would have been to employ Europeans fluent in the vernaculars to both write and present the materials. But the administration was in a bind. Not only was media that was obvious government propaganda dismissed out of hand, with listeners responding to what they heard from Europeans with “only scepticism and suspicion,” and rejecting programming that did not appear “objective and free from Government propaganda,”¹⁰⁹ but native English speakers’ handle on the vernaculars was the subject of much derision.¹¹⁰ Audiences were quick to point out any interruption in the flow of broadcasts or live shows, though interruptions were routine.¹¹¹

This work of conceptual translation required mobilizing local idioms and salient metaphors, and finding the right people to perform this work was no easy task:

¹⁰⁷ “Extract from Minutes of Meeting of Advisory Committee on Information Held on the 14th December, 1940.” KNA HAKI/13/276 or CS/2/8/121 – Information and Propaganda

¹⁰⁸ M.F. Hill, Information Officer, “Memorandum of the Broadcasting Service Arranged by the Kenya Information Office, with the Cooperation of Messrs. Cable & Wireless Limited, With Certain Proposals for the improvement of the Nairobi Broadcasting Station,” KNA HAKI/13/170.

¹⁰⁹ Perspective of Patrick Jubb, Director of Broadcasting, KNA AHC/18/34 - Regional Mount Kenya Station.

¹¹⁰ Gurney, “Mobile Propaganda Safari in Uganda,” BNA CO/875/8/8, 1943

¹¹¹ Gurney, “Mobile Propaganda Safari in Uganda,” BNA CO/875/8/8, 1943

Vernacular[s] besides having a considerable grammatical system taps all the wealth of allusion to traditional songs, stories and proverbs which are deliberately used by good vernacular speakers to make all points clear. These allusions have not only a profound literary and artistic significance, but also an important value in propaganda and morale because their use is an appeal to history and the inherited wisdom of the tribe.¹¹²

What was required, in other words, were knowledge workers capable of making British developmentalist messages *legible* and *meaningful* to African communities. Carbon copies across scripts were impossible, to be sure, and loose conveyance was as necessary as it was threatening.

In this, and in general, administrators were limited by their own conceptual imaginaries, assuming that listeners' cares were parochial in scope. "We must collect and 'feature' local news" argued E. R. Davies, head of the African Section of the Kenya Information Office. Understanding "the local" required employing "locals." As the report continued: "To make sure that the local news was of interest to Africans it had to be collected *by Africans*."¹¹³

Indeed, the recruitment of African knowledge workers was undertaken in a bid to firmly root broadcasting in the lifeworlds of listeners.¹¹⁴ And so, during the war years, "well-known chiefs" were invited to the microphone to counter the feeling that broadcasts to African troops had come to feel "too impersonal, coming as they do from an unknown announcer in Nairobi."¹¹⁵ Observers had noted that "the chief attraction of...[speakers was a] well known voice, and personality, [this was the case] irrespective of the matter on which he speaks."¹¹⁶ The goal here was to "introduce a personal element into the vernacular broadcasts by means of short talks by men who are well known to the tribe to which they are talking...This gave a domestic touch to

¹¹² J. Wilson, "Memorandum: The Use of 'Pidgin' and Vernacular for Propaganda Purposes in the Colonies," N.D. CO 875/5/13. This comment was made in reference to the use of a "pidgin" in Nigeria. One of the interesting features of the world of broadcasting, is expertise in this period often did not relate to connections between colonies and metropolises but across colonies.

¹¹³ A Broadcast Given From Nairobi on Friday, 8th August, 1941, By Mr. E.R. St. A. Davies, in Charge of the African Section of the Kenya Information Office, "Some Problems of Broadcasting to Africans." Emphasis added, KNA AHC/10/68. This against the available evidence, which suggested that Africans were interested in the capacity of listening to expand their social and political horizons.

¹¹⁴ A Broadcast Given From Nairobi on Friday, 8th August, 1941, By Mr. E.R. St. A. Davies, in Charge of the African Section of the Kenya Information Office, "Some Problems of Broadcasting to Africans," KNA AHC/10/68

¹¹⁵ Geoffrey Northcote, Principal Information Officer, Ministry of Information, East Africa Command to Information Officers, 28 August 1942, CO 875/8/21 "Propaganda, Conference of Information Officers in Nairobi, 1942-43.

¹¹⁶ Hutchinson to DC, Central Kavirondo, DC/KSM1/28/52 – Publications and Records; Propaganda and Wireless Sets

the programmes.” Autobiographies were a move in the same direction. Indeed, Davies readily acknowledged that: “A good deal more credence is given to the broadcasts if the voices of well known natives are occasionally heard by the listeners.” And this had been the case from the outset. As early as 1940, people on the Coast reported that Africans showed a great interest in talks “given by Africans whom they know.”¹¹⁷

If this work of conceptual translation required a kind of poetics, it also brought into full relief the politics of the infrastructural world of which broadcasting was a part. The “psychology and political views” of Africans would “have to be taken seriously” when programing was designed, one report noted.¹¹⁸ To do so, administrators were forced to concede, would require mobilizing the local. It was only in this way that a seemingly generic form, radio, would become habitual and everyday. This was a scalar move by which administrators sought to embed radio broadcasting in the particular milieu of communities it hoped to address over the airwaves.

Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, African knowledge workers did not *only* act infrastructurally, then. They were critical intermediaries and maintainers of ideology as well as technics. This placed African knowledge workers in a place of threatening power. So thoroughgoing was this issue that these key intermediaries, these knowledge workers and broadcasters, these researchers and translators, were always viewed with suspicion. As Kelly noted, even with an expansion in funding for information work, which included 5 vans promised following the end of hostilities, the group would still have to concern themselves with the “loyalty of the commentator.”

Perhaps because of their experience with translation missionaries, in particular, viewed the medium of radio as being unsteady and volatile, leading those among their ranks to be even more anxious than the administration about the prospect of drawing on the labor of African knowledge workers and announcers. In coming to their conclusions, it seems that missionaries drew on their experience working with African catechists, and their intimate knowledge of the importance of innuendo, proverbial forms, and idiomatic sayings in shaping communication.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ E.R. Davies as cited in Information Officer, Kampala to Honorable Chief Secretary, Entebbe, “Broadcasting,” 11 June 1941. Broadcasts for Africans (includes papers on Listener Research), Uganda National Archives [hereafter UNA].

¹¹⁸ DC/MUR/3/10/2 - Stage Plays and Cinematography, 1934052

¹¹⁹ Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004).

They, in other words, understood the complexity and the Janus-faced nature of language; the ability for language to communicate cultural facts to listeners, facts that might be missed by European listeners. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, it would be these men, men who saw themselves as having unique insights into the local, who argued for ever-more stringent protocol when it came to recruiting knowledge workers. Leakey, for his part, argued that despite evidence that local voices would augment the success of broadcasts, that “any such talks by chiefs and other prominent natives” were not “advisable in war time.”¹²⁰ Mobilizing local knowledge, all were beginning to realize, was a requisite, but it did not come without risks.

But who were these knowledge workers? To crib from Ambrose’s own itinerary, these were men of high education, who were highly mobile as a result. These were men with an interest in travel, who spoke a minimum of two languages. Most importantly, perhaps, these were men with a sensitivity for the local. Indeed, in the 1940s, the IO tasked African knowledge workers with not only translating government knowledge but with generating new knowledge. This took many forms, ranging from research on local conditions to reporting back on local responses to the information being disseminated through the mobile information unit. And this work, their remuneration notwithstanding, was value-generating. Indeed, the information gathered and interpreted by these men was subsequently cycled up and integrated into the state’s expanding information apparatus, a critical component of ongoing efforts to “tropicalise” colonial media. This knowledge work was not to be depersonalized. These African knowledge workers were “expected to make as many personal contacts as possible.”¹²¹ Some were to act as “local correspondents, with their homes widely scattered.” By 1941, some 15 of these correspondents had been appointed. And it was these men that were responsible for sending news from the districts to Nairobi.¹²²

It quickly became apparent that this work of news gathering, too, was a skill. While some “caught on to the idea at once,” one administrator reported, others had “no nose for news.”¹²³

¹²⁰ “Broadcasts Programmes Sub-Committee, Eighth Meeting Held at 3:30 p.m. on Friday 12 July, 1940,” AE/34/63

¹²¹ E.R. Davies, Officer in Charge, Africa Section, “African Propaganda, 1942,” KNA HAKI/13/229.

¹²² A Broadcast Given From Nairobi on Friday, 8th August, 1941, By Mr. E.R. St. A. Davies, in Charge of the African Section of the Kenya Information Office, “Some Problems of Broadcasting to Africans.” AHC/10/68

¹²³ A Broadcast Given From Nairobi on Friday, 8th August, 1941, By Mr. E.R. St. A. Davies, in Charge of the African Section of the Kenya Information Office, “Some Problems of Broadcasting to Africans.” AHC/10/68

The concern was not simply that there would be accidental slip ups, but that knowledge workers would use their position in the network of information to spread messages contrary to those desired by the state. And this was not limited to newsmen. “We could never guarantee,” wrote another administrator, “that a singer would not convey remarks about the weather to the enemy.”¹²⁴ Thus it was of the utmost importance that they locate “men whom they could trust to broadcast faithfully the material supplied.”¹²⁵ Screening was strict. “A number have been tried out,” one report recounted. Some were outright “rejected on political grounds eg because they are members of associations, the activities of which are likely to make them unreliable.”¹²⁶ The political work of these knowledge workers was, evidently, of a different shape than that aspired to by the colonial state. But even with these provisions in place, overhearers could never tell, really, what knowledge workers were communicating nor how their messages were being received.

Indeed, so great was the concern over how information generated by these men would be broadcast and interpreted that G. G. S. Hutchinson, Manager of Information Services, argued that what was needed was a network of informants to report back to the Information Office on popular perceptions of, and reactions to, broadcasting.¹²⁷ And so, in the early 1940s, in a bid to generate “reliable reports of the effect which the various types of propaganda is having,” the Information Officer enlisted the “assistance of observers” of a wide variety; a heterogeneous group composed of “various races, both official and unofficial throughout the country.”¹²⁸ But evaluating responses remained difficult. Some argued that it was impossible to judge the “degree of effect [of these shows] on the native mind.” In other areas, the interest was simply not there, reports indicating that so few people were showing up for broadcasts that information, such as it did exist regarding reception, could not be said to have been representative.¹²⁹ Those that were listening in tended to be highly educated, moreover, and therefore their opinions were not

¹²⁴ Miss Wrong, Secretary of International Committee on Colonial Literature for Africa (1941) ACKA/COM/CMS/2

¹²⁵ To the Hon Chief Secretary, “Broadcasting Facilities for Africans,” 20th September, 1945.

¹²⁶ AE/34/64 - Posts and Telegraph, 1940-41.

¹²⁷ G.G.S. Hutchinson to the Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza Province, “African Broadcasts,” 1 December, 1941. AHC/10/68.

¹²⁸ C.M. Deverrell for Chief Secretary, “Asian and African Propaganda,” 30 January 1941, KNA HAKI/13/229.

¹²⁹ Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, “Asian and African Propaganda,” 14 February 1941, KNA HAKI/13/229.

reflective of popular consensus.¹³⁰ In other instances, still, administrators simply refused to offer up their reflections, perhaps resenting this impulse towards centralization (see Chapter 3).¹³¹

It seems likely that Leakey played a significant role in stoking this anxiety. Indeed, he routinely railroaded information work, demanding that particular voices be banned from the mic. Sometimes, Leakey's position won the day, leading to the dismissal of knowledge workers. In 1940, for example, James Beuttah was cut from the African Information Services' (AIS) roster. He had been scheduled to broadcast on the soil conservation efforts that would become part and parcel of the spate of expertly administered reforms that typified the "second colonial occupation" of the postwar period.¹³² Beuttah was, at this stage, already in the employ of the state, working as a propaganda officer of the Local Native Council (LNC). And he was experienced in the world of information, having worked as a commentator with *Champion* in the early 1940s. And yet Leakey emphatically rejected Beuttah's appointment. As the meeting minutes noted, Leakey "felt very strongly on the matter" claiming that Beuttah had "taken an oath that he was the enemy of the British and would probably be under detention within a week." For his part, the Chairman of the meeting stated that he had known "James Beuttah for many years and that the latter had been a member of the first Native Council to be elected in the native locations of Nairobi in 1926 when he himself had been District Commissioner" there. E. R. Davies, too, challenged Leakey, arguing that Beuttah had been "sent into broadcast by the District Commissioner at Fort Hall." Even the Chief Native Commissioner (CNC), the Chairman noted, had "approved of his giving a talk on the wireless."¹³³

In this instance, Leakey was himself playing double duty. His rejection of Beuttah, among other African broadcasters, he freely admitted, was based on knowledge he gained working for the Criminal Investigations Division (CID). It was ostensibly on the basis of information so gathered that Leakey made his recommendations. But here he was also exploiting his dual role, using it as a "cloak for *fetina*," as he worked to settle old scores. In this instance, Leakey's disdain for Beuttah was the result of Beuttah's role in the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), an organization that Leakey felt unduly challenged the authority of

¹³⁰ D.C. Kitale to PC Rift Valley Province "Asian and African Propaganda," 24 February 1941, HAKI/13/229.

¹³¹ D.R.G. Brown to Provincial Commissioner, Rift Valley Province, KNA HAKI/13/229.

¹³² "Broadcast Programmes Sub-Committee," 12 July 1940, KNA AE/34/63

¹³³ "Broadcast Programmes Sub-Committee," Eighth Meeting held at 3:30 p.m. on Friday 12 July 1940, KNA AE/34/63

conservative Gikuyu elders, such as Chief Waruhiu, with whom he was close.¹³⁴ And Beuttah was not the only prominent personality rejected. So too was Eliud Mathu, on largely the same grounds. Leakey “considered that such announcers should be selected with great care and some time in advance so that something would be found out regarding them.”

While in many instances the concern regarded individuals well known to administrators and missionaries alike, it raised more fundamental questions about African broadcasters as a social category, and the medium of broadcasting as a form of communication. During the same meeting, it was recorded that “Dr. Philip enquired...as to whether *any* native is a fit and proper person to broadcast or as to whether a chief or other native cuts any ice or no.”¹³⁵ Programs were broadcast live, and “African entertainment” being “essentially impromptu in character” bore a number of threats, not least leaving no one with any “idea what they” were “going to say next.”¹³⁶ As Davies proclaimed in a 1941 broadcast designed for European settlers and employers: “You may rehearse them as often as you like and find that on the actual occasion of the broadcast they may give quite a different version to what they have rehearsed.”¹³⁷ Evidence suggests that knowledge workers did leverage their status within the government to secure for themselves the most desirable outcomes in putatively “local” disputes.¹³⁸ One administrator claimed that some correspondents “thought their function was to air their grievances or to start an argument. Great care...[thus had to be] taken in the sifting of these news letters. For an apparently innocuous account of an incident may easily cloak local ‘fetina.’”¹³⁹ This was the world of colonial information, a world wherein knowledge workers, Leakey among them, competed with other information workers in using their positions to secure a monopoly over public opinion.

As these scenarios demonstrate, the world of knowledge work was rarely clear-cut in the Kenya colony, and African knowledge workers, administrators sensed, were often playing double duty. Anxieties over hiring, then, indexed a fear that knowledge workers, those

¹³⁴ Berman and Lonsdale, “Louis Leakey’s Mau Mau,” 178.

¹³⁵ “Broadcast Programmes Sub-Committee,” 12 July 1940, KNA AE/34/63.

¹³⁶ N.A. “Broadcasting,” N.D., CO 875/3/6

¹³⁷ Broadcast Given From Nairobi on Friday, 8th August, 1941, By Mr. E.R. St. A. Davies, in Charge of the African Section of the Kenya Information Office, “Some Problems of Broadcasting to Africans,” KNA AHC/10/68

¹³⁸ Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, Richard L. Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006)

¹³⁹ A Broadcast Given From Nairobi on Friday, 8th August, 1941, By Mr. E.R. St. A. Davies, in Charge of the African Section of the Kenya Information Office, “Some Problems of Broadcasting to Africans.” AHC/10/68

infrastructural prosthetics, used their prosthetic labor as a means of engaging in their own political and cultural projects. In this, they transformed these new mediated forms into their own prosthetics, extensions by which they could call to order new audiences, spread new messages, and engage in their own political contests over the mediated worlds of those people they hoped to secure as *their* listeners. Deftly moving between subject positions—of loyal intermediary and dissenter, of soil expert and oath-taker—these men cycled through the colonial hierarchy, leveraging their positions to their own advantage, sometimes undermining the colonial authority that underwrote their own, while concurrently augmenting their power and authority in domains illegible to the state.

As in the case of African representatives advising as to the future of language policies in the Kenya colony, this is best apprehended not as a movement between discrete categories of belonging and practice, but rather as evidencing a social, political, and cultural world that was rife with code-switching and multiplicity. For knowledge workers like Beuttah, in other words, their work as intermediaries was not incommensurate with their work as dissenters, their work as state-employed knowledge workers not at odds with their efforts to leverage new infrastructures to forward their own political projects. Perhaps this was why, by 1946, African knowledge workers were limited to “men of high educational standing.” And this hiring policy was matched by an expansion of responsibility, these men being tasked with “advising of the form in which the material should be put over to their own people.”¹⁴⁰ The significance of this labor from the perspective of the colonial state was, as we shall see, most evident in the government’s protracted propaganda war against Mau Mau.

Extending Prosthetic Work: Vernacularizing “Development” and Mau Mau

By the 1950s, the Kenyan Information Services was actively courting dedicated African information workers. The KIO’s recruitment pamphlet reveals how it sought to pitch these positions to would-be knowledge workers. The KIO began by justifying its very existence:

Any Government or any other big organization which serves the public must tell the people what it does and why, so as to gain the goodwill and understanding

¹⁴⁰ Dictated by D.C.S., 31 December 1946, KNA HAKI/13/229.

which are essential if its work is to be effective. In years gone by this could be done by word of mouth, by meetings and speeches, and by individual contacts between Government officers and the people of the country. Today...these methods...are no longer enough by themselves. Many modern methods of mass communication are now available such as newspapers, radio, films, film strips, posters, books and pamphlets and governments cannot ignore these ways of reaching people. In Kenya the Department of Information has the task of making use of these methods so as to ensure that the people of Kenya are fully informed of Government's plans, policies and achievements and to build up public opinion in other countries well informed on Kenya affairs.¹⁴¹

Would-be recruits had to be recipients of a "School Certificate." And those traveling with Information Vans were guaranteed attentive audiences:

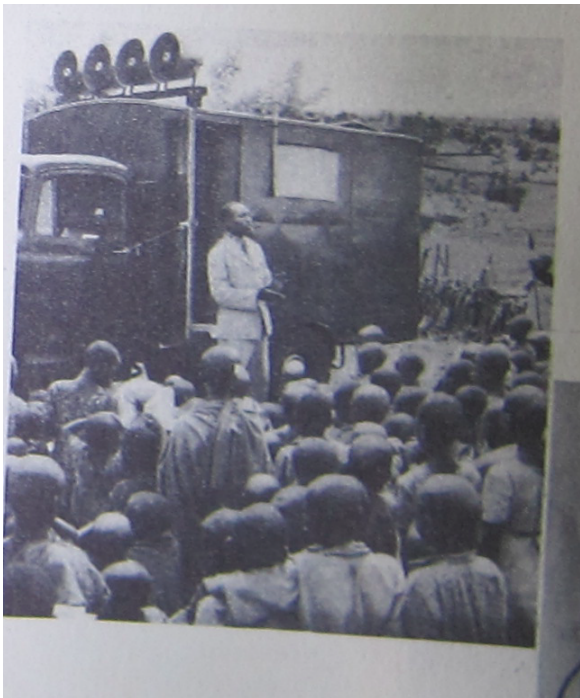


Figure 4- Careers in Government Service, Recruitment Pamphlet, No. 2

Would-be knowledge workers were also promised space to exercise their creativity and their expertise as they were invited to become parts of the administrative apparatus. "This pamphlet," recruits were reminded:

was written and designed by one of the staff of the Department of Information. Such production is typical of the interesting and creative work performed by its

¹⁴¹ "Careers in Government Service, Recruitment Pamphlet No. 2," The Department of Information, Kenya (Nairobi: Government Printer, KNA HAKI/13/85

officers, who are concerned with the writing of Press stories, the production of newspapers and magazines, broadcasting, the making of films and the running of cinema information vans.¹⁴²

These men, though, were not granted authorship status. Like technical experts, knowledge workers were not recognized as shapers or producers, as creative innovators or designers. The author of this report remained unnamed.

What was on offer, then, was an interesting mix of autonomy and discipline, of creativity within confines. And this intermediary status both opened up opportunities for creative forms of action and subjected these men to stringent oversight and scrutiny, strictures that heightened during the years of Mau Mau. And yet, even then they retained a good deal of mobility. The peripatetic itineraries of these men, their movement through various local spaces, placed them beyond the reach of the state. Indeed, they possessed an unprecedented degree of autonomy in these years, with each van staffed by an Information Assistant, who was largely in charge of the unit and responsible for the conduct of the show.

These information workers were to “make announcements and commentaries as necessary to explain policy, the background of campaigns.” This work of information dissemination was coupled, as we have seen, with the equally critical work of information gathering. These men were to “act as a sounding board of public opinion, rendering reports on his return to his headquarters station.” Those involved in the work of information were tasked not simply with generating information, but with the work of surveillance and policing. These knowledge workers were accompanied by experts of other kinds, a few of whom we have met, such as Katele, a “driver/operator” who was to “drive the vehicle” and assist “with the operation of the generator and projector.”¹⁴³

Wakaria was one such information worker. As promised, he fulfilled myriad roles. Wakaria not only acted as the voice of the broadcast, but also as a researcher. Later he was the editor of *Mugambo wa Kiambu*, a paper directed at Kiambu communities, after which he opened “the first information office” in Muranga. In 1956, he was tasked with opening the Mount Kenya Broadcasting Station, where he started another newspaper called *Matemo*. Reflecting these

¹⁴² “Careers in Government Service, Recruitment Pamphlet No. 2,” The Department of Information, Kenya (Nairobi: Government Printer, KNA HAKI/13/85

¹⁴³ “Staff Functions,” KNA HAKI/13/262

varied responsibilities, and reflective of the nodal and lumpy infrastructural reach of the state, sometimes Wakaria was on the move, traveling with the mobile unit. At other times, he was more stationary, broadcasting from the Mount Kenya station.

The flexibility of Wakaria's work was critical in the context of colonial policies of austerity that mitigated against the cultivation of a robust broadcasting network. Not only were the hours of broadcast highly circumscribed, but Africans by and large, due to colonial labor policies, did not have the capital necessary to buy receiving sets (see Chapter 4). As Wakaria recalled: "You know, we didn't have radios." It was left to the government to provision sets if they wanted to cultivate a pool of listeners. "The information," Wakaria noted, "they were the owners of the radios." Wakaria was routinely tasked with disseminating these "for [the] public," dropping them at marketplaces throughout Central Province. This was critical. Radio was, after all, conceived of as being a public service (see Chapter 4). Once deposited with shop owners at central sites, it was left to these sellers to tune the receivers and manage the upkeep of the sets.

As with the mobile unit, listening was a public, rather than a private, affair. "During lunch hour all people would come there to listen" for the mere 15 minutes a day—12–12:15 p.m.—that the Kikuyu program was allotted. This state of affairs, Wakaria recounted, continued until 1954, when "they brought this Saucepan Radio." He laughed at the recollection: "I wonder if you've found this Saucepan Radio. It was a circular radio." The small blue radio, operated by battery, was easier to transport than older models. This receiver was a tropicalized technology, specifically designed to accommodate itself to the particularities of Sub-Saharan Africa. And, once on the market, men like Wakaria were tasked with installing the Saucepan Special in marketplaces across Central Kenya.

As Ambrose's own itinerary suggests, strict recruitment policies notwithstanding, the limited infrastructural reach of the state continued to require the autonomy and mobility of these men in the 1950s. And this led to problems. As noted in a 1956 letter of termination addressed to Joseph Ngugi: "In view of the nature of the post you have been holding being one whereby the officer filling it is required to travel round the Province without constant supervision," it was essential that such a position "be filled by a man with a sense of duty and a sense" of

responsibility “to this Department.”¹⁴⁴ Failure begot paperwork. And paperwork reveals the central role played by these men. But it also reveals that this autonomy demanded austere discipline.

These men were employees of the state and were to comport themselves with the ascetic discipline such a position demanded. Failure to do so led to summary dismissal, as John Gitonga would have known. Gitonga, like Wakaria, was the son of a committed Christian. In Gitonga’s case, his father was a clergyman of the Church of England. Gitonga had been educated in mission schools, spending three years at a government school. He later attended Alliance High School, from whence he proceeded to Makerere College, thereafter attending King’s College in Uganda. His elder brother was a District Officer, with another brother having secured the position of Chief Inspector of Police in Kakamega, a third brother acting as a Medical Assistant, and a fourth as a “Farm manager.” As Gitonga pointed out in defending himself against accusations of insubordination: “most of us are all in Govt. Service.” These men, in terms of education and ascension within the colonial hierarchy, were exceptional.

It was upon completing college that Gitonga joined the Department of Information in 1951, where he was trained in the art of broadcasting. Soon thereafter he became a Translator/Announcer. In the beginning, these responsibilities were combined with record-keeping. As he moved up the ranks, he was appointed an “Announcer in Swahili,” and then a “Broadcast Producer.” With the Emergency, he was given the responsibility of producing “counter propaganda.” This position saw him fly high over the Aberdare Mountains. From this eminence, he was responsible for affirming for listeners that, indeed, the bombing was happening a great distance from the reserves. Wakaria, too, was trained by the British in the art of propaganda. He was, he emphatically told me, a “propagandist.” But this term, in Wakaria’s hands, takes on a slightly different valence than one might assume.

While the value of the knowledge generated by these men turned precisely on their ability to cultivate dynamics of intimacy with would-be listeners, the colonial state routinely tried to calibrate the emergent intimacies of these men as they moved through the countryside. Indeed, the ascetic discipline demanded of these men was, in part, designed to halt the formation of

¹⁴⁴ M. Stitt, Provincial Information Officer, Rift Valley Province to Mr. Raphael Joseph Ngugi, Provincial Information Office, “Termination of Employment” 12 June 1956, KNA HAKI/13/84

emergent socialities that, given the context of Mau Mau, constituted threatening insubordination. These intimacies were everyday, ranging from consuming beer off duty, to arriving late, to cavorting with “local” women, all of which led—as in the case of Gitonga—to dismissal.¹⁴⁵

The administration desired the maintenance of a firm hierarchy and a strict division of labor. “Drivers are to drive. Operators and Officers in Charge of vehicles will on no account take the wheel. The fact that they are in possession of a valid driving licence will not be accepted as an excuse. Disobedience to this instruction will entail instant dismissal.” Access to a vehicle, and indeed the right to move, registered these knowledge workers as men of high status. One can only imagine the temptation of these men to go on joyrides with these government vehicles, wooing both women and men with the possibility of otherwise unavailable mobilities.

Prohibitions on unsanctioned movements were put in place to limit these emergent socialities. “Vehicles will not carry passengers unless written authority is first obtained from a European member of this Department or the Administration.” The specifications were even more precise. The “use of vehicles for other than official running is strictly prohibited.” These regulations were not simply preventative, but were a response to unsanctioned though widely practiced forms of sociality. “It is known,” the report continued, “that it is the custom of many drivers, operators, etc., to use the Departments’ vehicles for the purpose of visiting friends who live near to places where entertainments etc., are given. This practice must cease forthwith.”¹⁴⁶ These joyrides were difficult to monitor. One could simply not keep track of gasoline usage. Even if you could monitor the fuel needed for a given leg of the journey, the generators themselves were voracious consumers of the valuable substance. Ambrose confirmed the prestige he gained driving around the countryside in the information department’s vehicle. The use of the van—itself operating as an infrastructural prosthetic—enabled knowledge workers and technologists—themselves performing prosthetic labor—to transform the unit itself, and media infrastructures as a whole, into their own prosthetics, in this case a technology critical to the formation of new socialities.

¹⁴⁵ John Gitonga to the Accountant and Broadcasting Officer, Nairobi, 1 May 1956, KNA HAKI/13/84 - “Information and Propaganda,”

¹⁴⁶ Director of Information to All Provincial Information Officers, 14 June 1956, KNA HAKI/13/262

During the years of Mau Mau, these men, as employees of the Information Department of the Government, particularly as Kikuyu men, were vulnerable. Gitonga noted that he had “received several letters from Mau Mau [stating] that they wanted my head badly.” Wakaria also emphasized this awkward middle status, “Many of us were killed by Mau Mau,” he said, but many “of us were [also] chased away by British.” As Wakaria ruminated: “you had to be very careful.” Not all situations were similar in their risk. Most dangerous were periods when knowledge workers returned to their towns. Here, intimacy was not a source of protection, nor a source of value, but a source of vulnerability.

In this section I turn to what colonial officials referred to as Mau Mau. Variouslly described as an anti-colonial struggle, a civil war, a class struggle that pit young, marginalized Kikuyu men and women fighting to achieve “self-mastery” against an older generation of wealthy men who had forgotten their obligations to social juniors, Mau Mau was a movement that sought to affirm new affinities as it worked to secure new possible futures in what appeared to many to be an untenable present.¹⁴⁷ For some, this required constraining the behaviors of young women and men in the city.¹⁴⁸ For others it involved shoring up a putative “Gikuyu” center perceived to be under threat from variously constituted “Others.”¹⁴⁹ For others still it was a struggle to draw connections among class formation, land scarcity, and the politics of adulthood.¹⁵⁰ By all accounts, though, Mau Mau was a project of social and moral reform. A project wherein various players sought to assert themselves as the legitimate protectors and guarantors of contested notions of “community” and contentious visions of the future.

As noted by Myles Osborne, while much has been written on the conflict, decidedly less attention has been directed to exploring the central role played by propaganda during the Emergency. In this war of words, Osborne argues, the colonial state deployed “development” as

¹⁴⁷ John Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau.”

¹⁴⁸ John Lonsdale, “Authority, Gender & Violence: The War within Mau Mau’s Fight for Land and Freedom,” in *Mau Mau and Nationhood*. E.S. Atieno-Odhiambo and John Lonsdale eds. 46-75, (Oxford: James Currey, 2003); Derek Peterson, “Wordy Women: Gender Trouble and the Oral Politics of the East African Revival in Northern Gikuyuland,” *Journal of African History*. Vol. 42, No. 3 (December 2001): 469-489.

¹⁴⁹ Derek Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival, A History of Dissent, c. 1935-1972*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁵⁰ John Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau.”

a key tactic designed to convince Mau Mau forest fighters of the wisdom of surrender.¹⁵¹ Development's failures were a product of Mau Mau's actions, future development the promise for loyalty. The state mobilized development, in its social welfarist form, as the carrot to induce a swift conclusion to the conflict.

This potential future would be marked by the government's provisioning for the health and wellbeing of the population. But globally circulating visions of development were not the only ones the state sought to harness in its fight against Mau Mau. Simultaneously, the KIO mobilized another, and arguably deeper, set of ideas regarding social transformation or development. If the history of radio broadcasting in colonial Kenya had taught the KIO anything, it was the importance of tropicalizing both the technologies of media and the messages they bore. And so, during the Emergency the colonial state mobilized African knowledge workers and vernacular notions of development as they sought to convince forest fighters to leave the confines of the Aberdares and return to "civilization."

In this, the Information Office actively combined notions of development premised on a logic of social welfare *with* Gikuyu notions of complete personhood, emblemized in the concept of *wiathi* or self-mastery. These twin notions of development were to be broadcast over the airwaves, reaching into the cultural consciousness of Kikuyu forest fighters and their allies in the reserves.

The sources I work with in this section are partial at best. They are based on the few remaining audio files from the period, which today are housed at the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). Holding true to colonial representational practices, rarely are the voices of knowledge workers attached to personalities, nor are they named. Like other forms of African expertise, these unnamed men are, instead, represented as easily replaced non-experts, as easily replaced voices. However, as the preceding sections have demonstrated, these men were anything but replaceable: they were actively courted experts of both technics and culture. This anonymizing impulse notwithstanding, a close reading of these broadcasts demonstrates how the cultural expertise of African knowledge workers was actively brought to bear in efforts to convince Kenya's diverse communities to side with the government in its fight against Mau

¹⁵¹ Myles Osborne, "The Rooting out of Mau Mau from the Minds of the Kikuyu is a Formidable Task: Propaganda and the Mau Mau War," *Journal of African History* Vol. 56 (2015): 93.

Mau. In this, the concept of *wiathi* was to play a central role. My concern here is less with elucidating whether these strategies “succeeded” or “failed.” Instead, my efforts are directed to understanding how various notions of development were actively co-mingled in this period, and to elucidating the place of vernacular knowledge workers, and the infrastructure of radio in broadcasting, in advancing this twinned vision.

Gikuyu social thought holds that self-possessed labor is the most valorized form of work. Through their active labor on the land, boys became men, people became moral persons. According to historians John Lonsdale and Derek Peterson, this ethic of labor emerged from the particular ecological zone within which Kikuyu communities lived. Located in the forested region of what has come to be called Kenya’s Central Province, cultural life was literally cut out of the wild. It was through the painstaking work of removing trunks, stumps, and roots that the land was made tillable and social reproduction was secured.¹⁵² These homesteaders, writes Lonsdale, literally “sweated culture from nature.”¹⁵³ This ethos of work, itself in part borne of material conditions, shaped Gikuyu political thought.

Labor as the means of self-actualization was historically reflected in Gikuyu structures of authority. An acephalous society, the homestead was the foundational unit of social organization. Like concentric circles, this logic—while argued over—was reproduced in the *mbari*, or lineage.¹⁵⁴ Once a given homestead grew too large, frontier groups reached outward, taking over neighboring ridges.

The highest responsibility of a man was the successful management of his immediate family. This, itself, was marked by rituals of maturation, most notably circumcision. It was upon being circumcised that a man would seek to separate himself from his father’s *shamba*, or garden, cutting his own bit of soil and laboring to produce a tillable plot. This piece of cultured land was the first step towards establishing a household. It was at this stage that adult life was pursued (and pursuable)—a man marrying his first wife who, after the initial clearing of the land,

¹⁵² Lonsdale, “Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 327; 333.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 341.

was largely responsible for tilling the soil. A man's worth was defined as *wiathi*, or self-mastery; this, argues Lonsdale, was an expression and recognition of the social value of his labor.¹⁵⁵

Wiathi is a profoundly future-oriented theory of value. It was only by virtue of pursuing land, marriage, and children that a man would be remembered beyond his death; a man's legacy being sustained through his children and their mothers, and the generations that succeeded them. Adulthood was the promise in the immediate future. The status of venerated ancestor, of protector of the line, was the promise in the long-term. Failure meant adulthood was not realized. And this was a profoundly classed vision of maturation. Adult status was premised on access. First to land, then to wives, and children after that. Poverty, then, merited social exclusion. Here, then, we have a Gikuyu epistemology of both individual and collective development. Mau Mau was, in part, an argument over this vision of maturation.

Social conditions had changed. Land was scarce and thus the possibility of gaining the requisite materials for maturation became functionally obstructed. This was not the only time such disputation had happened, but it was the most extreme.

Within this epistemology, the uncut forest was the place of the wild. Indeed, the forest stood in for the troubling forms of disorder against which Gikuyu civilization gained some of its definitional strength. The forest was a place of anti-culture. Its creatures the opposite of man and civilization. Gikuyu enclosures maintained strict boundaries between the uncultured world of the bush and the spaces of domestic life.¹⁵⁶ This spatialization of culture was reflected in modes of consumption, Kikuyu almost uniformly maintaining prohibitions against the consumption of wild animals.¹⁵⁷ These frameworks of both self and society were at the center of the arguments that formed the basis of what the colonial state called Mau Mau.

Social welfarist visions of development, as I have argued, had always been wrapped up in efforts to curb discontent in Britain's colonial holdings (see Chapter 4.). Indeed, we must situate the push for social welfare via radio broadcasting as a response to the labor unrest of the 1930s and 1940s. As we have seen, this included among other things the promised extension of government services in the fields of medicine and agriculture, as well as better labor conditions and housing

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 356

¹⁵⁶ Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism*, esp, Chapter 8.

¹⁵⁷ Louis Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu Before 1903*, (London: Academic Press, 1977), 168.

in the cities, premised, in the case of the latter, on the hope that the consolidation of monogamous and urban working-class households would act as a bulwark against “disorder.” It is no surprise, then, that efforts to mobilize development as antidote against disorder was equally prevalent in the fight against Mau Mau.

Over the airwaves, people that joined the government, so-called Loyalists, were promised that they could look forward to a developed future. This, administrators acknowledge, was a direct response to discontent. As one Kiswahili broadcast detailed: “The government and the leaders of the big areas have already known that black people are not satisfied by houses that they live in.” It was in response to this that one Gikuyu broadcaster promised, as he called to order his audiences in Kikuyu, a future wherein Africans would be “given food and houses to live in, and after that, we’ll find a way of letting their wives and kids go live with them [*nitūre tabarira ūria atūmi na ciana ciao*].¹⁵⁸

But a comfortable dwelling was not sufficient. People were promised “other things so that they can live happily and [be] satisfied.” These included “a football pitch, and places they can watch movies [*nyūmba cia kuonanagĩria thinema*] and also places where their kids can play.”¹⁵⁹ New forms of leisure were promised as a means to staunch the flow of discontent. And all would be provided by the government, which had “spared funds for that to happen.” Together, these reforms would ensure that urbanites had houses within which to live, places where they could “go for meetings and where they...[could] be reading books.”¹⁶⁰ But broadcasts situated these futures as a kind of return wherein people could “start having the fun that we used to have where people will dance and sing.” As this suggests, promises for new developmentalist initiatives were routinely grafted onto visions of the good life that tapped into longer histories.

If the future was represented as the realization of this augmented vision of the past, Mau Mau was presented as an atavistic throwback, the inverse of both development and progress. In this, it was presented as anathema to civilization. But the notions of civilization conjured up by the colonial state were not generic, but explicitly drew on Gikuyu notions of complete

¹⁵⁸ Broadcast #7, N.D. Tape A4, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation [hereafter KBC] Audio Archive, Translations done by Vivian Wanjiku, to whom I am tremendously indebted for her work and her insights.

¹⁵⁹ Broadcast #2, N.D. Tape A5 KBC Audio Archive

¹⁶⁰ Broadcast #2, N.D. Tape A5 KBC Audio Archive

personhood. As one European, who secondary evidence suggests was none other than Louis Leakey, put out over the airwaves in a Kikuyu broadcast that likely took place in 1954:

We've beaten Mau Mau together and most of them have already seen the truth and surrendered but we are still going on with killing or arresting those who are still there. And those who are like animals of the forest [*nyamū cia gĩthaka*] should think of their people and respect them, their kids and their wives [*andū ao, ciana ciao, atumia ao*]. They don't have a big chance [*ihinda ikuhe*] and in the near future they will be killed if they refuse to surrender.¹⁶¹

Here, listeners were offered a vision of Mau Mau forest fighters as having abandoned their families. In so doing, they had abrogated their central responsibility as effective fathers, as homesteaders. What was more, the broadcast continued, for those unrepentant, this decision was irreversible. As Leakey continued, the “already captured Mau Maus will never go back to their families [*makĩria ya ūguo, ndĩna wĩtekio, andū a Mau Mau arĩa mahĩngeretwo matire hĩndi mangeĩtekerio gũcoka kwa andū ao*].”¹⁶² The stakes of this threat would not have been lost on listeners, so central was the connection between the cultivation of a homestead and the realization of social maturity.

But Leakey sought to cut even deeper than this. Mau Mau fighters, in rejecting this central tenet of Gikuyu masculinity, had rendered themselves non-human. Not simply boys—arguably a framing that led them to the forest in the first place—but “animals of the forest.” The inverse of humanity, the opposite of civilization; the wild animal a symbol of anti-culture, the opposite of intellect.¹⁶³ As one broadcaster provoked those in the forest: “If you know you're not animals, then think.”¹⁶⁴ What these men were being called to think about was the way in which their decisions to become like “wild animals” had placed them beyond the realm of culture. If Mau Mau were wild animals, it so followed that they had no claims over the gardens they had cut.

Those who are in the forest must surrender and those who are helping them inside the reserves, and also in the big homes inside the shambas, should go to the District Commissioners, or to the District Officers, or to the Police Officers and

¹⁶¹ Broadcast #7, N.D. Tape A4, KBC Audio Archive

¹⁶² Broadcast #7, N.D. Tape A4, KBC Audio Archive

¹⁶³ Lonsdale, “Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 344. It is here that he discusses the labor that went into dividing the space of the wild from the space of domestic life.

¹⁶⁴ Broadcast #2, N.D. Tape A2, KBC Audio Archive

confess their mistakes before 10th of July so that they can save their lives and their properties.¹⁶⁵

This was not simply a matter of property, however. For Kikuyu listeners, the distinction between life and property was not so neatly drawn. Land was both a central symbol and materialization of culture, central as it was to Gikuyu notions of individual and thus collective actualization. Land, in other words, was not an addendum to life, it was life (see Chapters 1 and 2).

The threat, then, was existential, not only calling into question the present and immediate future but the futures of generations to come. The very viability of Kikuyu as a people was on the line. Those who refused to confess would be lose their “*Ithaka* [lands] *before* the 10th of July,” and these would “never be given back either to their kids or their kids kids, forever and ever. Those people in the forest if they refuse to surrender...will never never go back and live in their *migunda* with their parents or their kids ever ever again.” Here, the forest fighters were framed as having sacrificed their land, the critical hinge between past, present, and future. This threat fundamentally undermined the animus underwriting Kikuyu social life, anchored as it was in material interventions on the land.

The centrality of land to Gikuyu social thought, as Lonsdale has argued, was framed by a temporality of futurity. While cutting culture out of the forest might seem to be a temporally circumscribed vision of futurity, constrained as it appears by the immediate needs of social reproduction, it was undertaken in a bid to secure one’s own future beyond death by provisioning for the long-term sustainability of a line. It was for this reason that Kikuyu men were always to act “on behalf of their children’s children.”¹⁶⁶ The threat here, then, was not simply death or the loss of property, but a kind of social death that would extend through the generations.

Being landed was the first and critical move towards establishing oneself as a homesteader. Without land, there was no family. This meant no expansion in material terms, but also in temporal terms. These men would not be mourned, one broadcast warned, but would “die like animals of the forest.” This reduction of men to the status of animals in the forest was tethered by these broadcasters to a serious set of existential uncertainties. “Now, are you among those that will be killed like animals. Without a wife, who will cry for you?”¹⁶⁷ Without family,

¹⁶⁵ Broadcast #4, N.D. Tape A4, KBC Audio Archive

¹⁶⁶ Lonsdale, “Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 338.

¹⁶⁷ Broadcast #9, N.D. Tape A7, KBC Audio Archive

there was no future. Having no one to mourn you and pay deference to you after death rendered not only the death meaningless, but the life, and the lives of your children and your children's children, as well. "Posterity, not burial, conferred remembrance and reincarnation," writes Lonsdale. And this was profoundly classed. Though framed in generational terms, for those marrying "late and often dying young, the poor were at greater risk of oblivion."¹⁶⁸ This threat was precisely what had led these social juniors to the forest in the first place.

This disgrace, though, would not be limited to the individual, or their families beyond them; it threatened the longevity of the entire group. With Mau Mau, one Kikuyu broadcast began, "the Kikuyu culture was destroyed and their name was hated." The onus for this was placed on forest fighters: "How can you do these things to your own people?" the broadcast continued. Contrary to Mau Mau's claims, this was not framed by broadcasters as a putative return to Gikuyu culture, but marked a critical a departure. "Go back to how...[you] lived earlier," one broadcast advised. Otherwise Mau Mau's actions would "destroy the whole country which has *ustaarabu* [Swa. civilization]."¹⁶⁹

In some broadcasts, these twin visions of development were actively combined. One broadcast promised both "development" and *wiathi* for those who surrendered. However, and in keeping with colonial policies of austerity, this future would, the broadcast acknowledged, be borne on the back of unremunerated labor, not government investments. The repentant would be responsible for bringing:

back cleanliness in the black people's areas [*anduai airu*] and that is by digging the trenches that will be leading water to their shambas [*mugunda*] or by trying to slash out the bushes [*githaka*]. All these jobs have been established to bring back better lives for the black people and to enhance their shambas. The government, together with the black people, especially the elderly men [*athuri agima*], have come to an agreement that that type of a job is the best one in trying to heal the people who were infected by the Mau Mau disease [*mirimu*].¹⁷⁰

The elders consulted were likely landed men with an interest in maintaining the social order, their status as much reflecting their wealth as their age. From the perspective of these conservatives, Mau Mau were waywards, mere boys. In their hands, these two visions of development could be mobilized to stabilize existing social hierarchies. From the perspective of

¹⁶⁸ Lonsdale, "Moral Economy of Mau Mau," 344.

¹⁶⁹ Broadcast #2, N.D. Tape A2, KBC Audio Archive

¹⁷⁰ Broadcast #2, N.D. Tape A5, KBC Audio Archive

Mau Mau, youth by dint of class rather than age, by contrast, these elders were “hungry eaters,” voracious in their appetites; they, in collusion with the government, had neglected the social contract. Land reforms of the past many years, but most recently the Swynnerton Plan, which formalized land tenure, had attenuated these relationships in critical ways. Poverty was now a permanent position, rather than a temporary status. This class immobility, this emergent inflexibility, led many to the forest. It was in the domain of vernacular, not social welfarist visions of development, that they found their paths blocked. The threat: forever remaining a child. Without land or family, these men would simply fade into oblivion.

These broadcasts must be interpreted against this existential threat. As one Kikuyu broadcaster stated: “Any person who submits easily [and] shows that he is ready to change...it’s possible that they will be given a new bush [*githaka*] where they will live.”¹⁷¹ Here, Mau Mau forest fighters were being promised that for which they fought. Here they were being offered a piece of land to cut into culture. Here they were offered the possibility for marriage and thus children. Here they were offered the possibility of becoming self-actualized adults, respectable males, the bearers of *wiathi*.

Reformulating the Labor of Maintenance and Repair and New Prosthetic Extensions

Understanding the premium put on mobilizing vernacular notions of development and the cultural knowledge of African knowledge workers requires understanding what the state perceived itself to be up against: other highly elaborated networks of communication. The information arm of the colonial state was, indeed, designed to combat what was routinely referred to as the “bush telegraph.” Administrators felt profound anxiety in the face of uncertainty regarding what African communities thought. During Mau Mau, these other communications networks would have called men and women to the task of joining Mau Mau’s fight along many of the same registers as those vernacular notions of development the state mobilized in an effort to combat Mau Mau.

¹⁷¹ Broadcast #2, N.D. Tape A5, KBC Audio Archive

This was a fight that pit ‘young’ men—defined as much by class position as by age—against elders—defined less by age than by class. These men were called to arms to regain *ithaka na wiathi*, or cultured land and self-mastery. It was a fight over how, in the context of ongoing material change, these putative youths could achieve *wiathi*—the route to social adulthood and complete personhood. This, in other words, was a battle over both the future and the capacity to establish futurity. And these messages would have made their way into the homes and locations of people along the inscrutable lines of the “bush telegraph.” Of this, the state was well aware. “Don’t accept to be lied to by the voice [*twanya toa ohoro*] of those who call themselves leaders of the opposition [*atongoria a ūtīti*],” one broadcast in Kikuyu advised.¹⁷²

The communications network of the colonial state was not the only one in effect, in other words. And often the same people generating cultural knowledge for the state’s use were engaged in other cross-cutting communications networks. Walking this fine line required careful calibration, subtle movements to convince audiences on both sides, a complicated dialectics of intimacy and estrangement. It was *this* work, this work of pivoting between two epistemologies that, for Wakaria, made him an expert propagandist. Recalling the difficulty of reporting during Mau Mau, Wakaria stated: you had to “make sure both sides...[understood] you well.” This was not about ensuring that a single message was communicated clearly. Instead, it required the development of a seemingly singular message that could be interpreted by each side according to their reigning epistemologies. Doing so required a nuanced understanding of each.

The British needed to hear your broadcasts and interpret them as loyal. As for Mau Mau, Wakaria continued, “We could say proverbs or idioms” that communicated messages illegible to the British. It was in this way that you could make sure that “Mau Mau was happy, [and that] the British were happy.” But you “had to be very careful...During the emergency you had to be very careful. Because you have to please the government, and also you have to please the Mau Mau. The government can kill you. Mau Mau can kill you.” This might have been a skill rooted in wordplay, but it was dangerous. I asked Wakaria if he remembered any of the proverbs he mobilized during this period. Of course, he said, “I remember. I use them even today in broadcasting.” In this, Wakaria signaled how his work as a “propagandist” was part and parcel of the “return to culture” that has enabled him to become an authority on all things Gikuyu.

¹⁷² Broadcast #4, N.D. Tape A4, KBC Audio Archive

Wakaria no longer self-identifies as a propagandist. But in those years, “The tension was high” and information workers “had to play it very well.” “To be a spy is not easy,” Wakaria continued, “it’s not easy.”¹⁷³ This, too, was a product of the uneasy movement between intimacy and estrangement.

Ears were everywhere. But savvy British listeners, in particular, were a source of great anxiety for these knowledge workers, particularly those British listeners with a facility in vernacular languages. In this, Leakey loomed large. “Our big man was Louis,” Wakaria recounted. He “knew Kikuyu very well....[so you] had to be very careful” not to be found out. “We were followed, every word we said.” And people occupying this doubled position were, on occasion, found out. One story, in particular, many interlocutors recalled: the story of Mburu Matemo.¹⁷⁴

Matemo was Wakaria’s senior in the field of information work. And the two were close, Wakaria continuing to visit Matemo’s widow after Matemo’s death. Like other information workers, Matemo had to negotiate this fine line between intimacy and estrangement as he reported on Mau Mau. Matemo’s story, like all good stories, is subject to variation, but in broad strokes it goes as follows. African knowledge workers reporting on the war were prohibited from publicizing the deaths of Europeans. Instead, Mau Mau losses were to be foregrounded. One day, Matemo recounted a battle that had taken place at Brackenhurst. Deviating from policy, he reported on the deaths of Europeans. He “used a proverb,” Wakaria said, describing Europeans using the term *thukumu*.¹⁷⁵ “That’s what he did,” explained Wakaria, it “was as simple as that.” Matemo, perhaps, thought that by tapping into this longer linguistic genealogy of otherness, he would escape Leakey’s attentive ear. In this he was wrong.

Leakey himself was concerned with locating culture in language. Indeed, it was based on interviews with elite Gikuyu elders that he had set himself the task of writing *The History of the Southern Kikuyu*, which ostensibly documented precolonial Gikuyu culture and social life. In this text, Leakey put to page his knowledge of the term *thukumu*. In his rendering, it was a Kikuyu concept used at the turn of the century to describe foreign trading partners—first Swahili traders, and later Europeans. And so, Matemo was caught in his vernacular insubordination by Leakey,

¹⁷³ Interview with Ambrose Wakaria, 22 June 2015

¹⁷⁴ Louis Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu Before 1903*, (London: Academic Press, 1977), 498.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Ambrose Wakaria, 22 June 2015

who “chased him,” summarily firing Matemo. But they were all vulnerable in the face of Leakey. And this vulnerability stemmed from years of intimacy that had transformed Leakey into “a Kikuyu,” as Wakaria explained.

The colonial state’s efforts to secure a monopoly over communications in the region had, evidently, failed. Robust para-networks had always existed. “So there were many communications networks?” I asked. “There were many communications. We didn’t have telephones but we used to communicate.” And Matemo was not unusual in using his position to demonstrate his support for the Mau Mau forest fighters, Wakaria insisted. Indeed, according to Wakaria, all Kikuyu, information workers included, were on the side of Mau Mau. For his part, not only did Wakaria mobilize proverbial forms to communicate with Kikuyu listeners—“To the Mau Mau I will only give a single sentence, but it says a lot”—but he used his connections as a one-time would-be pharmacist to get medicine to the Mau Mau forest fighters. “They knew very much that I was in pharmacy. And, therefore, I was given a mission to supply them with medicine.” In this, too, he mobilized para-networks, relying mainly on women to move the goods to the forest.

Despite all these dangers, Wakaria was emphatic that he enjoyed his role as a knowledge worker before independence was granted in 1963: “I enjoyed very much. I enjoyed broadcasting.” This was understandable. From this position Wakaria discovered and pursued his vocation as the preeminent authority on “Gikuyu culture.” “When people first saw the unit,” he told me, people “didn’t like it. Not from the beginning.” As he explained “It was a new thing to us. We were not coming across those things. They were done by Europeans.” His opinion changed in 1950 when he joined the unit and “saw it was a good thing.”

What he found the most satisfying was knowledge work. “I enjoyed looking for news.” For this, he had to do “a lot of research for my language, because it was a Kikuyu broadcast.” This allowed him to “interact with the people...[and go] to meetings.” And this brought him access. “After I joined the information,” he told me “especially when people liked me so much, [the elders] called me to sit with them.” For Wakaria, this allowed a return from the path of deviance pursued by his father. His research, he explained, allowed him to go “into the culture.” This ethnographic work he then broadcast first over the loudspeakers, and later over the

airwaves, calling together a community bounded by language and culture to him through *his* “Kikuyu broadcast.”

This about-face, in other words, came from his appreciation of the reach broadcasting allowed him, the capacity it offered to act as his own prosthetic, enabling him to call to order a new community of listeners. For this work, he made 142 shillings per month, a wage that placed him just above the semi-skilled workforce employed in Nairobi.¹⁷⁶ This was an improvement on years past. In the beginning knowledge workers had been seconded from other departments, retaining no pay for their labor. His work, in this capacity, was to close the gap between the desired reach of this aspirationally rich but materially poor developmentalist state and the arterial nature of its presence in the lives of the bulk of the population living in Kenya’s rural areas. From this vantage, he claimed for himself the position as authority on all things Gikuyu. And this brought him fame. “I was a big man by the way. I was a boss. An information assistant. ABS. African Broadcasting Service. Driving in that car. Oooh! I loved it.”

Knowledge workers like Wakaria, then, routinely turned their positions within the information arm of the colonial state into ones from which they could pursue their vocations as not simply advocates of an abstract and developmentalist ethos but as purveyors and authors of culture. In this, then, they reformulated their prosthetic work, appropriating the form of these new media for themselves as their own prosthetics. Radio broadcasting reformatted as a tool that they could put to work in calling to order new audiences, audiences bound together by language.

When I interviewed Wakaria for the second time, his narrative slipped easily between past and present. In the present, like in the past, he uses his role as a broadcaster as a means of suturing listeners to their culture. In the present, like in the past, many fear Kikuyu are on the brink of cultural loss. In the present, like in the past, the status of adulthood is a key part of what, for Wakaria and his listeners, is at stake. On this second occasion I was accompanied by Gitau, who himself views the revival of Gikuyu culture as being imperative to combating the forms of cultural loss, of forgetting, that are linked to material transformations. When Wakaria is not producing broadcasts, he uses his status as a venerated radio personality to advocate for the project of cultural renewal being argued for most forcefully by the Kikuyu Council of Elders.

¹⁷⁶ Luise White, *The Comforts of Home*, 188.

These men of wealth and power, these social adults, have set for themselves the task of revivifying what, to them, appears to be a cultural inheritance under attack.

Today, Wakaria told me, the youth have gone astray. These men of 30–35 years are social children, mere “boys” in Wakaria’s framing. Their social immaturity is indexed by the fact that they have pursued paths of listless waywardness. Both Wakaria and Gitau linked their deviance to the collapse of white-collar work. These men, by and large educated for futures in white-collar professions, have turned to drink and drugs waiting for futures that will never be theirs. In the context of this changed economy, Wakaria told me, “They have found that they are educated fools.”

Critically, this foolishness is tightly bound to their perceived disrespect for their elders. One of the key symbols of their insubordination is evident in their consumption of alcohol, which they drink without paying due diligence to generational hierarchies. Wakaria and Gitau were both emphatic that they would never had dreamed of consuming *muratina*, Gikuyu beer, without the permission, without the invitation, of their fathers. For this reason, men like Gitau, the fathers of this wayward generation, are “trying to go to their culture.” While this declension narrative might appear to be closely linked to the material transformations that came on the heels of structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and 1990s, Wakaria’s narrative positions this moment as but the most recent in a long line of attacks on Gikuyu culture.

The first attack he locates as coming on the coattails of Christianity. While Wakaria self-identifies as a “true Christian,” he is adamant that the “Church did us something very bad.” Its main violence, for Wakaria, was the work that it undertook to “change the Kikuyu in their culture.” Kikuyu are unique in this cultural decline, according to Wakaria. By virtue of their early conversion, he explained, it is “only Kikuyu...[who] are lost.” This process of cultural dilution was echoed during Mau Mau when male detainees were separated from their wives and placed in detention camps. This led to polluting cultural mixture, as non-Kikuyu men were relocated to Kikuyu locations and these “Others” “produced with the Kikuyu women.” And so, men “returning from detention, would find their wives “with children” and they were left “wondering.” According to Wakaria, this was a tactic of the British, designed “To finish Kikuyu.” “The trouble started then also,” he told me. While the British were not successful in destroying Gikuyu culture, they did deep damage. And yet, he said, “we still survive.”

For Wakaria, this declension continues into the present, but it is actively being rolled back by people like him, a cultural expert who is at the center of what he actively refers to as a “campaign.” The culture, he told me, “it’s coming back now, it’s coming back.” Gitau agreed. It would require time, “another 50 years,” but the cultural inheritances of Kikuyu people would be restored to them. This required that men and women, boys and girls, be re-educated in Gikuyu culture. “I teach men, I teach women,” he told me, “I bring them together.” Much of this happens over the radio, where listeners call in to consult with Wakaria over “correct” Gikuyu practice. As though untouched by time, it is over the radio that Wakaria explains to them their cultural inheritance. Over the airwaves these inheritances will be restored and the Kikuyu will “find themselves correct,” find themselves “standing straight.”

Ensuring that today’s youth take the path to attaining *wiathi* requires closely monitoring the moment of circumcision. It is here that cultured adults are born. For this reason, Wakaria routinely attends circumcision ceremonies. “Sometimes I stay with them for about two days. Teaching them: What is circumcision? What they should do after circumcision.” He is busy in this venture. “I’m booked every week,” he told me, “nearly every week.” While Wakaria spoke to me in English, it is essential that this cultural knowledge be transmitted in Kikuyu. For Wakaria, like for Leakey, language is where culture lies.

Today, by contrast to the past, Wakaria is well compensated for his labors. “And they pay me! No joke!” He laughed. This is not quite the realm of “ethnicity inc.,” discussed by Jean and John Comaroff.¹⁷⁷ This cultural knowledge is not on the global marketplace, but it does index the commodification of culture that has come on the heels of the liberalization of the economy and the transition to multi-party politics. It is a product of the same moment and set of processes that has enabled the emergence of myriad privately run vernacular language stations, those bastions of coded violence largely blamed for the dire dislocations and loss of life of the post-elections period. But Wakaria is finally being properly remunerated for this cultural knowledge. It was against this backdrop that his irritation at my paltry offer by way of thanks for our meeting gain their texture and historical depth. Payment for his cultural knowledge by the parents of wayward

¹⁷⁷ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

youth he read against both a deeper past and my own cheapness: “I’m telling you to pay me 5000 and you can’t cover. [And yet, they can]...pay me well.”

Conclusion

The colonial state had grand ambitions for radio broadcasting in the Kenya colony. As early as 1936, the colonial office advocated for radio broadcasting’s future as a “tool of advanced administration,” capable of ushering in a new ethos of social welfarist development. In this vision, a robust broadcasting network heavy with developmentalist messages was to precede, rather than accompany, more concrete material investments in the lives of communities in the fields of health, education, and farming. In this, radio broadcasting was, from the outset, imagined as an infrastructural prosthetic—a network capable of filling the breach, of suturing the gulf between the state’s aspirations for seamless infrastructural reach and its actual presence in the lives of Kenyan communities, which was lumpy and uneven at best. These ambitions for capillary reach were always stopped short, though, truncated as they were by troubling and seemingly intractable material interventions (see Chapter 4). But the reach of this broadcasting network, and the messages it bore, remained limited in both material and conceptual terms.

In the seams of this infrastructural landscape the mobile information unit was imagined by administrators to have a central role to play. Absent a robust infrastructural network it would be over the roadways, rather than over the airwaves, that the developmentalist messages would move into the lives of colonized communities. Contrary to the ideal-typical vision of radio as an affair of the domestic, with nuclear families gathered around hard-won receivers, most Kenyans’ first experiences of radio came with the whole host of new media technologies. And in a van that was subject to breakdown. And irregularly, subject as the van’s movement was to seasonal variations and the roughshod roads over which it traveled. And people’s experiences of new media technologies were anything but seamless. Breakdown was not simply an aberration, a moment when technologies and their components became visible.¹⁷⁸ Breakdown, instead, was

¹⁷⁸ Paul Edwards, “Infrastructure and Modernity: Force, Time, and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems” in *Modernity and Technology*. Eds. Thomas J. Misa, Philip Brey and Andrew Feenberg. (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

the perennial state of the new media technologies—and the van itself—as it went trundling through the countryside. And the stakes of these breakdowns were, at least from the perspective of administrators, very high. The discerning ears and eyes of audience members was a source of perennial concern, worrying as administrators did that a breakdown in mechanical components might unduly interrupt the messages on offer.

But this should not be taken to mean that the mobile information van and broadcasting did not, in spite of these difficulties, 'work.' They did, but this status of working required the input of vigilant labor and constant re-jigging. This was the work, to use the language of the time, of “tropicalising” technologies. And this was not a one-time fix, but required constant monitoring and intervention.

Focusing on these moments of breakdown has disclosed new histories of labor, namely the labor of African knowledge workers and experts, who were routinely tasked with undertaking the work of maintenance and repair critical to making these imperfectly tropicalized technologies themselves “work.” And this labor, like the van itself, was prosthetic, mobilized to close the gap between the state’s aspirations for smoothly operating technologies as the harbinger for a development to come and everyday forms of breakdown. This prosthetic work was not mundane, though, but was a form of expertise. And much of this expertise was cultivated on the road, as crew members familiarized themselves with technical components and developed workarounds to make these machines work in this new zone. This required technological translation, as mechanical components were reformulated such that they could operate in the novel material environment that characterized the Kenya colony.

The work of translation was not limited, though, to technical components. So too did the messages carried by these new media require translation. And this work of translation was not only linguistic. Instead, messages needed to be made both legible and meaningful to the communities to whom they were being broadcast. This work was delicate and nuanced, and of translation, missionaries and their kin had a lot to say. It is perhaps no surprise that it was this cadre of men and women who were most forceful in voicing their concerns that this work of translation might open up avenues for knowledge workers to engage in creative and troubling forms of social, cultural, and political action. And in this labor of translation, African knowledge

workers were, like African technologists, called to the task making imperfectly tropicalized technologies, and the messages they bore, “hang together.”¹⁷⁹

But this labor was never *simply* prosthetic. By that I mean it never *simply* filled the gap, generically taking the place of the missing part. It was essential and value-generating work that, on occasion, fundamentally transformed the system of which these experts were a part. In some instances, this authorial capacity was tacitly recognized by the Kenya Information Office, such as when it deployed African knowledge workers to the field where they were to act as information gatherers tasked with generating content that would appeal to “local” communities. The central place of this form of work was further amplified during Mau Mau, when the state sought to capture and redeploy this cultural labor in its propaganda war against forest fighters. It was here that African knowledge workers’ cultural knowledge was appropriated as new sources of informational value, scaled up as it was and integrated in the ongoing process of tropicalizing the Kenya colony’s media apparatus. And yet for this critical work these experts were rarely acknowledged and were poorly remunerated, when they were remunerated at all. These men were simply expected to engage in prosthetic labor, simply expected to act *like* infrastructures, to act *infrastructurally* in the context of durable policies of colonial austerity.

As I have demonstrated, though, African knowledge workers routinely translated their prosthetic labor by deploying new media technologies as their own prosthetics, extensions through which to call to order new audiences and extend novel messages to newly reached and reachable communities. Such was the case of Ambrose Wakaria. It was by virtue of his work with the information department that he ably reconfigured his position, transforming these new media into a platform from which he could call together new audiences. While today, the value of Wakaria’s expertise is recognized in monetary terms, this was not always the case. Indeed, during the colonial period this labor was not acknowledged as the value-generating work that it was, in part because it was never recognized as expertise. This, I have argued, turned on a pernicious and durable vision of Africa as a place without technologies and thus as a place without technological experts, knowledge workers included.

¹⁷⁹ Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

As we shall see in the next chapters, this trend continues to structure how technological expertise and knowledge work is framed today. In the chapter to follow, I turn to the present and to new digital financial infrastructures and their politics. Colonial practices that sought to maximize the value-generating potential of knowledge workers and experts, all the while devaluing their work as simply labor, did not end with independence. And here, too, the concept of prosthetic labor helps us understand how, in the present, emerging capital markets draw on older tropes of Africa's relationship with technologies, thereby enabling the elision of the types of expertise that remain critical to making new infrastructures and the technologies that ride on their rails "work" in Kenya. This, then, is what is at stake in recognizing the labors of maintenance and repair as critical forms of expertise. Not simply does this focus disclose new histories of work, but it also offers a critical foundation from which we can locate a robust and historically rooted critique of the present, and the logics and forms of capture that continue to be the foundations upon which highly stratified technological and capital fields are premised.

Chapter 6

Intimacy and Estrangement: Safaricom, Divisibility, and the Making of the Corporate Nation-State

One morning in September 2014, I hopped on a *matatu* minibus heading north-east away from Nairobi's Central Business District (CBD). Alighting by a lime green pedestrian bridge, I confronted a large billboard marking my destination. Familiar lime green letters marched neatly across the face of this sign, and the many others peppering the landscape of the sports grounds: Safaricom Stadium Kasarani. This name is new. A rebranding that came on the heels of a large investment into the facilities made by Safaricom, the region's largest corporation and dominant telecom, but a few years ago.¹

The proprietary claim implicit in the presence of the new name frames how visitors interpret the grounds of the sports complex. The stadium, historically a key symbol of the nation, now hails Kenyans with an altogether different brand of belonging, that of corporate citizenship. In a few discrete places, the old name remains in smaller, red font: Moi International Sports Centre. In this space of cultural and sporting spectacle, Safaricom has displaced another giant, Kenya's dictatorial second president, Daniel arap Moi.² Reflecting on the meaning of this displacement, I joined my fellow travelers, many dressed in their Sunday best, as we approached the hulking stadium. The event: Safaricom's Annual Shareholders' Meeting.

A friend had facilitated my access to the meeting. His sister was a shareholder but, he told me, she was so disappointed with the performance of her shares, and the resulting dividends, following the massive oversubscription during the Initial Public Offering (IPO) 6 years earlier that she had no interest in attending the Annual General Meeting (AGM). This enabled the

¹ This rebranding was contested in Parliament, with opponents arguing that it was an affront to the image of Daniel arap Moi and an effacement of "national heritage" see: David Mwere, "MPs Oppose Renaming of Kasarani Stadium," *The Star*, December 5, 2013. Available online: http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2013/12/05/mps-oppose-renaming-of-kasarani-stadium_c867652

² For a discussion of the importance of the visual presence of the figure of the 'dictator' in asserting political authority in Kenya, see Robert Blunt, "Of Money and Elders: Ritual, Proliferation, and Spectacle in Colonial and Postcolonial Kenya," (Dissertation, The University of Chicago, 2010). For broader perspectives, see Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and J-F. Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, 2nd edition. (Boston: Polity, 2009).

curious researcher to participate in her stead, a deal secured by the scrawl of a signature and the inscription of a national ID number on a form downloadable from Safaricom's website.

But a few years ago, access to the internet was limited to “cybers” and the homes of Kenya’s elite. Today, “smartphones” proliferate across the Kenyan landscape. These material transformations have been accompanied by the emergence of a new set of imaginaries, both of which are largely attributable to Safaricom and the “miraculous” rise of mobile telephony. Indeed, today techno-enthusiasts worldwide describe Kenya as a “hub of technological innovation,” the continent’s “Silicon Savannah.” Within Kenya, people at all tiers of society traffic in this rhetoric, which has moved beyond the circumscribed field of technological innovation and is today used to index a whole range of projects: from an individual’s aspirations for the future, to a national shorthand for how “development” is thought today. The promises of “the digital” also shaped the aspirations of would-be shareholders, who viewed buying into the digital communications company as a means by which they could secure their fiscal futures, personal enrichment a means of *becoming* digital.

As I made my way across the complex, I became increasingly perplexed by the confusing semiotics of the space. Every few feet, one was confronted by signage. Safaricom's telltale italicized green font, nested amongst the dark green, red, and black of the Kenyan flag. Most striking within this palette was how the green of the national flag, the green symbolizing the struggle to regain control over lands lost to white settlers —itself a contested symbol of the ethno-politicized struggle that precipitated independence—was juxtaposed against a green of a lighter hue, what Kenyans refer to as “Safaricom green.” Here, the signs of the corporation and signs of the nation at once seemed to jockey for preeminence, while concurrently existing in an uneasy cohabitation—an awkward conviviality splashed across walls, banners, and flags.

Approaching the stadium, I was handed a small box containing a sandwich, a can of soda, and a Safaricom branded t-shirt. This welcome, I later learned, was a vast improvement from the year before. In 2013, the company had provided no material offering in exchange for attendance. As shareholders were quick to point out, Safaricom had not even provided transport to the stadium. People had been incensed by this deviation from the script that guides interactions between patrons and clients. In registering this critique, Kenyans called the corporation to account according to enduring expectations regarding the proper operation of politics in Kenya, a

register wherein politicians routinely pay (and are expected to pay) people to turn out for rallies and political meetings. Shows of political loyalty are rarely freely given in Kenya.

But shareholders are not clients as conventionally understood. Their investment in the relationship uniting themselves to Safaricom has been secured by shillings, their shares “freely” bought on the Nairobi Securities Exchange (NSE). Shillings, rather than promised votes, are what ostensibly tethers these Kenyans to their corporate patron. Meeting attendees were acutely aware of this transformation in conventional relations of dependence.³ They appealed to the company both in their capacity as client-citizens and in their capacity as corporate shareholders, a mix that reveals how the company is today reconfiguring not only the meaning of citizenship, but the nature and location of the attachments binding Kenya’s citizen publics to both the state and the corporation.⁴

My sense of the complicated place of the company in Kenyan social and political life increased as the day progressed. As I walked up the steps of the stadium, a brass band started playing. “Wimbo wa taifa” the woman next to me whispered to her companion as they stopped, bowing their heads as the national anthem played. As the last notes faded, we proceeded into the belly of the building. Safaricom’s management was seated on a raised dais in the center of the stadium. Shareholders sat in the bleachers gazing down at this international cadre of men and women who were flanked by flags and bunting the colors of the Kenyan national flag, the secondary green of Safaricom conspicuously included. The meeting followed the model of a *baraza*, or political meeting, where normative codes of behavior dictate the enactment of the bonds binding the citizenry to the state.⁵

But the semiotic doubling of Safaricom’s green jockeying for space with the green of the Kenyan flag at the 2014 AGM is not seamless, and gestures toward a deeper ambivalence regarding the place of the corporation in everyday life. This is not altogether surprising. Everyday Kenyans of various stripes engage the corporation, whether to access money, provision for a family member or friend, make a call, send an SMS, gather provisions following calamity,

³ James Ferguson, “Declarations of Dependence: Labour, Personhood, and Welfare in Southern Africa.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. Vol. 19 (2013): 223-242.

⁴ Marina Welker, *Enacting the Corporation: An American Mining Firm in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

⁵ Angelique Haugerud, *The Cultural of Politics in Modern Kenya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

or watch a football match. The multiplicity of its domains of operation renders Safaricom, both as a material network and as a discursive and visual presence, pervasive; its ubiquity and reach through the sinews of everyday life impressive, rivaling the reach of the state in ways both visible and invisible. As Safaricom's reach into the intimate lives of its customers expands it generates new attachments, attachments that industry insiders refer to as "stickiness." And while Safaricom's embeddedness in this Kenyan milieu is not accidental, it can be a liability for both itself and the Kenyan state. Indeed, both Safaricom and the state work assiduously to walk this line between proximity and distance. Understanding this dialectic of intimacy and estrangement—both in material and symbolic terms—forms the substance of this chapter which seeks to understand how today Safaricom, the region's largest company and a multi-national corporation, produces state-like effects in Kenya.

This chapter begins by considering the conditions of possibility for the emergence of Safaricom in the early 2000s. It situates this emergence as having been generated at the interface of the changing proclivities of international governing bodies, transformations in national policies, and global shifts in telecommunications technologies. The watchword in this period was "transparency." It was only by disembedding the new corporation from the state that "innovation" and the "efficient" provision of services could be ensured and the "public good" protected. This new ethos entailed both the reordering of the relationship between public and private within the state, and a reconfiguration of the relationship between infrastructures and the constitution of belonging. The relocation of the "public good," I argue, concurrently brought to the fore uncertainty regarding who or what was responsible for "development." As this history of the present will demonstrate, incrementally the onus for "development" moved from being framed as the responsibility of the state to being placed on the shoulders of Kenyan citizens who have been reconstituted as a market of investors and innovators in the process.

The Birth of a Corporation: Privatizing the Commons and the Production of Divisibility

Safaricom's complicated relationship with the Kenyan state extends back to its founding moment. And, like many origin stories, this one begins with a series of perceived betrayals. While reforms operating under the aegis of the World Bank and the IMF began in the 1980s, it

was not until the mid-2000s that the state began breaking up the last of its nationally held assets. This process was one of fits and starts. In 1998, a new Information and Communication Technology (ICT) policy was enacted, which split the former Kenya Posts and Telecommunication Corporation (KPTC) into three discrete entities: The Postal Corporation of Kenya, the Communications Commission of Kenya (CCK), and what was to become Kenya's monopoly telephone service provider, Telkom Kenya.⁶

Proponents of the disaggregation of state assets argued that the move would increase both “transparency” and “efficiency.” As David Mwiraria, then Minister for Finance, argued in parliament in 2004:

in the past, incidents of mismanagement in public enterprises have imposed heavy financial costs on both the economy and the Kenyan taxpayers. As a result, the public has paid for services which were either not rendered or when rendered, were of a low quality. In general, this sub-sector has been largely under-performing and unable to service its debt obligations, transferring most of the burden to the Exchequer.

Spotty service provisioning was not the only thing at issue. “In some instances,” he continued, “these enterprises hired excess labour while engaging in inappropriate procurement procedures. The result has been overpriced purchases of assets, real estates or outright theft through purchases of [the] wrong equipment.”⁷ Public enterprises, in other words, were being used illicitly to secure private gain. Rather than provisioning services and enabling the development of robust infrastructures that would bind people to place, those managing state enterprises stood accused of unraveling the material networks that enabled connectivity, separating the materiality of infrastructures from their purported function: the provision of services necessary to secure the “public good.” These actions placed an undue burden on the Kenyan population, as government appointed managers sucked capital out of state coffers.

This was particularly vexing in the context of telecoms for, as Moses Akaranga put it, communications infrastructures were critical to “the development of any place.”⁸ The division of KPTC, and the subsequent creation of Telkom Kenya was, in effect, designed to both protect the

⁶ “KENYA TELECOM REFORM: A GOOD STORY GONE BAD?” April 10, 2005. Wikileaks, Available online at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05NAIROBI1488_a.html. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, September 27, 2007.

⁷ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 10 June 2004.

⁸ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 18 June 2003.

Kenyan public and the state from the perceived predations of government officials. It was only through these reforms that national “development” would be possible.

Observers at the American Embassy tended to agree. However, they were quick to argue that, as a remedial step designed to ensure transparency, the bifurcation of KPTC had been a failure. So, too, did these observers question Telkom’s integrity as a semi-autonomous parastatal.

To no one’s surprise, the CCK’s latest annual report notes TKL’s utter failure to translate its monopoly status into improved services [in landline provisioning] and infrastructure... Nearly all Kenyans can recount anecdotes which together paint a picture of an inefficient, badly managed company widely seen as more a platform for political patronage and corruption than a genuine service provider.⁹

These observers claimed that government foot dragging had beleaguered the path to liberalization, as contracts to private corporations were routinely thwarted in what observers perceived to be efforts to protect “cabals.”¹⁰ Challenging a long-held ideology of distribution that links political patronage to (albeit unequal) service provisioning, these critics positioned patronage as an anathema to the “public good.” The politics of patronage, the message was clear, was an obstruction to infrastructural maintenance and expansion, both of which had implications for service delivery.

There was some truth to this. The extension of Kenya’s landline network had proceeded slowly and unevenly. By 2002, Kenya had 327,000 landline connections servicing a population of over 31 million, ranking Kenya 23rd on the continent.¹¹ Services, parliamentarians claimed, were mainly nested in Nairobi and its immediate hinterlands: “leaving most of the country unwired in the information age.”¹²

Kenya’s entry into the “information age” would be heralded by privatization, a process which was widely held to be the only way to bring together what was needed: the holy trinity of foreign expertise, technology, and capital. For proponents of privatization, the selling off of state assets would not reproduce asymmetric relations of power between putative centers and peripheries. The goal, wrote then Minister of Finance, Chris Okemo in 2001, was to cultivate

⁹ “KENYA TELECOM REFORM: A GOOD STORY GONE BAD?” April 10, 2005. Wikileaks, Available online at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05NAIROBI1488_a.html

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), October 31, 2001. “KENYA TELECOM REFORM: A GOOD STORY GONE BAD?” April 10, 2005. Wikileaks Available online at

https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05NAIROBI1488_a.html

new, “strategic partnerships.” This was especially important: “when...dealing with enterprises that involve technology and management expertise.”¹³

The value of these relationships was not to be framed in terms of dollar (or shilling) amount alone, but crucially turned on a qualitative assessment of the emergent relationships borne out of the selling of state assets. “What was needed,” he argued, was “somebody who would bring value to the corporation not just by acquiring assets but... [by bringing] technology and management skills that will enhance the value of that enterprise; that will lead to efficiency of services.” His framing here was cautious, however. Care must be taken, he stated, to protect: “Kenya’s interests first...all other interests are secondary.”¹⁴ Amidst much discussion, the Privatization Act of 1999 was finally passed by Parliament. Oddly, then, privatization was devised as a means, the only means, of both protecting “the public” and securing the “public good.”

It was in this period that Safaricom first made its appearance. One narrative holds that Safaricom was created in 2000, having gained access to Telkom Kenya’s subscriber base and network—in other words, its wealth in people, and its wealth in things (Guyer 1995). Soon thereafter, Vodafone Kenya Limited acquired a 40 percent interest in Safaricom by contributing \$20 million USD in cash. Telkom Kenya and British owned Vodafone contributed \$33 million USD and \$22 million USD, respectively, as their contributions for the portion of the license fee required to operate cellular services. An alternative narrative holds that Safaricom was registered as a wholly owned subsidiary of KPTC on April 3, 1997. In January 1999, the newly formed parastatal, Telkom Kenya, gave 30 percent of Safaricom to Vodafone Kenya Limited (VKL), followed by another 10 percent in October of that year.¹⁵ This 10 percent later ceded, while seemingly unknown in this period, would become important in years to come. In both narratives, under the terms of the new ownership structure, Telkom Kenya held 60 percent of Safaricom, which was subsequently taken over by the government along with a range of debts, in December 2007.

¹³ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), October 23, 2001

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Ewen Sutherland, “A Short Note on Corruption in Telecommunications in Kenya,” Electronic copy available at: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1996429>

While these timelines would be hotly contested in the months leading up to the 2007 IPO, what united these founding narratives were the numbers. Indeed, in the series of debates and intrigues that would assemble around the company, the numbers themselves—60/40— would occupy a central position as the objects over which people argued. Though in this period, the terms of the split remained unquestioned, uncertainty remained regarding the proprietary claims embedded in these numbers, which turned on the status of the monies granted by Telkom and Vodafone and how they were to be evaluated. The *Public Investments Committee on the Accounts of State Corporations* tasked with examining Safaricom's origins some years later outlined the confusion. Why, it asked, were the monies exchanged framed as a loan rather than equity?

The problem of the character of the exchange was beset by other irregularities. As the committee wrote in its report, the deals under question had not generated a paper trail. "[I]n absence of a written agreement between the parties...the Committee was unable to confirm the term[s] of the said loan."¹⁶ For members of the committee, the lack of documentation, and the discursive authority it bore, smelled of the bad old days of the politics of patronage. Not only had privatization failed to deliver on transparency, but uncertainty regarding how these proprietary numbers were to be evaluated made it difficult to discern who (or what) was really driving the company. If it was a loan, at issue were the rates of interest, the nature of debtors' oversight, and rates of repayment. If it was equity, at issue was how the division of managerial labor, and the identity of relevant shareholders, would impact the future direction of the company. All of these questions led critics to query how the new arrangements would upset the status of Kenyanness.

At this stage, foreign proponents of liberalization were unconcerned with the specifics of this origin story. For their part, the growth of Safaricom confirmed an emergent orthodoxy: development was best effected when driven by global capital and expertise operating under the conditions of a newly liberalized economy. As noted by a U.S. Foreign Service Officer (FSO):

TKL's failure as a fixed line service provider stands in stark contrast to the roaring growth of Kenya's mobile phone industry - one of the country's rare economic success stories. Mobile services were commercially launched in 1993, but the market didn't start to take off until 1997, when SafariCom, [*sic*] a wholly-owned subsidiary of TKL, was established. In May 2000, TKL sold 40% of Safaricom to

¹⁶ Kenya National Assembly, Public Investments Committee, *Fifteenth Report of the Public Investments Committee on the Accounts of State Corporations*, (Nairobi, National Assembly, 2007)

Vodafone UK, which assumed management of the company...the market took off. Mobile network connections surpassed the number of fixed lines in 2001 and by 2004, total subscribers exceeded 2.8 million. Networks have been rolled out quickly, and close to 60% of the population now has cellular signal coverage. This rapid growth in mobile is both a cause and a consequence of TKL's failure in the fixed line market.¹⁷

These numbers depoliticized liberalization. They offered ‘proof’ that privatization had ‘succeeded,’ enabling both transparency and service delivery. In a sentiment that was coming to the fore amongst policy-makers, foreign lenders, and industry leaders alike, inefficient government agencies needed to be replaced by responsible and efficient corporate management structures and models.¹⁸ If a new corporate managerialism via privatization was the solution to state “failure,” new technologies were to be its arsenal; allowing Kenya to “leapfrog” landline infrastructures and launching the country into a mobile future.

Kenya’s entry into the mobile market in this period was *not*, however, unique. Indeed, the launch of mobile phone networks in Kenya was part and parcel of a broader, indeed global, shift towards mobile telephony. In 1995, there were approximately 91 million mobile phone users across the globe.¹⁹ By 2006, this number had risen to 3.3 billion subscribers.²⁰ Kenya was a part of this trend. By 2006, 26.9 percent of the adult population were mobile subscribers.²¹ While Kenya’s rates of adoption were reasonable under the leadership of Vodafone, it was not until these new mobile networks were reformed, made “peculiarly Kenyan,” that Kenya embarked on the path towards becoming Africa’s “Silicon Savannah.”

For U.S. observers, market growth took precedence over the material and symbolic implications of the company being reformed by the injection of private foreign capital and expertise. Indeed, it was these investments to which they attributed the generation of new markets in mobile telephony, itself unquestioningly positioned as an index of national

¹⁷ “KENYA TELECOM REFORM: A GOOD STORY GONE BAD?” April 10, 2005. Wikileaks. Available online at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05NAIROBI1488_a.html

¹⁸ Brenda Chalfin, *Neoliberal Frontiers: An Ethnography of Sovereignty in West Africa*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Laura Bear, *Navigating Austerity: Currents of Debt along a South Asian River*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

¹⁹ Gerard Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture: Mobile Technology in Everyday Life*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.

²⁰ http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/ict/graphs/ICT_penetration_2007.jpg

²¹ FSD Kenya: Financial Sector Deepening. “Financial Access in Kenya: Results of the 2006 National Survey,” (October 2007) Available online at: <http://www.microfinancegateway.org/sites/default/files/mfg-en-paper-financial-access-in-kenya-results-of-the-2006-national-survey-oct-2007.pdf>

development. But this was to be a wireless, rather than wired, development. A development secured through the privatization of national assets and infrastructures rather than through the extension and maintenance of state owned infrastructures. This would serve an integrative function, binding diverse parts of the country into a single network.²² This was not, however, a conventional story of state building. These infrastructures were not a means of generating attachments between people and the state. Instead, Kenyans were becoming tethered to an interesting hybrid, Safaricom, by a series of 0s and 1s.

These transformations were not lost on the Kenyan public for whom the fact that Kenya's telecommunications sector, under the auspices of a parastatal, Telkom, had been ceded to foreign interests caused much consternation. The numbers themselves— 40 percent being held by British owned multinational, Vodafone, and 60 percent being held by Telkom— were a part of these debates. Under the terms of the Privatisation Act (1999), no more than 40 percent of a state asset could be foreign held.²³ This regulation indexed an attempt to fix in place and render in numerical form the nature of the new relationships being established as state assets were privatized. For some, the numbers were all wrong. Allowing foreigners a stake in state assets, they argued, would parlay into a kind of neo-imperial relationship. For these critics, the enforced privatization of state enterprises was in the interest of foreign investors alone. A cynical means of creating new markets for metropolitan capital, their own markets having long-since dried up. For others, the question of Kenya's sovereignty was front and center. As C. Kilonzo stated in the national assembly: "Privatisation is a new form of colonization. It cannot be anything else. Very soon, if we sell all the parastatals then all the managing directors will be European."²⁴ Though all seemed to agree that services would be improved, not everyone was convinced that the benefits of these improvements were worth the costs.

For these opponents of privatization, the question turned on the status of the asset. For many, state assets were "public resources" to be protected and retained as whole, indivisible

²² "KENYA TELECOM REFORM: A GOOD STORY GONE BAD?" April 10, 2005. Wikileaks. Available online at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05NAIROBI1488_a.html

²³ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), December 15, 1999; Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), September 27, 2007.

²⁴ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 28 April, 2004.

parts of the national patrimony.²⁵ As Boaz Kipchumba argued in April 2004 while a new privatization bill was being debated in Parliament, Kenyans had a naturally endowed right to these networks as these “parastatals are... owned by members of the public.”²⁶ For some, this was a matter of history. As Kerow Billows argued: “There is no way we can sell Telkom Kenya; a company owned by Kenyans, in which they have invested their time, efforts and resources for 40 years.”²⁷

Others moved away from history, tapping into a logic of rights and ownership rooted in a deeper genealogy of belonging, thereby firmly rooting Telkom Kenya and its infrastructures within the logic of the patria. It is “our heritage” one parliamentarian emphatically stated.²⁸ These critics argued that Kenyans’ proprietary rights over telecommunications infrastructures were rooted in a logic of primordialism. Kilonzo, for example, argued that while he, too, supported the new privatization bill, it was essential that the majority “of the shares should be sold to Kenyans, and to indigenous Kenyans for that matter. If we are going to pass and support this Bill, it has to be on condition that it is only going to benefit Kenyans, and it must be indigenous Kenyans.”²⁹ In invoking indigeneity rather than citizenship as the metric of rightful ownership, Kilonzo firmly framed Kenya’s telecommunication sector as one of the “resources of this country.” The legitimate purview of the legitimate holders of the land, defined not as citizens but as first-comers.³⁰ Like conflicts over the continent’s subsoils, this debate turned on a logic of autochthony. In this framing the resource ought to remain indivisible, a commons over which indigenes held a naturally endowed right.

While writing a few years later, the spirit of this argument was captured in the Kenyan blogosphere.

If you are awake, you should have noticed something very strange has been happening since [the] 1980’s. From this period, we have witnessed [the] massive sale of basic industries, or *natural monopolies* by states. For instance...Kenya Post and Telecommunications Corporation (KPTC)...As usual, the priests will yell, *efficiency*. They said the same as they enclosed common lands in England and Scotland which was then extended to other continents in form of colonialism. *We*

²⁵ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 5 July, 2005.

²⁶ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 27 April, 2004.

²⁷ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 5 July, 2005.

²⁸ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 2 April, 2002.

²⁹ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 28 April, 2004.

³⁰ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 5 July, 2005.

*are in the midst of the greatest enclosure of commons ever witnessed by mankind.*³¹

For this blogger, state assets were a kind of a commons, which the government ought to retain outside of market relations. Kenyans had naturally endowed rights to these services and networks, rights that were fundamentally undermined as these entities were commodified and rendered divisible.³²

But policy-makers were in a fix that pit ideology and materiality against each other. Like the boundaries that demarcate the borders of belonging, infrastructures require constant investment and vigilant maintenance work. As Assistant Minister of Co-operative Development stated, while parastatals had been:

founded using the taxpayers' money...parastatals were expected to offer services and they were supposed to be of help to Kenyans at large. I am saying this because I realize that when we speak about privatization, we are mainly talking about the improvement of the infrastructure.³³

Critics of privatization were in a double-bind. To privatize would be to remove publicly held assets from the hands of Kenyans who were their naturally endowed owners. Dividing these assets, they seemed to argue, fundamentally altered their status *vis* Kenyanness. But allowing the company to remain in the hands of the state as a “custodian of...enterprises” would prevent “the improvement of the infrastructure” and thus fail “to be of help to Kenyans at large.”³⁴

Here anxieties over the status of Kenyanness precluded a simple economic reading of value.

As Peter Kenneth argued during the same discussion:

On the issue of valuation...we need to be careful. We need to have the correct machinery and procurement procedures in place. This is normally a very difficult subject in privatization. *I am aware that not all of us can agree on certain values which are pegged on various assets of a company...* If you look at the previous

³¹ Emphasis added in first and second instance. Emphasis in bold in original in third instance. “Phil,” “The Coming Two Tier Global Economy: Which is Thy Tier?” *Kumekucha* (Blog) 24 May, 2011. <http://kumekucha.blogspot.com/2011/05/coming-two-tier-global-economy-which-is.html>. Phil’s profile lists social worker as his profession and Kibera, a large “informal” settlement on Nairobi’s periphery as his location.

³² Bear, *Navigating Austerity*

³³ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), April 27, 2004.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

privatisation exercises which have taken place, you will find that there has always been a dispute as to *what the real value* could have been.³⁵

On the face of things, Kenneth was concerned with how value should be ascertained economic terms. This was no easy task. It required establishing the monetary value of existing assets but also forecasting how they might generate future profits in a context where the future was uncertain at best. And yet, lurking in the background was an uncertainty regarding how authorizing the divisibility of state assets might reconfigure the terms of Kenyanness. Not all parastatals ought to be subject to divisibility. Some, as Kenneth argued, ought to be retained by the government “on behalf of its people.”³⁶

For opponents, then, this concern turned on the relationship between materiality and meaning. Was the improvement of services worth what some viewed as a ceding of state sovereignty? Did this new relationship not simply re-rehearse colonial dynamics? And, perhaps most importantly, what were the implications for belonging? The “value” of foreign investments, evidently, did not simply inhere in the amount of foreign capital and expertise brought in to run what were formerly state-held assets. Quantities in these discussions were meaningless without a close reading of the mechanisms and relationships that modified their qualities.³⁷

Privatization in the form of the Initial Public Offering (IPO) seemed, to some, to remedy this impasse. State assets would be rendered divisible in the form of shares, but the selling of those shares would be undertaken in a bid to protect the patria, to ensure that Kenya’s natural “resource” returned to its natural owners: Kenyans. In subsequent years, however, this debate would reframe the terms of earlier discussions over privatization. Public assets would, indeed, return to Kenyans, but this time not as autochthons or first comers, nor as undifferentiated Kenyan citizens, but as individual shareholder-citizens.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ For a discussion of qualities and quantities, and the relations between them. See Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004); Diana Nelson, *Who Counts? The Mathematics of Death and Life After Genocide*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

“The question which vexed the Committee’s mind was: ‘Who is Mobitelea Ventures?’ ”³⁸

Kevin and I were out for *nyama choma* with a friend, Simiyu, and some of his colleagues, all of whom work at Finance Against Poverty (FAP).³⁹ FAP’s mandate is to make “markets work for the poor.” FAP’s research is concerned with understanding the patterns and networks of the poor so as to better include them in emerging financial markets. This mandate, which goes by the shorthand M4P (Markets For the Poor), rests on an increasingly prevalent postulate: the private sector, rather than governments, or NGOs, is best placed to ensure “development.” According to this emergent developmentalist wisdom, the poor ought not be viewed as people in need. Instead, this rationale holds that the poor be viewed as both entrepreneurs and a potential market to be tapped through the financialization of everyday life.

M4P is not limited to FAP. This ethos was formalized following the publication of C.K. Prahalad’s, 2006, *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty through Profits*. In this oft-cited text, Prahalad argued that: “we stop thinking of the poor as victims or as a burden and start recognizing them as resilient and creative entrepreneurs and value-conscious consumers.” The Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP), he continued, was not simply a base of consumers, but was a “source of innovations,” innovations that could be marketized.⁴⁰ This near-orthodoxy is propounded by Safaricom, Simiyu’s former employer, as well. Indeed, Safaricom routinely attributes its success to the company’s investment in the twin projects of “knowing their customers,” and investing in projects operating under the banner of “Corporate Social Responsibility.” However, and as we shall see, while this ideology now has global purchase, its emergence in Kenya was contingent and firmly rooted in the particularities of the Kenyan milieu.

We first reached out to Simiyu to gain a better understanding of the knowledge work Safaricom undertakes to establish and nurture new markets. How, we wanted to know, could we

³⁸ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), April 27, 2004. 27 September, 2007.

³⁹ *Nyama choma* is roasted meat, a favorite meal in Kenya. Note that the name of this organization has been changed to protect the identities of our interlocutors.

⁴⁰ C.K. Prahalad, *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty Through Profits*, (New Jersey: Pearson FT Press, 2009), 1. For an analysis of this rationale at work, see Julia Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Julia Elyachar, “Next Practices: Knowledge, Infrastructure, and Public Goods at the Bottom of the Pyramid.” *Public Culture*, Vol. 24, No 1 (2012): 109-129.

account for the unprecedented success of this company? Why were customers seemingly so closely bound to Safaricom? From whence did their attachments derive?

As the night wore on, talk turned to Mobitelea, a shadowy company that emerged as a shareholder of Safaricom in the period leading up to the IPO. Despite much talk of the company, which was registered in Guernsey, an island in the English Channel, very little was known regarding how Mobitelea gained shares in East Africa's largest corporation, nor did anyone seem to know—or was willing to name—who was behind it. The moniker, Mobitelea, had puzzled Kevin and I. Did any among them know where it had come from, we asked the group. Jim, an innovations leader at FAP laughed. Standing up, and walking away from the group as his cellphone rang, he turned to the table and shouted: “Everyone knows! Mobitelea: Moi, Biwott, Telecoms!” It was so simple, so elegant, so obvious. Safaricom may have displaced Moi's legacy at the newly renamed Safaricom Stadium, but Moi—and the politics of patronage and statecraft for which he stands— had, evidently, remained embedded in Safaricom.

This section works to tease out the debates that surrounded the second phase of privatization, which took the form of an IPO initiated in 2007 and completed in 2008. The IPO was framed as a means of democratizing the ownership structure of the corporation by placing it firmly in the hands of an undifferentiated and distributed Kenyan public. This was accompanied, I argue, by a reconfiguration in how “development” was being imagined in the period. No longer linked to the state and the partisan ethno-politics that characterized its operations, development was increasingly viewed as being the proper purview of Kenya's multiple citizen-publics, who were reconfigured as both investors and markets to be tapped, with Safaricom operating as a new corporate patron and seeker of value. In tracking this distribution in developmentalist agency, I turn to questions of market-making. Here I query how it came to pass that the poor came to be viewed as a source of both value and innovation.

Now firmly under the directorship of Michael Joseph, a South African national, Safaricom had undergone massive transformations by 2007. From a company with only 200,000 registered lines, Safaricom had assembled a subscriber base of over 8.1 million, fast becoming the largest

corporation in the region.⁴¹ Much of this success can be attributed to the company's launch of its widely lauded value-added service, M-PESA, a service to which I will return, which enables mobile-to-mobile money transfers. The generation of new markets that happened in these years demanded the expansion of infrastructures, as the increase in M-PESA users put pressure on the existing bandwidth, leading to overcrowding on the 2G spectrum. And so, the company purchased the country's first Third Generation (3G) license from the industry regulator, the Communications Commission of Kenya, for \$25 million USD in the same year.⁴²

M-PESA has generated widespread international attention, widely lauded for "including" populations heretofore "excluded" from financial markets—for "banking the unbanked." The language of inclusion, from the beginning, situated M-PESA in an altruistic register, positioning it as having 'democratized development' by following the lead of the poor, rather than imposing top-down, centralized development initiatives. This 'democratization of development' was to be matched by the democratization of the company's ownership structure in the form of the IPO.

And so, in 2007, the company prepared to go public by extending the privatization of the corporation in the form of an Initial Public Offering (IPO). Under the agreement struck between Telkom Kenya as 60 percent shareholder of Safaricom and Vodafone as 40 percent shareholder, the Government of Kenya would transfer Telkom's 60 percent to the Minister of Finance. 25 percent of these shares would be sold to the public on the Nairobi Securities Exchange (NSE). Under the terms of this agreement, the majority of shares would be held by a combination of the Government of Kenya and the Kenyan populace. But the agreement allowed for a future wherein Vodafone would become majority shareholder.⁴³

This move would have shifted the geographic center of ownership beyond Kenya's borders. But, on the face of things at least, Vodafone seemed more concerned that the company's top leadership, not the majority of its shares, be the purview of various global elsewhere. Indeed, rumors held that Vodafone was willing to forego this majority stake in Safaricom if the Government of Kenya agreed to cede its right as majority shareholder to appoint the company's

⁴¹ "KENYA'S BIG PUSH FOR ICT REFORM AND INFRASTRUCTURE," October 25, 2007. Wikileaks, Available online at: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07NAIROBI4202_a.html;

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Kenya National Assembly, Public Investments Committee, *Fifteenth Report of the Public Investments Committee on the Accounts of State Corporations*, (Nairobi, National Assembly, 2007)

CEO.⁴⁴ This clause in the agreement, which has led to the appointment of one South African and one Guyanese CEO in the succeeding years, is popularly held to have been a means by which the company sought to distance itself from the Kenyan state, both with regard to the protracted nature of Kenyan ethno-politics, and the politics of patronage that are widely held to be the animus for “corruption.”

But revelations that came on the heels of the announced IPO called into question Safaricom’s desired separation between corporation and state. The 1999 law, which mandated that the majority of shares remain in Kenya had replaced an earlier, 1997, policy established to monitor the country’s Information Communication Technology (ICT) sectors. This law was in effect prior to the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act of 1998, which split KPTC into three entities: Telkom Kenya, Postal Corporation of Kenya, and the CCK. The initial policy stipulated that any new investor could hold no more than 30, rather than 40, percent equity in the company. These new numbers raised a series of questions. According to the second origin’s story the company had been established in 1999, meaning the original 1997 regulations were in place at its inception, rendering the altered proportion held by Telekom illegal. If this second narrative of origins was true how and when, Kenyan parliamentarians queried, did it come to pass that this policy was changed? More than timelines were in the crosshairs here. According to a parliamentary committee organized to investigate these irregularities:

by the time of its inception ... Telkom Kenya, on behalf of the Government of Kenya, owned 70 per cent of Safaricom. The remaining 30 per cent was owned by Vodafone Kenya Limited on behalf of Vodafone PLC. [The]...Committee found out that contrary to what is in the public domain, the company has more than two shareholders. The third shareholder is a shadow firm known as Mobitelea Ventures Limited...whose directors are also obscure.⁴⁵

Not only was this contrary to the 1997 stipulations governing the privatization of state assets, but it also contravened the shareholders’ agreement, which mandated that all shareholders be notified of a potential sale, and that the identity of new shareholders be made known. The real rub, however, returned to questions of value. Specifically, it was not clear that Telkom Kenya had received *any* capital in exchange for the 10 percent passed along to Vodafone Kenya. As the

⁴⁴ “KENYA’S BIG PUSH FOR ICT REFORM AND INFRASTRUCTURE,” October 25, 2007. Available online at: https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07NAIROBI4202_a.html

⁴⁵ Kenya National Assembly, Public Investments Committee, *Fifteenth Report of the Public Investments Committee on the Accounts of State Corporations*, (Nairobi, National Assembly, 2007)

Committee report recounted: "Mr Sammy Kirui, Chief Executive, Telkom (K) Ltd informed the Committee that, while he is not sure what necessitated the reduction of TKL shares in Safaricom from 70% to 60%, available records are not explicit [regarding] whether TKL was paid for the reduction."⁴⁶

By uncoupling 10 percent from the original 70 percent, the network was revalued, transformed into a gift to be freely given, a cessation of both sovereignty and a selling-out of citizens. As one parliamentarian argued: "the 10 per cent was given to the shadowy company for free. It was public funds!"⁴⁷ By giving a proportion of Kenya's natural resources away, the government had disrupted the terms of its fiduciary relationship with Kenyan citizens, an agreement wherein it held a proportion of state assets, but only "in trust" for the Kenyan public.⁴⁸

Requests of information from the relevant parties only deepened suspicions. Sammy Kirui, CEO of Telkom Kenya, argued that the reduction in shares may have been necessitated by the "need to raise funds for the expansion of Safaricom's network."⁴⁹ Contrary to what advocates of privatization under the banner of "transparency" had been saying for years, here Kirui seemed to argue the politics of patronage were *not* an obstruction to infrastructural expansion. They were its condition of possibility.

When pressed on this, Vodafone executives, Michael Joseph included, ostensibly chosen because his status as South African inured him from imbrication in Kenya's complex politics of patronage, refused to disclose the status of Mobitelea, though no one denied that a deal had been struck. A letter written the Chief Executive of Vodafone Africa stated: "in 2002, Mobitelea Ventures...was offered an opportunity to acquire 25% of VKL by Vodafone Group. *This was in return for the advisory role it played as a local partner of Vodafone Group on local business practices and protocol challenges associated with investing in Kenya.*" Safaricom representatives here tried to assuage fears. This new investor, though its identity remained obscure, was not "foreign" but was a "local partner." And so, Darby seemed to suggest, the 5 percent of the company held by Mobitelea did not shift the center of gravity outside of Kenya.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), September 27, 2007.

⁴⁸ Kenya National Assembly, Public Investments Committee, *Fifteenth Report of the Public Investments Committee on the Accounts of State Corporations*, (Nairobi, National Assembly, 2007)

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

To the contrary, the deal had been struck in a bid to more firmly embed the company in Kenya's social fabric. The deal was struck, in other words, to secure intimacy.

The letter indicated that there was nothing unusual in this. "When Vodafone makes investments in new territories," Darby told the committee, "it is not uncommon that it works alongside a partner, who typically gives advice on *local* business practices and protocols and various challenges associated with investing in a *new market*."⁵⁰ If, for Kirui, the deal with Mobitelea had provided *value* in the form of capital needed for "local" infrastructural expansion, Vodafone executives argued that the expansion of the company and its infrastructures turned on mobilizing "local" knowledge. And that the *value* of this knowledge outstripped any irregularities that might have enabled the movement of shares among the contracted parties.

These debates brought into relief an emergent developmentalist regime. "Local knowledge," mediated by foreign expertise and capital was necessary for the generation of new infrastructures. This coupling of the infrastructural and the "para-ethnographic" has since become the *modus operandi* of Safaricom, a distributed vision of developmental agency that brings ever-larger swaths of the Kenyan population into the orbit of the company as sources of knowledge and sites of innovation.⁵¹

Critics in Parliament were indignant:

It is appalling that Vodafone Plc a Company registered in the United Kingdom involved itself in underhand activities of [a] corrupt nature aimed at depriving Kenyan citizens of billions of shillings through m/s. Mobitelea Ventures, despite the fact that the U.K. has been in the forefront of campaigning against corruption in developing countries.⁵²

This was hypocrisy at its worst. Under the guise of a foreign multinational corporation, the networks of patronage had, evidently, not disappeared. Instead, like infrastructural expansion, they too were outsourced, distributed amongst the island of Guernsey, the Nairobi offices of Safaricom, the State House, and the metropolitan headquarters of British-owned Vodafone. On the heels of these troubling revelations, critics called for an immediate cessation of the IPO. These critics challenged the government of Mwai Kibaki to make good on its promises to end

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

⁵¹ Douglas R. Holmes, and George E. Marcus, "Para-ethnography and the rise of the symbolic analyst." in M. Fisher and G. Downey, eds, *Frontiers of Capital: Ethnographic Reflections on the New Economy*. 33-57 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁵² Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), October 2, 2007.

corruption. “If it was transparent as it claims to be,” it should have no problem getting to the bottom of this “murky” deal.⁵³ These irregularities, they argued, ought to be resolved and “all those disclosures...made” before the IPO was allowed to go forward.⁵⁴ This was not merely a matter of political wrangling. Many Kenyans firmly located the IPO within a longer genealogy of state corruption. The context of these revelations, however, coming as they did on the heels of the second round of privatization, offered Kenyans the opportunity to weigh in. As one blogger wrote: “if you are against corruption then it is a good idea...to stop corruption dead in its’ tracks and what better place to start than to cause the Safaricom IPO to fall flat on its’ face.”⁵⁵ By withholding their hard-earned shillings and boycotting the IPO, Kenyans could actively work to remedy the misdeeds of the past. This, interestingly, marked a continuation of the logic of privatization that had animated parliamentary debates since the early 2000s. It was the very expansion of private ownership through the divisibility of state assets that seemed to offer a means of protecting the “public good.”

If critics of the IPO centered on past irregularities, its supporters directed attention to how the IPO would usher in new futures, not least by ensuring the most “efficient” division of labor was effected amongst the contracting parties. This, they argued, was the surest path to achieving national development. As current President, Uhuru Kenyatta, professed in parliament in the period leading up to the IPO:

the desired objectives of the privatization of State corporations...is not a question of just selling assets but [is a means]...to improve infrastructure, [the] delivery of services, [and to] reduce the demand on Government resources...[thereby] allowing business to do what it does best and the Government to regulate.⁵⁶

Here, Kenyatta presented parliament with an increasingly prevalent vision of the division of developmentalist labor: business, not government, was best positioned to provision the “public good.” By transferring the responsibility for infrastructural maintenance to the private sector in the form of privately owned utilities, problems of breakdown and infrastructural reach would be mitigated. The state, for its part, would be strengthened in regulatory terms as it was scaled back in infrastructural terms. And both the public good and the state would be revived. This, then,

⁵³ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), October 2, 2007.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ N.A., “Why You Support Corruption If You Buy Safaricom Shares,” *Kumekucha* (blog), March 26, 2008. Available online at <http://kumekucha.blogspot.com/2008/03/why-you-support-corruption-if-you-buy.html>

⁵⁶ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 13 October, 2010.

was not a retreat of the state but a recalibration of the relationship between private and public both within the state and, as we shall see, in the public imaginary (Chalfin 2010).

Indeed, Safaricom and sympathetic voices in the government framed the IPO as an opportunity for Kenyans to repossess what was naturally theirs, Safaricom: an infrastructure, a network, a future, now imagined as constituting a *divisible* piece of the national patrimony. As Minister of Finance, Kimunya, was quick to remind his audience: “It is not Safaricom that is issuing shares. It is the Kenyan Government that is divesting part...of the 60 per cent that we own on behalf of the Kenyan people, 25 per cent is what *we are saying that we do not have to own on behalf of Kenyans when they can own it directly.*”⁵⁷

This was framed as a democratization of Safaricom’s ownership structure, but it had political entailments that fundamentally brought to bear questions of responsibilities and rights: namely, those framed through the categories of citizenship, development, and patriotism. As Kimunya stated, the IPO would enable “the Government...to...expand the opportunities available to Kenyans of all walks of life, so that they can participate in their own wealth creation, while at the same time, helping to build a new and better Kenya.”⁵⁸ The national patrimony would be democratized, its ownership distributed across the Kenyan populace. People would be able to develop themselves as they developed the nation.

This democratization of assets, of course, was a reframing of earlier discussions which positioned the Telecommunications infrastructure as a commons. The commodification of the asset had made it divisible. In this new framing, it was not Kenyans writ large that had a right to these resources, but those with the means to buy back what was rightfully theirs in the form of shares. But it was not only ownership that was being redistributed but the onus for development, which was now framed as being the responsibility of Kenyans, not *only* in their capacity as citizens, but in their capacity as a market of investors.

If supporters of the IPO argued that it would conjure into being a new public of citizens cum investors, the timing of the planned IPO articulated with growing concerns regarding existing Kenyan publics. The IPO was set to take place in late 2007, just prior to the much-anticipated

⁵⁷ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), October 2, 2007. Emphasis added.

⁵⁸ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 14 June, 2007.

presidential elections, which pit Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) against hopeful incumbent, Mwai Kibaki of the Party of National Unity (PNU). For many, the de-ethnicized and “transparent” politics promised by Kibaki in 2002, had not been borne out. Key government positions were occupied by members of the Kikuyu old-guard (Branch 2013). The Kroll report, the contents of which circulated in the blogosphere, confirmed that business during Kibaki’s tenure had proceeded much as usual, as powerful political figures continued engaging in a range of irregular (though by no means uncommon) practices which “fleeced” the Kenyan public.⁵⁹

Led by Odinga, opponents voiced concerns that monies made from the sale would be used as a “campaign war chest.” And so, ODM sought to have the IPO halted through the courts. While ODM’s legal arguments were recognized as “frivolous,” court proceedings delayed the IPO.⁶⁰ While the actual voting proceeded without incident, delays in releasing the results, widespread accusations of election rigging on both sides, and government and opposition sponsored aggression led to a cycle of violence and retribution through the first months of 2008. This violence led to the deaths of over 1100 Kenyans and the displacement of an estimated 600,000.⁶¹ If, to date, Safaricom had labored to present itself as at once embedded and disembedded in the Kenyan state. As at once intimate with and estranged from its complicated politics of patronage, here it tried to weigh in as an ostensibly nonpartisan arbiter between ODM and PNU.

People claimed that new communications technologies were largely to blame for the violence, citing in particular the virulent SMSs flying over the cellphone networks crisscrossing the country. Apparently at the behest of then Minister of Internal Security, John Michuki, Safaricom’s network was enrolled, and Safaricom sent the following message to all of its subscribers: "The Ministry of Internal Security urges you to please desist from sending or forwarding any sms that may cause public unrest. This may lead to your prosecution. From: SAFARICOM." While Safaricom directed its message to *all* subscribers, some interpreted this as

⁵⁹ The Report was reproduced and leaked by Wikileaks. *Wikileaks* Available here: https://wikileaks.org/wiki/KTM_report

⁶⁰ “KENYA: SAFARICOM IPO GETS GREEN LIGHT” March 18, 2008. Available online at: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08NAIROBI762_a.html;

⁶¹ Daniel Branch, *Kenya: Between Home and Despair, 1963-2012*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

but further evidence that Safaricom was in the pocket of the PNU government, demonstrating the difficult line the company walks between intimacy and estrangement.

One fails to understand how Safaricom, owned partly by Vodafone PLC and the Kenyan public through the Government of Kenya, can allow its network to be misused for political gain at this critical time while it failed to do absolutely nothing when fake propaganda was circulating within its network prior to the general elections. Perhaps the profits were too sweet to turn down, huh? The latest short text message is in fact tantamount to Safaricom turning into a state broadcaster and I dare add, [is] a direct infringement on the privacy of its subscribers.⁶²

Here, this blogger invoked a troubling past as he worked to interpret the volatile present. The media had operated as a mouthpiece for government under dictatorial president Moi. With political liberalization in 2002 had come the liberalization of the media, both of which ostensibly marked decisive break from the past. But that past loomed large. Any indication that Safaricom was working with the Kibaki government undermined its ostensible distance from Kenyan politics, conjuring up memories of Moi-era Kenya. While not noted by this blogger, Safaricom's mobilization of its networks indicated that it was willing to operate *like a state*. In appealing to its clients not as customers but as Kenyan citizens it tried to leverage the attachments generated by its networks in a bid to refashion sentiments.

By April of 2008, the violence had come to an end with a negotiated agreement between the two sides. For foreign observers, Safaricom's ability to proceed with the IPO was "as much a symbol of political reconciliation as of economic common sense." The power-sharing agreement between Kibaki and Odinga, with Odinga joining the government as Prime Minister:

set the stage for political stability and reform....In this new context, [Minister of Finance,] Kimunya was able to have a private lunch with Odinga, an erstwhile bitter political enemy, just prior to his IPO announcement. In a well-choreographed piece of political goodwill, Odinga expressed his support for the IPO, and Kimunya later commented that Odinga also expressed a personal interest in participating in the IPO as an investor.⁶³

⁶² Phil, "Safaricom Now Joins Partisan Politics." January 1, 2008. *Kumekucha* (Blog). Available online at: <http://kumekucha.blogspot.com/2008/01/safaricom-now-joins-partisan-politics.html>

⁶³ "Kenya: Safaricom IPO Gets Green Light," March 18, 2008. *Wikileaks* Available online at: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08NAIROBI762_a.html.

For this observer, here Odinga tacitly confirmed that the divisibility of state assets through their commodification opened up new possibilities for Kenyans, not as a bifurcated class of rights-bearing citizens, but as citizen-shareholders.

Having so staunchly opposed the IPO, Raila's newfound support demanded explanation. Irrespective of irregularities, he argued, the point remained that Kenyan people were the rightful heirs of the company. Given this, he continued, it was critical that "real efforts should be made to make these purchases more accessible by Kenyans *in all the regions and in all walks of life.*" In a thinly veiled accusation, here Odinga suggested that ethno-regional patterns of infrastructural stratification were alive and well. But timing is everything. And so, he concluded: "let me encourage as many Kenyans as possible to fully participate in this offering."⁶⁴ Both opponents and supporters of Odinga were flummoxed by this about-face. Indeed, on the Kenyan blogosphere lively debates were staged between ODM and PNU supporters, between Kenyans living abroad and those within the country. As one blogger succinctly wrote: "we're torn."⁶⁵

Some supporters argued that Odinga had done all he could, and that Kenyans had to respect the decision of the courts when they rejected his appeal to halt the IPO.⁶⁶ Others were incensed. By supporting the IPO Odinga had, in effect, sanctioned the Kibaki government's successful rigging of the election. As one blogger wrote: "The rigging of the 2007 elections was ALL ABOUT the Safaricom IPO."⁶⁷ The decision of the court was meaningless and, in any case, its ruling did not change these "matters of concern" into "matters of fact."⁶⁸ As another wrote: "ODM opposed safaricom IPO on principle and they OWE Kenyans a credible explanation on change of heart."⁶⁹

In the run up to the election, Odinga had promised an end to the "corruption" with which the Kibaki administration had come to be associated. His about face called this commitment into question. But it was more than this. Odinga had cast his bid for election on the basis of a logic of

⁶⁴ "Cabinet anxiety at a high!" April 7, 2008. *Cribarworld* (Blog) Available online at: <https://cribarworld.wordpress.com/page/7/> Emphasis added.

⁶⁵ Chris, "The "Sina Makosa" Grand Coalition And The Mouth-Watering Safaricom IPO," March 23, 2008. Kumekucha (Blog) Available online at: <http://kumekucha.blogspot.com/2008/03/sina-makosa-grand-coalition-and-mouth.html>

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* Vol., 30 (Winter 2004): 225-248.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

class that, in Kenya, articulates in complicated ways with popular perceptions that Kenya's postcolonial past has been characterized by ethno-regional patterns of (infrastructural) stratification. His support for the IPO seemed to confirm that, at the end of the day he, like Kibaki, was simply another *samaki wa kubwa* (big fish). That his class based allegiances had overcome his capacity to act for a bloc of voters in a context where class and ethnicity overlap in ways that, in Kenya, are as common-sense as they are misleading.

As one Kenyan living in the United States wrote:

When we told you that there was nothing fundamentally different between PNU and ODM you called us all sorts of names. We told you over and over again it was all about eating, eating, eating and more eating and that ODM was simply a vehicle to get to the Kitchen where the goat was being roasted and the Ugali was being cooked. Now if you knock at the Statehouse, Raila himself will open the door wearing a Chef's uniform complete with top hat.⁷⁰

If roasted goat was the metaphor used to describe how the IPO would enrich Kenya's political elite, *sukuma wiki* (lit. "push the week"), a green roughage, was the foodstuff used to describe the negligible value Kenyans cum would-be shareholders were poised to gain.

For the price of Sukuma Wiki...you can own a piece of the country's biggest company, for the price of a match-box, you can own a piece of a company that is currently being investigated by the British Serious Fraud Office in London. For the price, less than matatu fare from Kangemi to Safaricom headquarters on Waiyaki way, you can own a piece in a company.⁷¹

As these debates roared on in the comments' sections of the blogosphere, Kenya's politicians worked to shore up an inclusive vision of the IPO. It was an opportunity, they argued, to put an end to ethno-politics by inviting everyone, irrespective of region, irrespective of class, irrespective of ethnicity, to take part in the patria. *Sukuma wiki*, in their hands, was reframed as the "family silver." As Kenyatta stated:

We are hoping ... we will broaden the base of these enterprises and get Kenyans, through the Stock [E]xchange, to own shares and to participate in the family silver...These companies now have a broad shareholding...Kenyans from every

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.* *Matatus* are privately owned public service vehicles used by the mass of Kenyans. In everyday discourse they are used to mark the difference between the people (*wananchi*) and elites, who famously travel in Mercedes Benzes', gaining for themselves the title *wabenzi*.

corner...are participating in the Stock Exchange as owners and receiving dividends from these entities.⁷²

Coming on the heels of the post-election violence, the message was clear. If Kenya was plagued by “political tribalism” the “family silver,” mediated by the market and under the ostensible bipartisan lime green of Safaricom, itself managed by a British multinational, was leveling.⁷³ This mode of corporate citizenship, Kenyatta argued, offered a solution to the problems of partisanship and ethno-politics that had led to the violence; shares to be freely bought by Kenyans on the Nairobi Securities Exchange (NSE). Kenyans would, as shareholders cum citizens, both engage in developing themselves and the nation.

Corporate branding in the months leading up to the IPO confirmed Kenyatta’s framing. The slogan of the campaign, “Safaricom IPO. The future, let’s celebrate it together,” offered a forward-looking vision which was unencumbered by violence and the divisive politics of ethnicity. Here, Kenyans of all stripes, “Kenyans from every corner,” were invited buy into the lime green of the digital patria, unburdened by the politics of land that, arguably, formed and continues to form the material base for the divisive politics of ethnicity that shaped the election dynamics. This was, following Dinah Rajak, a branding that imagined the IPO as an opportunity to engage in a kind of “patriotic capitalism.”⁷⁴

Not all Kenyans were convinced by this message. As one blogger wrote of what was coming to be called “SafariCON: The Bitter Option:”

[The] Safaricom IPO has...gone political and it follows that it will go tribal – if it hasn’t already. In the end, the Safaricom shareholding register will likely read more like a provincial rather than a national roll call....There are those...who will disregard the need for transparency and a clean fair market and [who will] go ahead to buy the shares based solely on where the leaders backing the IPO were born.⁷⁵

This blogger directly challenged the claim that by buying into the Safaricom IPO Kenyans “from every corner” would be able to direct the country’s future, all the while accruing profits in the

⁷² Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), September 8, 2009.

⁷³ This term comes from John Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought.” In *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa. Book Two: Violence and Ethnicity*. 315-468, (London: James Currey, 1992).

⁷⁴ Dinah Rajak, *In Good Company: An Anatomy of Corporate Social Responsibility*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011), 92.

⁷⁵ Shika-Msa, “Safaricom IPO Goes Tribal,” March 28, 2008. *Kumekucha* (Blog) Available online at: <http://kumekucha.blogspot.com/2008/03/safaricom-ipo-goes-tribal.html>;

form of dividends. If divisibility had been framed as a means of democratizing Safaricom's ownership structure, of allowing Kenyans access to what was rightfully theirs as heirs of the country's resources, bloggers such as this one pointed to the problems of this vision. In reframing Kenya's telecommunications sector not as a commons but as a divisible and commodifiable asset, the government had not only untethered one of the cords binding Kenyans to the central state but, concurrently, had created the conditions where *some* Kenyans, those defined by "tribe" and region, would have preferential access to the natural patria due to their connections with Kenya's governing elite.

Whether because people wanted a piece of the undifferentiated "family silver," or as a defensive move to ensure that Kikuyus were not the majority shareholders, Kenyans turned out *en masse* to buy Safaricom shares when the company finally went public on June 9, 2008. Thousands of small investors trekked to the Nairobi Securities Exchange (NSE) that morning to witness as Kibaki rang the bell to start the day's trading.⁷⁶ The minimum buy-in was 2,000 shares, translating to a cost of Ksh 10,000 or, today, approximately \$100 USD, not an insignificant sum for many. The excitement generated by the IPO, the region's largest, led to the company being oversubscribed by a shocking 532 percent.⁷⁷

Refunds following the oversubscription were issued slowly. Excitement over the IPO continued to wane as people discovered that returns on their investments would be low. As one Safaricom employee and shareholder explained, the period following the IPO was one of great frustration. Kenyans were well aware that the company was the largest and most profitable in the region and so the IPO, he explained, produced dissonance as shareholders sought to reconcile the "real value of Safaricom and the value of shares." This left people feeling like Safaricom was not treating Kenyans "with the dignity we deserve[d]."⁷⁸

But, equally significant, the IPO signaled a transformation in how "development" was thought both by the corporation and within the apparatus of the state. Government officials began mobilizing Kenyans' massive investment in the IPO as evidence of the "inherent fund

⁷⁶ "A Happy Roar From Kenya: A Successful IPO Brings Cheer to Safaricom and to Kenya's Small Investors." *The Economist*. June 9, 2008. Available online at: <http://www.economist.com/node/11525262>;

⁷⁷ Duncan Miriri, "UPDATE 2 – Kenya's Safaricom IPO Oversubscribed by 532 pct." *Reuters*. May 30, 2008. Available online at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/kenya-safaricom-idUSL3007123920080530>

⁷⁸ Interview with James Oweno, 21/07/2015

raising potential among ordinary Kenyans in rural and urban areas.”⁷⁹ This involved the redistribution of developmental agency. “Why,” one parliamentarian asked, “must you look for money from the Treasury, when you can get it from Kenyans? So long as you float attractive road...bonds, people will buy them just the same way they did with Safaricom.”⁸⁰ Here, Kenyans were being asked to subsidize development not through the contribution of taxes as undifferentiated citizens, but by buying into the capitalization of now private assets as investors. Then Minister of Finance, Oburu Odinga, agreed. The oversubscription of Safaricom shares had demonstrated: “that Kenyans have a lot of resources that can be tapped for development purposes.” From a vision of infrastructures as a natural resource, the naturally endowed purview of the albeit shifting category of ‘Kenyans,’ this new rationality saw Kenyans, not as having an inalienable right to infrastructures cum resources but as themselves the bearers of resources. From autochthons, to citizens, in this most recent iteration Kenyans were imagined as citizens-cum-shareholders-cum-investors. A new market: a market of patriots.

Value at the “Bottom of the Pyramid:” Infrastructures, Market-Making, and Reimagining the Commons

At Safaricom we believe in investing in the future. Working hard towards the creation of technologies that positively impact the society and most importantly transform the lives of those around us is a core value that we hold dear. Milestones in the mobile money sector in the form of M-PESA...have put Safaricom on the global map. With more innovators and thinkers emerging daily, we endeavor to aid them in their road to discovery through interesting and encouraging platforms that enable them to reach their potential. This is because when they unlock their potential, they push us to ours and most importantly, the end result is solutions that better the lives of the human race.⁸¹

As this suggests, Safaricom’s goal is not simply to produce value, but to create conditions amenable to the expression and visibility of existing value that is simply lying in wait. One way Safaricom seeks to “unlock” Kenyans’ “potential,” is through its commitment to “know its customers,” who are also, importantly, potential innovators. This corporate mantra hinges on

⁷⁹ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 4 November 2008.

⁸⁰ Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard), 16 July, 2008.

⁸¹ See Safaricom’s page on “Innovation.” Available online at: <http://www.safaricom.co.ke/about-us/innovation>

Safaricom’s ability to mobilize and render valuable the “local.” As we have seen, Safaricom invoked the value of the local in defending the irregular deal it had struck with Mobitelea. Indeed, the irregular movement of shares to Mobitelea in exchange for “local knowledge,” a relationship the company framed as being the precondition for capital gains, ought to be seen as a precursor of what would become its mantra for success—albeit in distributed form. The origins of this, too, are well storied. Sometime in the early 2000s, customers began complaining of network congestion on Friday evenings.⁸² By this time, the company had nearly 700 000 subscribers. Though Michael Joseph claims he never uttered the statement, popular memory holds that, in response to queries regarding network congestion, he placed part of the blame on the shoulders of Kenyans. “Kenyans have peculiar calling habits,” he is rumored to have said. This led to a firestorm of critique. How dare this man, a foreign national no less, deign to make statements regarding what Kenyans ‘were like.’⁸³

While unbeknownst to him at the time, Joseph had hit on a key insight and guiding business strategy that is, today, cited as an explanation for the corporation’s unparalleled success. Kenyans’ “peculiarity” need not be a liability, Joseph learned, but could be transformed into an asset. Locating and understanding this peculiarity, making it legible and capitalizing on the knowledge gained, was a means of more firmly embedding the company—foreign capital, technologies, expertise, management structures and all—in a particularly Kenyan milieu. Operationalizing this insight as a business model required developing a sensitive and malleable knowledge apparatus. One that was capable of understanding, abstracting and thus capitalizing on the “peculiarity” of a body of citizens. For Joseph, the question became one of discerning what kinds of value might be located in the everyday practices and “peculiarities” of Kenyans.

This brand of “ethical capitalism” does not imagine itself as being extractive.⁸⁴ Indeed, the logic of Markets for the Poor turns on a framing that does not hold the market in opposition to the social good.⁸⁵ Instead, proponents of this new rationality argue that marketizing the strategies of the poor concurrently generates profits and ameliorates the lives of those at the

⁸² “Michael Joseph was spot on over our ‘peculiar habits.’” December 6, 2012. *Standard*. Available online at: <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000072201/michael-joseph-was-spot-on-over-our-peculiar-habits>

⁸³ Sunny Bindra, *The Peculiar Kenyan: Tounge-in-Cheek Writings from the Sunday Nation, 2003-2009*, (Nairobi: StoryMoja, 2013).

⁸⁴ Dinah Rajak, *In Good Company*.

⁸⁵ Webb Keane, “Market, Materiality and Moral Metalanguage,” *Anthropological Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 27 (2008): 27-42.

Bottom of the Pyramid. This is a win-win narrative. This is a narrative of “financial inclusion” via “deepening” the reach of the “financial sector.” It is to this deepening to which this section now turns.

M-PESA, the company’s much lauded mobile-to-mobile money transfer service was, for Safaricom, the touchstone for this new mode of thinking, and it put Kenya and Kenyans, with all their “peculiarities,” on the map of both the corporate world and the development industry. The service was developed by Vodafone in collaboration with Faulu, a Kenya-based micro-credit organization. Designers imagined the service as one that would ease clients’ ability to repay loans issued by Faulu. But, during the early phases of the pilot’s launch, developers noticed “some queer behavior,” not least that participants were using the platform to send small amounts of value in the form of airtime among themselves. Designers ran with the insights they gleaned by being attentive to “local practices.” And so, M-PESA was born.⁸⁶

James is intimately familiar with the trajectory of Safaricom’s knowledge work. James works as a financial analyst for Safaricom, and he explained that M-PESA had been a harbinger for how the company, today, approaches the task of developing new products and services. Not least, M-PESA’s evolution led Safaricom to pursue an interesting business model: users’ patterns of use with one service could be used to guide the innovation of new services. Users, in this vision, have been reimaged as lay designers, albeit designers who are unaware of their role in generating new knowledge, and not cognizant that everyday life is being commuted into value. And yet, he insisted, this is a “collaborative way” of developing new services.⁸⁷ This new form of knowledge work is undertaken in an altruistic register. The goal is to “build communities” and “transform lives.”⁸⁸

Transforming lives through the generation of new services requires work, as data is read for patterns, patterns for potential value, and discovered value used to develop new services. And “innovation” has beget “innovation.” The team of M-PESA observers tasked with locating and rendering visible this quiet and creeping value noticed, James told us, the “queer behavior” of

⁸⁶ Olga Morawczynski, “Exploring the usage and impact of “transformational” mobile financial services: the case of M-PESA in Kenya.” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3:3 (2009): 509-525.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Safaricom Foundation Strategy 2014-2017. Available online at: <http://safaricomfoundation.org/home>

users. It was over the course of many months that a new pattern was discernible to these analysts as they poured over the numbers that result from the tens of thousands of transfers people make per day. These users, they learned, were depositing more money into the system than the value they subsequently transferred. No longer simply a means of transferring value, users had reconfigured M-PESA into a savings service.⁸⁹ And so, designers set to work constructing M-Shwari, a value added service that operates as a platform for savings and provides a gateway for customers wanting to access small loans.

Upon its launch, Safaricom framed M-Shwari as a means of “deepening” the financial inclusion of the “unbanked.” In this, Safaricom built on a common though rarely articulated truism. Popular knowledge holds that Kenya’s banking infrastructure has long excluded people at the “bottom of the pyramid,” and that banks’ patterns of lending in the past were but another way of enforcing ethno-regional patterns of stratification, thereby shoring up the strength of the Kikuyu-dominated center.⁹⁰ By contrast, the algorithmic regime devised by Safaricom is widely held as a means of flattening these historic inequalities. The disinterested work of algorithms undercutting the politics of both patronage and ethnicity that are popularly associated with brick and mortar banks. And yet, these altruistic algorithms had to mitigate the risk of issuing loans to persons without credit scores. Six months of Safaricom’s user data were transformed into user portfolios and ascribed with predictive potential. When they began, Simiyu said, risk modelers included 49 variables. Those variables that were highly correlated were eliminated. By the end of the trial, 11 variables remained. These included age, repayment of emergency credit, M-PESA transactions, and daily airtime usage. In explaining how this data mapped onto the relative risk for debtors, Simiyu explained using a simile: it was like “using consumption of bananas to tell you something about your consumption of oranges.” And it has worked. Rates of non-repayment among M-Shwari borrowers hovers around 3.8 percent this as against the average of 5.6 percent.

Safaricom’s para-ethnographic work has, in other words, been used to generate new value-added services, not least through capitalizing and scaling up the lifeways, behaviors, and strategies of the poor. This involves work of re-valuation, as customers are identified as potential

⁸⁹ Interview with James Oweno, 21 July 2015.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Chris, “Little Known Facts About the Safaricom Cash Machine,” May 3, 2007. *Kumekucha* (blog). Available online at: <http://kumekucha.blogspot.com/2007/05/little-known-facts-about-safaricom-cash.html>

designers. The poor themselves emerge in this new landscape not merely as generators of value, but as themselves—their knowledge, their strategies, their patterned behaviors—sources of value. Though, and as we shall see, this thinking does not apply to M-PESA agents, those tens of thousands essential to making the network operate. But discerning and capturing this value has led to unintended consequences for Safaricom. As Safaricom positions itself as having achieved what the Kenyan state has “failed” to achieve—the amelioration of the lives of huge swaths of the Kenyan population through provisioning for the ‘public good’—it increasingly occupies the ideal-typical space of the nation state, though in a digital register.

But there are definite limits to this state-like behavior. Safaricom is in the business of transforming the lives of the Kenyan people, generically construed, “customers,” a more limited category of persons, and share-holders, who are also part owners of the entity. And it is precisely this tripartite vision that subjects Safaricom to forms of political claims-making from Kenyans as Kenyans. Indeed, many Kenyans expect Safaricom to step in to provide services that the Kenyan state is either unwilling or unable to provide. As one Safaricom employee stated, when something terrible happens, people ask “what is Safaricom doing” to help? In other words, it is because Safaricom engages in state-like actions it has had state-like effects.⁹¹

People like James are but one node of knowledge work that makes the accumulation of data on usage possible. Moving away from the Safaricom towers toward Nairobi’s Central Business District, many afternoons I would hop on a *matatu* winding its way northeast on Thika Superhighway. My destination was Zimmerman Estate, a neighborhood that but 20 years ago, I was repeatedly told, was just “swamp.” Today it is a bustling lower-middle class neighborhood. And it is here that Nyawira works as an M-PESA agent in a small though permanent kiosk, painted Safaricom’s tell-tale green, with a *mabati* (or corrugated steel) roof.

The money that Nyawira makes at the shop is the primary income for her household, which is composed of herself, her son, and his father, Maina. Despite her long hours at the kiosk, Nyawira’s access to money is uneven and periodic. On both the scale of the day, and the scale of the month, she is perpetually hedging her financial futures. Nyawira, and her family, are part of

⁹¹ Timothy Mitchell, “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics.” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (1991): 77-96.

the upper tier of the social category of persons forming “the bottom of the pyramid.” As a result, Nyawira is cautious about how she structures her thinking about the future.

She has ambitions of ending up in the United Arab Emirates, a site associated with relative wealth and possibility for many young Kenyans. However, this would require a series of sacrifices. Not least she would be traveling alone, leaving her only child in the hands of Maina’s family, with whom she has an ambivalent relationship. Though this plan hovers in the background of conversation, in the present and on a day-to-day basis, her temporal horizons are rather more constrained.

In the main, Nyawira purchases food to prepare for meals just prior to making them. This makes sense. The flow in and out of money into her shop means that she can take a little for lunch, knowing that it will be replenished before dinner. There is no refrigeration in her home, moreover, making bulk perishables impracticable. Nevertheless, these decisions come from as much a place of fiscal constraint and uncertainty as they come from a place of practicality. Unexpected expenses, such as in the instance of illness, and the perennial and vexing uncertainty regarding whether friends and family will contribute to her imagined future (in the form of bridewealth), or that of her son (in the form of school fees), upset the balance that Nyawira seeks to maintain.

Hers is a position of risk and relative vulnerability, of which Safaricom’s payment structure plays no small part. As an agent, her commission at the end of the month is determined by the number of transactions that she completes in a ~30 day cycle. In 2014, customers were charged 15 Ksh to transfer 1000 Ksh to another mobile device and 27 Ksh to withdraw the same amount. The transaction fees associated with withdrawals are divided between herself and Safaricom, a 50/50 split, determined at the end of every month. However, rates of transaction are by no means guaranteed. And Nyawira’s ability to secure her commission maps onto the ebbs and flows of the movement of money within the Estate.

One day, sitting with Nyawira in her shop, a number of customers streamed in wanting to make deposits: “*Sina float*” (I have no float), Nyawira responded. Nyawira’s float is the total electronic value stored in her agent account, which she accesses through her digital phone. Every time a deposit is made, her float goes down. As her float approaches 0, as it did on this day, she has to refuse people wanting to deposit, waiting until customers wanting to make withdrawals arrive, their movement of money out of the system increasing her float.

I asked Nyawira why so many people were depositing today. She speculated that it was because banks had closed early, it being a Saturday. But this was not the only reason. She continued, noting that times had been tough in the Estate. That people just didn't have money to spend. Even those making deposits, she said, were using their money to pay bills. It is only when money is moving through the system, and generating interchange fees, that it generates value

Other days, this precarious balance of deposits and withdrawals is achieved. One afternoon, I joined Nyawira working at the shop. For nearly 3 hours there was barely a moment of pause. At any given moment, there were 2-4 customers waiting to be served. I doled out credit while Nyawira did deposits and withdrawals. She speculated that it was busy because it was Sunday, a day when families make small outings after attending morning service. But, she continued, it also mapped onto another financial rhythm. It was close to the end of the month. With people being paid "from the 25th," this meant "a lot of business." And to her good fortune today people themselves were doing the work of equalizing, deposits and withdrawals happening in balanced numbers and amounts.

The uncertainty of Nyawira's commission, in other words, is compounded by the uneven but semi-predictable financial lives of her customers. As Nyawira is fast to tell you, there are definite and observable rhythms that govern that rates at which people use the system. These rhythms are structured along different temporal scales: certain times of day are busier than others, as are certain times of month, and certain times of year. For example, whether making a salary or making wages on the day the end of the month is a tense time as people evaluate how much of a stretch it will be for them to make rent. Other times of acute yet predictable financial anxiety are the periods before the beginning of school terms when people go to great lengths to ensure they can assemble "school fees." Nyawira's life is also structured by these rhythms, but in a reduplicated way as her livelihood is also contingent on the fact that these rhythms structure the lives of her customers and thus their use of her services. As Nyawira succinctly put it, her livelihood: "depends on what the customers are doing."

Her commission as an M-PESA agent, however, constitutes but one source of income. Over the course of the time I spent with Nyawira (partly renting a room in her "Maina's" apartment and partly visiting the shop in the afternoons) she drastically expanded her stock. These additions happened in a piecemeal way. One day, I would arrive and see that to her stock of phone cases, she had added batteries and chargers. On another day, I would see that she had

added “energy efficient” lightbulbs and the lines of wire required as Kenya’s television network went “digital.” And later, I arrived at her shop to see it had been adorned with thin, brightly colored ladies’ belts, and hair scrunchies, both of which were popular at the time. Nyawira’s shop is also an infrastructural node in an Estate characterized by the uneven delivery of services. While many in this area have access to electricity, blackouts are semi-regular, whether the result of the system going down or because people have not re-upped their pre-paid tokens. Nyawira’s shop, by contrast, is constantly glowing at night, boasting the constant hum of electricity or “stima.” This allows her to offer another service: the charging of cell phones, for which she demands a flat fee regardless of the duration of the charge.

Those working in the mobile money industry refer to people in Nyawira’s position as “human ATMs.” This bridging of the human anatomy with the technological invokes images of a cyborg: half-human, half machine, better than either alone at completing the task at hand. When first learning of this moniker I reacted with a knee-jerk distaste. This, it seemed to me, was a dehumanizing term that indexed a stop-gap moment marching toward a future where technologies would displace Nyawira’s labor. The ideal-typical declension narrative of industrial capitalism. And yet, this knee-jerk response is more obscurantist than it is elucidating. It tells us little about how the work that Nyawira does (the human side of the cyborg) is connected to global flows of capital. It tells us even less about how Safaricom’s ever-expanding knowledge apparatus operates. Finally, it tells us nothing of the subjective experiences of work and life of Nyawira and the 8,000 people working in her capacity across the country.⁹² But it does disclose something about how the value generating work of people like Nyawira is under-valuated by Safaricom as generic labor.

Nyawira’s day starts at 6 am at which point she prepares porridge for her son before he wakes up in preparation for his day at “baby class.” She opens the shop at around 8 am and closes, with breaks for lunch and dinner, between 11 pm and 1 am depending on the day. The increased activity in the evenings reflects the financial reality of many Kenyans today who do not make salaries but make money on the day working as market men and women, hawkers, and day laborers. Nyawira’s work is repetitive, often “boring” in her rendering. And it often is. There are spells of quiet where few people come into the shop and the labor of an M-PESA agent is

⁹² <http://www.cgap.org/blog/10-myths-about-m-pesa-2014-update>

largely rote. But her day-to-day labor is critical to securing “her customers.” Many of these people are not strangers, but intimates with whom she has developed relationships over the course of many months of work.

These intimacies are as essential to her ability to enroll the broader networks within the neighborhood that are as essential to making Safaricom’s business work in this small corner of Nairobi as they are to securing “her customers.” Periodically, when short of cash, for example, she heads down the road to Safi Roho, one of the many butchers in the Estate. An agreement produced out of routine, she regularly borrows 10 000 Ksh, which she uses as her liquid capital until the end of the day. Tapping into these wider networks is part of Nyawira’s strategy to retain “her customers” because “if a customer comes and no [cash] float, they will just go somewhere else.”

Consistency in services offered is not the only thing that Nyawira has to calibrate in ensuring the loyalty of her customers. These are interpersonal relationships borne of familiarity. One day, approaching the kiosk, I saw Nyawira sitting behind the grating. She looked tired and unhappy. I asked what was wrong. She told me that she had a lot of “stress” these days and that it was a problem for business. “The customers, they know if you’re stressed, it’s not good,” she told me. “If you’re not nice with them, they know. They have to come here and find you happy. Otherwise it’s bad for business.” This human ATM is, evidently, involved in a careful act of self-curation, which she views as being critical to extending the social relationships essential for the smooth operations of this marketplace.⁹³ This requires that she carefully calibrate the outward expressions of her moods.

In other words, while Nyawira is a savvy business woman, her capacity as a shop-owner is contingent on maintaining and extending social relationships that are conventionally held to be outside the rationality of the market.⁹⁴ And knowing “her customers,” is as much a part of Nyawira’s strategy as it is the corporate strategy of her employer, Safaricom. As she put it to me: it’s important that you know them, that you understand them, as “every customer has their own problems.”⁹⁵

⁹³ Fieldnotes, 7 August 2014.

⁹⁴ Keane, “Market, Materiality and Moral Metalanguage,” 27-42.

⁹⁵ Fieldnotes, 15 December 2014.

For example, one of her customers cannot see very well so sometimes he asks her to read the transaction text to him.⁹⁶ Others of her customers are not hard of sight but are illiterate, and it is left to Nyawira to guide them through the service. Some know her son and buy him “smokies” (small sausages) being sold by another of “her customers” who has a small stand outside of her kiosk where he sells boiled eggs with *kachumbari*, and the small beef sausages Gacheru, her son, likes so much. She knows the family of a fourth, and so is willing to bend some of Safaricom’s regulations when carrying out their transactions. These relationships, despite their differences, are underwritten by a strong sense of trust.

Nyawira’s work, in other words, is that of both sociologist and ethnographer. She knows the neighborhood and its rhythms. She, better than anyone, knows when people have been paid, and the temporality of money sent, money stored, and money withdrawn. In part, this is because the rhythms of their economic lives dictate her own. But her knowledge of “her customers” extends beyond the general patterns of financial life of the Estate. Indeed, she routinely indicates the importance of moving away from such generalizations to the particulars of each individual person as: “every customer has their own problems.”

She asks few questions of her customers. And yet this work of “knowing” is critical to both her own future possibilities and that of the company and its expanding knowledge infrastructure of which Nyawira is a critical, though unremarked and woefully under-remunerated component. Her commission, on average, is 10 000 Ksh per month. And the rent for the shop is 6000. “And we eat,” she said, with a sigh.⁹⁷ This knowledge work, evidently, is differentially valued when conducted by people like Nyawira, people at the upper tiers of the bottom of the pyramid.

The category of the “human ATM” is both a boon and a potential liability to Safaricom. The company uses the data generated by Kenyans’ use of M-PESA as a baseline from which it develops new services. People like Nyawira play an important role in gathering these data. Every transaction is recorded both in her logbook and electronically. These data provide a map of

⁹⁶ Fieldnotes, 7 August 2014.

⁹⁷ Fieldnotes, 6 January 2015.

information regarding person-to-person transfers, rates and values of withdrawals and deposits, and the locations of parties to a given transaction.

All of these data are tethered to individuals. This was mandated by Kenyan regulators under the terms of a regulation titled: “Know Your Customer” (KYC), of all things. This regulation requires each M-PESA account be linked to an individual, a connection secured when a new customer presents a valid ID upon registration. All of this requires work. It is Nyawira and others like her, that collect and verify people’s ID numbers. It is she who explains how the system works to those unfamiliar with mobiles, to the blind, to those unable to read. With these categories of persons, her intimates in becoming, it is critical that Nyawira demonstrate that she is trustworthy.

But these relations of trust, which seem to fall outside of market relations as conventionally understood, are also a potential liability to the corporation. It is on the basis of the dynamics of trust that she and her customers routinely collude to evade some of Safaricom’s more cumbersome regulations. The term “direct deposit” refers to one such collusion. Transferring value via M-PESA incurs transaction fees such that if you want your receiver to have access to 1000 Ksh you need to send 1000 plus 15 Ksh for the transfer and another 27 Ksh for the cost of the withdrawal for a total of 1042 Ksh. These fees are borne either in part by the sender, or in full, in the event that they want to ensure the receiver does not incur the cost of withdrawal. If, however, the money is deposited directly into the account of the receiver, both the sender and the receiver avoid the secondary cost of withdrawal. This is expressly prohibited by Safaricom. As an agent, Nyawira can enable direct deposits, but if she is caught, she risks being penalized.

For Safaricom to notice these transactions, they have to become visible to the system, which it achieves by virtue of the sensitivity of the network to the spatial coordinates of money moving in and money out of the network. If, for example, a deposit is made to an account at Nyawira’s kiosk in Zimmerman and within minutes the money is withdrawn in Kerugoya, some 6 hours away, the system will detect that a direct deposit has been made. But there are workarounds. If the receiver holds off a half-day on withdrawing the money, Safaricom’s system will not be able to claim with any measure of certainty that a direct deposit has been made. If this strategy of deferring the withdrawal is followed, Nyawira said, “Safaricom can’t see anything.”

Nyawira deploys this strategy herself when she sends money to her mother or father living in Kinangop. But she also does it for “her customers.”

But there are other, more banal, evasions. Safaricom requires that its agents demand to see each customer’s ID every time every time a transaction is undertaken. Nyawira is uneven in how she applies this regulation. When I asked her about this she told me that it was a matter of “knowing.” “When I know you, I can withdraw for you without [seeing your] ID. If I don’t know you, I can’t trust you.”⁹⁸ Safaricom is well aware of the way that these relations of trust often supersede its regulations. For Safaricom, these are conceived of as moments of breakdown in the system. Moments where the human half of the human-ATM hybrid is a liability, undercutting its ability to secure either profits or standardized procedure.

M-PESA is conceived of as a way to move money across distances, disembedding it from the everyday risks and social obligations that attend moving money by hand, through a process of formalizing and dematerializing the movement of capital. And it does this. It enables money—in the form of electronic value—to travel great distances, unencumbered by social relations, and yet satisfying some of the most pressing. And yet, relationships of proximity and intimacy are important for those at the bottom of the pyramid working the system to their advantage. These relationships, ones built over accreted encounters, are also critical to the para-ethnographic work Nyawira undertakes in consolidating relationships with “her customers.” And while these relationships can produce “failures” in Safaricom’s system, as this knowledge moves up the chain to Safaricom’s “centers of calculation,” it can also form the basis of the data Safaricom uses to generate new services and products.⁹⁹

While Safaricom works to police the boundaries of intimacy generated by its agents, hoping that discipline produces the machine-like estrangement of the ATM, in other domains it is likewise engaged in a complicated dance of proximity and distance with Kenya’s publics. This work of generating intimacy has taken myriad forms: from developing services that map onto

⁹⁸ Fieldnotes, 28 June 2015.

⁹⁹ Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Kenyans' existing financial practices to mobilizing the symbols of the nation. And to a significant degree, it has "worked." But Safaricom expends a good deal of energy trying to modulate the registers of intimacy and distance that characterize its relationship with the Kenyan nation and the Kenyan state. And yet, because of its multiple domains of functioning, and its resultant state-like effects, this boundary between intimacy and estrangement requires the input of constant work and vigilant labor. And, as in the case of Nyawira, sometimes Safaricom has to contend with "breakdown" as it seeks to control how its state-like effects are mobilized by Kenya's various citizen publics. To address these moments of breakdown, we return to where we began: The 2014 Annual Shareholders' meeting staged at the newly rebranded "Safaricom Stadium."

When Safaricom's shareholders spoke at the Annual General Meeting (AGM), they began their comments in a manner that is telling of the seemingly contradictory space Safaricom occupies in the public imaginary. Half of the questioners began by following the globally circulating script of conventional practice at an AGM. These speakers began: "My name is James Ochieng. I am a shareholder." The other half localized this globally circulating form, prefacing their comments with language evocative of a *baraza*. These speakers began: "Asante Sana, Bwana Chairman."

Holding these two modes of appeal in a single analytic frame allows us to see how these questioners sought to root their claims on the company in two contiguous registers. First in their capacity as shareholders and second in their capacity as citizen-clients. Like the twinning of "Safaricom green" with that of the national flag, these modes of address were not isomorphic. Speakers often switched between these two registers over the course of their questions.

Many questioners began by congratulating the company for reforming its corporate practice in a manner that conformed to the expectations of the politics of patronage. "Mr. Chairman, we have been entertained today. We have had transport, we have had some lunch, we have had some give away. This meeting is a big improvement in the history of Safaricom," he continued, to which the crowd responded with enthusiastic applause. Critical to this enthusiasm

was the sense that the company had really “listened” to its shareholders, just as it really “listens” to the needs of customers.¹⁰⁰

But, if praise for Safaricom’s hospitality was premised on the politics of the gift, in other instances attendees called the company to account specifically in their capacity as shareholders. In these instances, shareholders contrasted their paltry dividends against the massive profits and operating costs of the company:

Mr. Chairman, as you have said in your report...the company has done very well... I want to remind you these shareholders have been holding this company when it was not showing any improvement...Mr. Chairman, while you make very good business, there is a point of heavy finance costs. Can this be explained because it’s...very heavy. It’s consuming our dividends.

In statements such as these, the company was asked to account for the poor returns being offered to shareholders, constituent components of the company; indeed, its part-owners. Here, Kenyans asked that company spending be reformed and profits maximized, in order to ensure the greatest returns to shareholders. In so doing, they followed the economic logic that supposedly typifies an AGM.¹⁰¹

The line between shareholder and citizen-client became more blurred as people homed in on their frustration with the company. Interestingly, the moments when the tensions engendered by company’s state-like effects were most visible surfaced in discussions of the company’s projects operating under the banner of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which were raised by the majority of the questioners. “Mr. Chairman I am pleased with your speech...and...that you are actually transforming the lives of Kenyans to be better but we...shareholders...I want to ask the other shareholders, are our lives better today than it was when we bought these shares?” Is it not the responsibility of the company, he continued, to focus equally on the shareholders, to “transform their lives” as “individuals” *and* “shareholders.” “Mr. Chairman,” he concluded, “as I

¹⁰⁰ As another shareholder remarked: “A listening board understands that last year we were complaining...and at least you have given us a gift, you are a listening board, and you have heard.” Safaricom had, in past years, laid out the costs of hosting such an event -- gifts included -- in an effort to explain why it would not offer any “give away.” This was done to try and shield itself from being criticized as a poor patron. The corporation’s arguments for the wisdom of fiscal restraint had, evidently, fallen by the wayside against the voluminous complaints of its shareholders. Shareholders’ distaste with Safaricom’s refusal to reciprocate shows of loyalty with material gifts, thus symbolizing and cementing the relationship between patron and client had, evidently, convinced Safaricom to reform its practices.

¹⁰¹ Rajak, *In Good Company*, 99-100; Welker, *Enacting the Corporation*, 17.

give you a credit...remember also I'm subtracting because our lives are suffering.” This algebra of praise and critique mapped onto the twin subject-positions questioners occupied as, on the one hand, shareholders and, on the other hand, Kenyan-nationals. One questioner was quite explicit in this doubling. “[Please] be kind,” he began, “go back to yourself, and support your people, Kenyans, and think about us, shareholders.” Here the line between the two subject-positions reached the apex of indistinction. The company, ostensibly a “Kenyan” corporation had failed its shareholders precisely in its capacity as a state-like patron. Its failure to provision for the wellbeing of Kenyans as client-citizens in this capacity was scandalous. “Don't you feel ashamed?” The speaker concluded, to a round of rousing applause.¹⁰²

Conclusion

Attendees’ appeal to the company as both client-citizens and shareholders would be misunderstood if simply framed as shareholders’ naive misunderstanding of the nature of the relationship binding themselves to Safaricom. Indeed, this doubling of the shareholder and client at the AGM was borne out of a set of overlapping histories that rendered Safaricom’s relationship both to the state and to Kenya’s multiple publics ambiguous, a precarious relationship shaped, in no small measure, by a corporate strategy that tacks between embedding and disembedding, between intimacy and estrangement.

As we will recall, the early debates surrounding privatization had positioned state infrastructures as a commons to which all had rights of access. While much has changed in the intervening years, a residue of this thinking persists into the present. This line of thinking certainly seems to have formed the backdrop of the IPO, as Safaricom and sympathetic voices in the government framed the public offering as a means for Kenyans to buy back what was rightfully theirs. When shareholders called Safaricom to account in this double register, then, they drew on this deeper genealogy of rights to access that were historically premised on their

¹⁰² Not authored, “The Bitter Option Indeed!” October 15, 2011. *Kumekucha*, (blog) Available online at: <http://kumekucha.blogspot.com/2011/10/bitter-option-indeed.html>. Author writes of “Safaricom strategy at the expense of Kenyans: Sustain big fat profits at all costs!!”

status as Kenyans, not necessarily as undifferentiated citizens, but as citizen-clients. This logic they overlaid with the logic of obligation premised on a new set of relations brought into being as they moved into the position of shareholders. In other words, to turn to this deeper history, what first appears contradictory is revealed as being a historically rooted claim to access. One located in a shifting reading of infrastructures—telecoms included—as a part of the national patria. Safaricom has capitalized on the shifting set of attachments binding its infrastructures to the state and the nation, even as it works to police these boundaries. Understanding shareholders' modes of address requires addressing these longer histories of the company in Kenya and locating the dialectics of intimacy and estrangement that have become the company's central business strategy, a strategy that is in turn both a source of potential profit and a potential liability.

Indeed, these claims map onto the company's own self-representation as being concerned, in the first instance, with securing the public good unencumbered by the bisecting affiliations of ethnicity or region. As Bob Collymore stated in closing the 2014 AGM:

Our most singular collective aspiration in Safaricom is transforming lives. We not only transform lives through corporate responsibility initiatives, but also in our products and services. The Safaricom team of over 4000 employees do so, and...[do so] knowing full well that [we are]...only relevant if we transform the lives of our shareholders, our customers...and the communities in which we live. Asante sana.

But Safaricom's claim to flatten the terrain of service delivery ought to be treated with some circumspection. Safaricom's stated goal is to "transform lives," to be sure. In the main, this has taken the form of developing services that enable "financial inclusion." But here is the rub. While in abstract terms, Safaricom is committed to "improving the lives" of an undifferentiated category of Kenyans, the very terms of its engagement truncate this possibility. As noted by Collymore, the company's commitment is to a divisible and tiered Kenyan public: "shareholders," "customers," and "communities."

This is not to suggest that there is not a real commitment within the company to "improve lives," because there is. This is simply to indicate that there are limits to how this "improvement" moves (or doesn't) across Kenya's social and geographic topography, shaped as it is by the returns-based logic of the company and framed, as it is, by the logic of a post-welfarist capitalism captured by models such as both BoP and CSR.

This is what is at stake as the impetus for infrastructural development and the delivery of services moves outside of the domains of the state. While customers and shareholders (and to a lesser degree communities), can work to leverage the indistinct line between the state and the corporation as they work to make claims on both, neither today appears to be under an obligation to respond. The company, in particular, holds no responsibility for provisioning for the lives of Kenyans as rights-bearing citizens. Instead, its attentions are drawn to sub-categories of persons within the Kenyan public, some of whom do not merely engage the company through their use of its products and services but who are, in the aggregate, also key generators of new value for Safaricom. And it is certainly not responsible for the lives of its workers, people like Nyawira whose affective labor and knowledge of her community generates the material baseline required for Safaricom's ever-expanding knowledge apparatus to generate new value-added services.¹⁰³

Speakers at the AGM, people like Nyawira conspicuously absent, were well aware of the limits of Safaricom's mandate. Indeed, these limitations framed the critique of the final speaker when he invoked the language of shame. Here, he called the company to account for its performance not in a register of economics, but in a register of ethics. In other words, pace Laura Bear, this speaker sought to register his critique in a language that called into question the morality of a contemporary moment where the "public good" has been rendered a calculable object, generative of "limited social contracts and precarious intimacies."¹⁰⁴ In so doing, this speaker drew on an older language of expectations that situated the nature of Kenyans' fiduciary relationships with Safaricom as, at base, guided by an ethics of patronage that, issues of "transparency" notwithstanding, he tried to leverage as a mode of economic and political critique.

¹⁰³ David Ciepley, "Beyond Public and Private: Toward a Political Theory of the Corporation," *American Political Science Review* Vol. 107, No. 1 (February 2013), 153.

¹⁰⁴ Laura Bear and Nayanika Mathur, "Introduction: Remaking the Public Good: A New Anthropology of Bureaucracy," *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, Issue, 33 No. 1 (2015): 18.

Chapter 7

Lived Economies and the Productivity of “the Jam”: Rescaling Marginal Gains on Nairobi’s Streets and the Politics of Masculinity

In April 2014, Kenya’s *matatu*—privately owned mini-bus—operators went on strike to protest a spate of new regulations that, among other things, mandated the migration of the industry’s payments to digital platforms.¹ The new law, blandly titled legal notice 23, would have rendered it illegal for *matatu* and bus operators to accept cash fares. Instead, passengers were to pay for journeys in advance via e-money. The migration to digital platforms appeared, to many, to be a potential cash cow. And a number of systems were floated by would-be financial-cum-Kenyan transport mavericks: VISA backing one, MasterCard backing another. But in the end, the Government of Kenya decided to back the ‘Kenyan’ option, which had been developed by a Kenyan techno-entrepreneur. He called the system My 1963.

These prospective reforms drew on the energy for all things “digital” that shapes the Kenyan landscape today. Addressing an audience gathered at a Nairobi golf club under the auspices of the African Forum on Inclusive Economies initiative in December 2014, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta stated: “Africa is rapidly growing its digital footprint and Kenya has established itself as a leader in the field of IT innovation with groundbreaking inclusive products such as M-Pesa.” “My Government,” he concluded, is “committed to ensuring it reflects a digital DNA.”² Kenyatta is not alone in celebrating the role of digital connectivity in ushering Kenya into a new and better future. Coming on the heels of the incredible uptake of M-PESA—the

¹ Cyrus Ombati, “Passengers Stranded as New *Matatu* Laws Take Effect,” *Standard*. Available online at: http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000108362/passengers-stranded-as-new-matatu-laws-take-effect?articleID=2000108362&story_title=passengers-stranded-as-new-matatu-laws-take-effect&pageNo=2. Last accessed 10/06/2015.

² N.A. “Africa’s future brighter than ever, Uhuru says,” Capital FM, 8 December 2014, Last Accessed 21/07/2017.

mobile money service with 15 million users—this energy is shared by citizens, state planners, foreign investors, and the aid world alike.

The imaginary invoked by Kenyatta and the excitement of techno-enthusiasts turns on a faith in the transformative capacity of technological things, which is a hallmark of the current administration, but which, as I have argued, has a long history in this corner of Eastern Africa. Indeed, this discourse—blending the technological with the corporeal, the digital with the developmental, the infrastructural with emergent visions of inclusivity—has been a central tenet of the Kenyatta government, which has self-consciously fashioned itself as a “digital” administration, reflecting the new, “digital” generation. And the administration is not alone in mobilizing the digital. Obbie, a *matatu* industry worker joined Kenyatta when he described his hopes of *becoming* “digital.” The uptake of the “digital” in such varied settings relies upon people’s ability to incorporate it into polyvalent projects of aspiration and valuation, yet these are not always in accordance. Such is the case with the push to digitize the *matatu* industry.

Proponents of the new regulation celebrate its capacity to rationalize a “chaotic industry;” by “streamlining” payments the law will ensure passengers are protected from extortionate pricing based on the vagaries of weather and traffic, while enabling the government to tax the \$2-billion-a-year industry, easing “the jam”—a popular Kenyan shorthand for the extreme traffic that characterizes Nairobi’s streets—and sealing everyday sites of porosity, those “leakages” through which owners lose profit at the hands of drivers and conductors, touts and police.³ Mobile money, in other words, will dematerialize the movement of capital, thereby eliminating the vagaries that attend the money form. For industry workers, by contrast, the prospect of “the jam” is critical to their ability to make those “marginal gains” essential to their future-making capacities.⁴

In what follows, I argue that the contests over the push to digitization in the *matutu* industry in 2014 were, at base, contests over valuation—that is, contests over who gets to define what counts as value-generating work. But they were also contests over who and what authorizes the generation, storage, and circulation of value. A focus on how the legislation and the

³<http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Matatu-goes-cashless-ahead-of-July-deadline/-/539546/2320584/-/dnn15az/-/index.html>

⁴ Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004).

technologies underwriting it are poised to redistribute the means of value production and acquisition reveals how the space-scaling affordances of the new technology are poised to scale up everyday practices of industry workers in a bid to create new markets, all the while dictating new temporalities of labor, which affect the rhythm, location, and storage of gain in the short term and are poised to reconfigure popular practices of futurity in the longer term. Designers of this new payment infrastructure seek not only to redistribute sites of marginal gain and generate new markets, but, conforming to particularly Kenyan preoccupations, seek to use the new platform to enact a specifically Kenyan brand of technopolitics, rescripting the subjectivities of users by transforming travelers into new sorts of fiscal subjects, and unruly *matatu* ‘youth’ into respectable middle-class men.⁵

Infrastructural Attachments and Digital Intimacies

Safaricom’s My 1963 is a cash-free payment infrastructure that relies on Near Field Communication (NFC) technology.⁶ The system, though one among many, was the only to have been formally endorsed by the Kenyan President. His support for My 1963 was borne of a series of overlapping intimacies, which brought together Safaricom, the current administration, *matatu* owners, and a group of Kenya’s young techno-entrepreneurs.

David Kirungu, head of an industry group representing *matatu* owners, views himself as being at the forefront of this push to digitize payments in the *matatu* industry. He had done his research before throwing his weight behind My 1963, traveling around the world to learn how other countries manage their transport systems. The task, he explained, was to find a “country that was similar to us so we could copy [their system] without reinventing the wheel.”⁷ He settled on Turkey, which had implemented regulations to ‘tame’ its own industry.

By the time that we spoke, though, Kirungu was convinced that for a cash-free payment system to work in Kenya, NFC, a globally circulating platform, would have to be reformatted as

⁵ Madeleine Akrich, “The De-Description of Technical Objects,” in *Shaping Technology/Building Society*. Edited by Bijker and Law, 205-224, (Cambridge: MIT, 1992).

⁶ <http://www.kachwanya.com/my1963/>

⁷ Interview with Kirungu, 19 June 2015.

it was rescaled to accommodate itself to this particularly and “peculiarly” Kenyan milieu. And he was confident that My 1963 would succeed, because, as he told me, he had the government on his side. Smiling as he spoke, Kirungu turned around a large, framed photo that takes up a good deal of real estate on his desk. There he was, shaking hands with the sitting president. The two are good friends, he told me. I asked if they were age mates. He laughed and told me they were born the same year. Kirungu intimated that theirs was more than simply a friendship, claiming that he had allowed Kenyatta to “use his platform to penetrate the country” in the run-up to the 2013 elections. From Kirungu’s perspective, this generosity had been essential; Kirungu had “helped” Kenyatta “become president.” Kirungu also has a close relationship with Collymore, the CEO of Safaricom and Guyanese national, whose foreignness, so popular wisdom goes, was a key reason he was appointed by British managers of Vodafone, Safaricom’s parent company—this a means of ensuring he would not be subject to the pressures of patronage that are widely held to dictate how services are provisioned in Kenya (see Chapter 6). But the two are close, Kirungu serving as Trustee for a body concerned with road safety, with Collymore acting as Chairman.

Mwangi headed up the start-up that had adapted the technology backing My 1963.⁸ As Mwangi explained, he had been introduced to Kirungu by Jane Kangemi, the managing Director of the East African branch of a large American firm, who he referred to as “auntie.” From the perspective of these men, these relations of intimacy were the condition of possibility for the new infrastructure—one guaranteed to put an end to “corruption”—to move forward. Many, though, saw in this alliance something more sinister. These men were so eager to push through the digitization of the matatu industry because this new technology was poised to enrich those backing it. The technology had been single-sourced, so rumor went. As one industry insider, and an opponent of My 1963 told me, those supporting My 1963 had been promised a cut of the interchange fees Safaricom and Mwangi’s start-up would demand. This completely undermined their purported motivations, as “you can’t both be service provider and represent the interests of stakeholders.”⁹

⁸ Interview with Mwangi, 27 July 2015.

⁹ Interview with James Gacheru, 9 July 2015.

Mwangi seemed like a good fit, capable of executing Kirungu's vision of making the technology "peculiarly" Kenyan. As Mwangi explained, in trying to get the regulators at the Central Bank of Kenya (CBK) on board, he had offered the group a compelling presentation. When he pitched the system to them, he recalled fondly, his first slide read: "This is a Kenya Product." This, he acknowledged, was a strategy to generate attachments between regulators and the new, patriotic infrastructure.

Kenyatta, Collymore, and Kirungu were conspicuous in their attendance at the inaugural launch of the system, joining Mwangi's technology, which, designers claimed, would concurrently generate a wholesale rupture, while acting as a kind of a return, though in a digital register. Indeed, advertisers positioned My 1963 as a kind of secular second coming. "1963KE: Join the Revolution and Lets [sic] Walk Together" was the system's tagline.¹⁰ Of course, 1963 was the year of Kenyan independence. Here the realization of the digital future was linked to the founding moment of the Kenyan republic. Freedom, reframed in a digital register, was linked to a second independence, heralded by the rise to power of the son of the first post-independence president, Uhuru Kenyatta, whose first name, incidentally, means "freedom." Mwangi was clear that there was nothing incidental about this. Branding the system "1963," he told me, seemed like the obvious choice, it being both "symbolic and intuitive." But branding would not be enough to embed the technology in this "peculiarly" Kenyan milieu. To design a good product, Mwangi insisted, you had to know the context, you had to "know it deeply."

These connections were explicit across advertisements. "Our Cards are designed with a patriotic theme in mind: 1963 Means Independence, Progress, Freedom, and Movement," reads the company website. This is a unifying and future-driven technology. This is patriotism via use; the consumption of an ostensibly Kenyan brand standing as the metric of both patriotism and inclusion in the future of the body politic. But what kind of patriotism was being advocated here?

While the government had backed the 'Kenyan' option, the capital underwriting the new system was provided by Safaricom, as was the system upon which My 1963 would operate. As Chapter 6 elucidated, while Safaricom is, on the face of things, a publicly traded multinational corporation, the company's history, and its relationship to the Kenyan state and the Kenyan

¹⁰ <http://www.my1963.co.ke/>

nation, is much more complicated than this designation suggests. Reframing Safaricom's services and brands as Kenyan, though, as we saw, is today a central corporate strategy pursued by the company, a scalar move designed to domesticate and embed foreign capital and expertise in this peculiarly Kenyan milieu, all the while creating new markets.

The synergies between this logic and that underwriting the IBEA are striking. Like the epistemology underwriting the dual mandate of "commerce and civilisation," this emergent developmentalist thinking links the creation of new markets to the amelioration of the lives of the poor. Now, like then, this is capitalism in an altruistic register. Now, like then, this would require cultivating new temporal sensibilities in communities now imagined as markets. Now, like then, this would be no easy feat.

Infrastructural Attachments and Kenyans' "Digital DNA"

When I asked Kirungu what demographic of passengers were most resistant to the cash-free system, he said that it was: "based on income." This, he admitted, was going to be a difficult transition for those making money on the day; but even so, those would-be users would gain something: "they would be able to feel, they would be able to say: 'I'm digital.'"

I follow Antina von Schnitzler here in arguing that this prospective payment infrastructure indexes a move away from large state projects and towards "more micro-logical forms of intervention," which, she suggests, define neoliberal projects. Micro-logical interventions, von Schnitzler suggests, "work on existing realities rather than aiming to build them from the ground up."¹¹ We can see this rationality playing out in the case of My 1963 in three ways. First, My 1963 did not seek to address the infrastructural thinness that has shaped Kenya's urban transport sector. Instead, it built on Safaricom's digital money-transfer infrastructure, M-PESA, which had been conceived of by designers as a mode of infrastructural "leap frogging," a workaround that, so the argument went, obviated the need for investments in brick-and-mortar banks. Second, Safaricom hoped to use the new user-data generated by the

¹¹ Antina von Schnitzler, *Democracy's Infrastructure: Techno-Politics and Protest After Apartheid*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 11.

system to expand its powerful data-collecting apparatus, these data becoming the basis from which it develops new services. Finally, My 1963 will allow industry partners to capitalize on the existing and patterned behaviors of industry workers, formalizing and scaling up their daily activities while relocating where gains are made. And yet, while the aspirations here may have been “micro-logical,” efforts to scale up and appropriate existing systems of knowledge have a long history in Kenya, where the developmentalist state has always also been an austere state. It is within this context that appropriating existing behaviors and forms of knowledge work and expertise has emerged as a durable strategy for executing development on the cheap.

This aspired-for digital future was not, then, simply a feat of rhetoric alone. It would take work to cultivate a population in possession of this “digital DNA,” a population guided by a new habitus underwritten by a new rationality, all of which turned on efforts to extend the financialization of everyday life. In the process, not only would new fiscal subjects emerge, but new markets as well. Designers’ efforts to cultivate these transformations were inbuilt to the system itself.

My 1963, unlike the other cash-free payment options floated, does not offer financial inclusion through brick-and-mortar banks. It does not have to, M-PESA having “leap-frogged” over the harder infrastructure of banks when it got its start in the late aughts. Instead, Safaricom would rely on its “payment rail,” M-PESA, in its bid to use My 1963 to extend new modalities of inclusion. Prospectively, coordinating these systems would allow Safaricom to include patterns of mobility in its already impressive roster of user data (Chapter 6); these new systems promising to enable increased legibility. As names and ID numbers are linked to patterns of spending on transport (and otherwise), this initiative promises not simply to rationalize the industry but to render visible the mobilities of the Kenyan population.

As in the case of M-Shwari, the financialization of everyday life turns on generating new regimes of indebtedness. One service offered is KOPA (Kiswahili for “borrow”). By simply dialing *100#, users can access between 50–300/= Ksh worth of travel credit. As Safaricom links its services, new modalities of rationalization are being discursively and materially linked to new modalities of financialization. As discussed in chapter 6, M-Shwari’s credit ratings are based on patterns of use of other Safaricom services. Here, indebtedness in transport credit might, as in the case of rates of airtime purchases, be integrated into Safaricom’s algorithmic credit-scoring system, ultimately determining people’s ability to access loans. My 1963, in other words, will

allow Safaricom to extend into new domains, deepening its capacity to capture the everyday strategies of those living at “the bottom of the pyramid,” which might, as in the case of M-PESA, allow it to locate new patterns of use that can be transformed into new and value-generating services. But passengers had resisted the company’s labors to generate new attachments between themselves and Safaricom through My 1963.

As Jane, who works for Mwa Obedient, one of the many Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs) structuring the *matatu* industry, noted: “Passengers are the problem. They are simply not willing to use the machines.”¹² Initially they said they did not have “float” (balance) in their M-PESA accounts, so they could not move value onto their My 1963 cards. And so, My 1963 planted people on the bus who were able to transform cash into electronic value. Even with this provision in place, she noted, “still people are resisting to go cashless.” Jane suggested that people were skeptical of the transparency on offer through the new system, fearful that their cash, now in digital form, would disappear into the wilderness of 0s and 1s. Evidently, not all are convinced that “the digital” is poised to end everyday forms of “corruption.” But people’s resistance to the service also turns on the types of users My 1963 imagined, and the types of futurity such a user pre-supposed.

The technology of cash-free payment requires customers to transform cash into e-money-cum-future fares stored on a card. Inbuilt to the technology, thus, is an imagined customer; the fiscal subject of the formal economy who uses their salaried wages to buy future trips in bulk. Embedded in the rhetoric surrounding a cash-lite society, then, is *one* logic of futurity. This logic, however, is a fantasy in Kenya, where 61 percent of those working are engaged in the so-called “informal sector.”¹³ The temporal horizons of these people, *matatu* men among them, speaks to a different set of rhythms that produce different senses of futurity; ones often marked by precarity today and uncertainty about prospects tomorrow. The temporality of this form of gains-making makes it difficult to assemble cash in advance. These people, people making money on the day, set aside the shillings required to get them home. This money, often assembled over the course of the day, is protectively guarded, otherwise people have to “foot,” a popular shorthand for the embarrassing form of travel that marks you as poor.

¹² Interview with Jane of Mwa Obedient, 17 June 2015.

¹³ Debbie Budlender, Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), Statistical Brief No. 5 (May 2011).

The “*Matatu* Menace”: Speedy Masculinities and Contestations Over Value

For Safaricom, My 1963 promises to generate new data by capturing the strategies of those living “at the bottom of the pyramid.” This, in turn, can be transformed into new services, firmly attaching the poor in the aggregate to new capital markets. For men like Kirungu, by contrast, the demographic to be disciplined into new modes of being are *matatu* men themselves.

Indeed, while these conflicts were happening in a digital register, the 2014 strike was not the first time that industry workers had responded to regulators’ efforts to discipline the industry with protest. At periodic intervals since Jomo Kenyatta deregulated the industry in the early 1970s, industry workers have struck.¹⁴ Nor is it the first time that regulators have enrolled technologies to reign in the “runaway” industry.

In 1996, the Minister of Transport had tried to enforce the use of “speed limiters.” As with the case of My 1963, the contract was single-sourced. And so, while framed as a means of taming this ‘undisciplined’ industry, opponents held that this legislation was pushed through as a means of enriching then-president Daniel arap Moi’s “tycoons” who “wanted to sell this particular gadget.”¹⁵ In the early 2000s, these labors were repeated when the government mandated the use of “speed governors,” small “gadgets” that place mechanical limits on vehicles, stopping them from exceeding 80 kph.¹⁶

However, in each instance, these technologies have been designed to enact moral as much as mechanical reform, something missed if we disembed the technology from the micropolitical contests out of which it emerged.¹⁷ Speaking in the Kenya National Assembly one MP noted: “the biggest problem...we have found...was the driver[‘s] attitude. The high speed tends to thrill [them]...the youthful drivers we have in the country do enjoy the speed...we need equipment that will work on the driver attitude.” To this end, he suggested the use of a device

¹⁴ Kenda Mutongi, *Matatu: A History of Popular Transportation in Nairobi*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

¹⁵ Interview with James Gacheru, 9 July 2015.

¹⁶ Mark Lamont, “Speed Governors: Road Safety and Infrastructural Overload in Post-Colonial Kenya, c. 1963-2013.” *Africa*. Vol. 83. No. 1 (2013): 367-384.

¹⁷ Antina von Schnitzler, “Citizenship Pre-Paid: Water, Calculability, and Techno-Politics in South Africa.” *Journal of Southern African Studies*. Vol. 34, No. 4 (2008): 898-917.

that would aurally discipline drivers. The MP described the technology, which would “tell you if you want to go beyond 80 KPH...‘enda pole pole,’ or “go slowly!”¹⁸ These admonishments would play on repeat, moving between Kiswahili and English, until the driver reformed their behavior. What was required, in other words, was a technology that would not only rework the driver’s practices, but that would also transform the subjectivity of the conspicuously “youthful” driver. These efforts were matched by other reforms, such as mandatory uniforms for crews and prohibitions on the decoration of vehicles.¹⁹

At stake in these regulations, in other words, were not simply concerns about speeding, but more enduring anxieties surrounding young men in the city and the speedy technologies they use to generate fast money (Chapters 1 and 2). This is not to suggest that the speeding is not a legitimate concern. Indeed, Kenya has among the highest rates of road-related fatalities on the continent.²⁰ However, brightly painted vehicles, loud hip hop, baggy pants, and the consumption of alcohol and meat, as much as speeding vehicles, index the ‘problem’ that regulators sought to address. In other words, these are anxieties about a particularly ‘disruptive’ form of specifically ‘youthful’ urban masculinity. There is, moreover, nothing new about these anxieties. As we have seen, since the colonial period, male “youth” in the city have been a perennial concern for both government administrators and “elders.”²¹

For critics, the *matatu* man’s desire for flashy clothes mirrors his inability to invest in more durable stores of value. The ‘problem’ of *matatu* men, in other words, is that they live the way that they drive. As Mwangi stated in a telling moment: *matatu* men “spend at pubs, on clothes, fake chains, cologne, movies, and women. This is what they do! No bank account opened...[And yet,] they get the cutest girls in Nairobi who go with them because their cash flow is good!”²² Gesturing effusively as he spoke, I could not help but note the conspicuous gleaming of his oversized gold watch. Competitions over adult masculinity, and who is authorized to claim it, are, in other words, part of what is at stake here.

¹⁸ M.P., Otieno, Kenya National Assembly Official Records, Hansard, 3 April 1996.

¹⁹ Mark Lamont, “Speed Governors: Road Safety and Infrastructural Overload in Post-Colonial Kenya, c. 1963-2013.” 367-384.

²⁰ World Health Organization (WHO). “Mortality: Distribution of Road Traffic Deaths by Road User.” *Global Health Observatory Data Repository*. 2012. Last accessed 18 May 2017 <<http://apps.who.int/gho/data/?vid=51312>>

²¹ For a wonderful review, see Richard Waller, “Rebellious Youth in Colonial Africa,” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2006): 77-92.

²² Interview with Mwangi, 20 July 2015.

Crews offered a different evaluation of their consumption. Driving around in a taxi that he owns, my friend Robert disclosed that he got his start in the transport industry working as a *matatu* driver. This is a period he recalled fondly as a time when he was liquid, a “big man,” wearing shoes “costing maybe 6000/=, pants 1000/=, shirts 2000/=” and “bling” around his neck. According to Robert his sartorial self-fashioning was part and parcel of his ability to secure future gains. Smiling, he recalled his notoriety during the period. How he charged, and people paid, more to sit in the *matatu* next to Robert, in “his seats.” Not only did people willingly pay these premiums for service, he told me, but they would wait for the opportunity to do so, allowing other *matatus* to bypass them, preferring to linger until the most “pimped” vehicle, Robert’s, arrived. This premium of 20 bob, which he charged passengers at the front, he told me, were his.²³ As a friend and conductor, Faysal, explained over Facebook chat, if you look “smart,” customers “tend 2 trust n follow u same goes 2 the *matatus*.”²⁴ As this suggests, transportation is not the only thing on offer when one boards a *matatu*. Indeed, people working in the *matatu* industry are often purveyors of the circulating signs and sounds of global youth culture. Tapping into this milieu is part of what is on offer to would-be passengers. And in their self-framings, industry workers imagine self-presentation as being future-oriented, expenditures today that may translate into gain tomorrow.

“The Jam” and The Pragmatics and Sociality of Cash

These divergent readings of valuation on Nairobi’s streets turn on the particular structure of the industry. Both owners and workers make money on the day. In general, owners demand a daily base pay from the crew for their use of a vehicle—an average of 3000–5000/= for 15-seater Nissans and 10 000/= for 52-seater minibuses. Within this general breakdown, there are shades of difference, however, which are accounted for when owners calculate the daily cost. Old “Nissans” are rented for a base of 2,500/=, those in better shape between 3,500/= and 4,000/=, and “Executives,” such as the vehicle Richard drove, and that boast music and brightly colored

²³ Interview with Robert, 29 September 2015; Fieldnotes 11 June 2015.

²⁴ Correspondence with Faysal, 2016.

interiors, 5,000/= . Temporality is part of this calculation. “Executives” are the most popular vehicles on the road, and thus are the easiest to fill in the shortest amount of time. The base cost of the vehicle generally remains stable, impervious to the interventions of traffic or weather. The temporal horizon of owners, in other words, is relatively secure day-to-day. Laborers’ wages, for their part, are derived from money made over and above this threshold. On average, drivers make 1000–1200/= per day and conductors 800–1000/= per day. The labor of industry workers, then, is best characterized as a kind of piecework. Wages are calculated not according to time but on the basis of units: customers secured, vehicles filled, return journeys completed.

In theory, “the jam,” whether caused by bad weather or traffic, intervenes in the temporality of this piecework regime by reducing the total number of times a route can be completed. Overloaded colonial road networks mean that blockage is the norm in Nairobi today. It is in a bid to mitigate against the precarity of this overburdened infrastructure that industry workers engage in everyday and popularly sanctioned (though often resented) forms of appropriation.²⁵ In so doing, they transform the negative value of “the jam” into a productive space of acquisition. Crucially, this turns on the pragmatics of cash and its ubiquity.

Boarding a *matatu*, savvy passengers examine the state of a vehicle and its crew and confirm the cost of the journey. It is the responsibility of conductors, for their part, to remember the itineraries of passengers, to calculate fares, and to tabulate change. Once on the road, money is demanded. Conductors expertly weave notes through their fingers. When they have collected 1000 KSh, these vertical notes are carefully bound with one horizontal bill.²⁶ The material and embodied practices surrounding money in the *matatu* enables vigilance in counting—the conductor constantly re-tabulating total profits, and considering their own gains in light of cash received.²⁷ If they are coming up short, they might quietly take a little extra. This takes subtle forms. Customers might find that have not received the 10 bob they are owed as change.

Not everyone, though, is charged these premiums for service. Purposive decisions are made as to who should be charged at what increment of increase. As noted by Sara Berry, parties

²⁵ Janet Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁶ Interview with Faruq Kamau and Charles Kamothe 06 March 2015; For a discussion, see Bill Maurer, “Regulation as Retrospective Ethnography: Mobile Money and the Arts of Cash.” *Banking and Finance Law Review*. Vol. 21, No. 1 (2011): 299-313.

²⁷ Interview with Faruq Kamau 21 April 2015.

to a transaction draw on past experiences in determining the “performative strategies they employ as the transaction unfolds.”²⁸ This is equally true of the exchange within the *matatu*. Conductors engage in a semiotic analysis of passengers: quality of clothes, shoes, cell phones, destination are all considered before premiums are established.²⁹ These are not announced, but quietly shillings disappear and change is not offered. But crews can never be certain that this tactic of appropriation will generate returns. As often happens, change will be demanded by passengers and the conductor’s feigned ignorance dismissed as a performative act of deception.

While by no means uncommon, in general securing marginal gains is more routinized and turns on the prospect of “the jam.” When it rains, drivers and conductors raise what are, theoretically, set prices. While crews justify this enforced inflation as a means of ensuring they can generate the base fee charged by vehicle owners, and compensate for fuel wasted “idling,” sometimes the gains of inflated fares outstrip the stickiness of movement produced by “the jam.” A key interlocutor, James, provided an example. A trip from town to K-West costs 60 KSh. It is on the assumption of smoothly moving traffic that owners determine the base fee they charge, and subsequently upon which laborers determine their wages. Unforeseen blockages upset this arrangement. But, as he explained, if people are willing to pay you can charge more. “Let’s say you charge 100 instead of 60 that’s a 40 bob increase per customer,” multiply that by 12 passengers for 2 trips, and you have a profit of 960, which “is split between conductor and driver.”³⁰ Crucially, the increase in fares is not, in and of itself, popularly understood to be an act of deception. And the presence of “the jam” is critical to these evaluations because “Everyone can see there’s a jam. Everyone can see there’s rain.”³¹

Far and away the most lucrative times of year, however, are the holiday seasons, during which many of Nairobi’s residents travel ‘up country,’ creating congestion on the major arteries fanning out from the city center. During these periods, rates of inflation hover around 80 percent.³² *Matatu* men describe this period as *kahawa ni keru*, or the coffee is ripe, thereby firmly situating the gains of their harvest within a moral economy shaped by a predominantly

²⁸ Sara Berry, “Marginal Gains, Market Values, and History,” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2007): 61.

²⁹ Interview with Manmo 8 February 2015.

³⁰ Interview with James Omondi, 24 November 2014.

³¹ Fieldnotes 13 March 2015; Fieldnotes 8 December 2014.

³² <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Hundreds-stranded-in-rush-back-to-towns-/-/1056/1299252/-/hk3ih7/-/index.html> - last accessed Oct 29, 2015.

rural labor theory of value. And, as we will see, *matatu* men match this discursive framing in practice by parlaying their work in the city—marginal gains included—into social reproduction in the countryside.

As Jane Guyer notes, marginal gains are generated out of dynamic performances that turn on “the definition of here, there, and the pathway between them.”³³ In this case, it is the prospect of “the jam,” of obstruction and blockage, that enables *matatu* men to charge premiums for service; the negative value of the jam transformed into a positive space of acquisition and gain. Collecting fares in physical currencies is critical to these strategies. Paper money and coins, unlike electronic value, leave no trace, with gains quietly pocketed and divided at the end of a shift. *Matatu* men’s acts of appropriation, while resented and periodically resisted, are not outright condemned.³⁴ Both industry workers and passengers refer to these increases using the same verb—*kuongeza*, which means “to increase,” or “to add,” but importantly also “to augment.” What proponents name “theft,” in sum, industry workers firmly locate within the realm of the licit, even the moral.³⁵ “That,” some friends of mine told me, “we consider our salary.”³⁶

Digital enthusiasts know that unrolling the new system is going to generate frictions with crews who “want to handle cash.” However, they also expect resistance from passengers. As one industry insider explained: today, “perhaps the fare is 30 and you only have 20, you can ask the conductor to do the journey at a reduced rate.”³⁷ With the new system, he continued, these people “can’t ask for favors.” Contests over value are always constituted relationally, argues Guyer, with “cross cutting scales of social valuation” compared and considered. In this instance, a sense of social obligation—whether due to familiarity, feelings of indebtedness, or those of affinity based on class—are generative of other methods of establishing value, or “true” price. Indeed, industry workers never pay for their journeys on *matatus*, irrespective of whether or not they board a vehicle that is a member of their fleet. And sometimes crews are sympathetic in light of prospective customers’ requests for a flexible fare scale. As this suggests, it is not simply

³³ Guyer, *Marginal Gains*, 51.

³⁴ Fieldnotes, 24 February 2015

³⁵ Janet Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation*, (Princeton University Press, 2005).

³⁶ Fieldnotes, 21 April 2015.

³⁷ Interview with Kirungu, 19 June 2015.

pragmatics of cash but the socialities embedded in a cash-based system that presents a problem for reformers, and for which “the digital” seems to offer a solution.³⁸

Re-Constituting ‘the Social’: New Regimes of Visibility and the Temporality of Work

I met with a representative of *matatu* owners in June of 2015. He sat behind a shiny wood desk in a tall office building boasting highly reflective glass, which he shares with iHub, one of Nairobi’s centers of “digital innovation.” This cohabitation is fitting given the Chairman’s enthusiasm for all things “digital.” “Digital payment,” he told me with a smile, “is my baby.” It was a Friday afternoon and the Chairman, like many Nairobians, would be leaving for “up country” later in the day, where, he told me, he has a large *shamba* and “many projects” on the go. The Chairman was understandably proud of how he has been able to parlay urban gains into rural investments. But he, importantly, would not be traveling via *matatu*, but in the large SUV with darkly tinted windows that he generously drove me to town in following our meeting.

“The problem” with the industry, the Chairman told me, is that it is a “system...based on trust.”³⁹ In practical terms, he explained, this means that at the end of the day, crews hand over what they claim to be total gains (often the requisite cost of the vehicle), withholding margins over and above that threshold for themselves. This results in a situation where the owners are “at the mercy of the conductor or driver.”⁴⁰ The Chairman is confident that the new technology will eliminate the problem of trust and the tactics of “pilferage” that characterizes the industry, because unlike crews, “the machine will always give you its [correct] history.”⁴¹ This will relocate sites of gains-making, bypassing the conductor who will no longer act as an “obligatory

³⁸ Webb Keane, “Market, Materiality and Moral Metalanguage,” *Anthropological Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 27 (2008).

³⁹ Interview with Kirungu, 19 June 2015.

⁴⁰ Interview with James Gacheru, 9 July 2015.

⁴¹ Interview with Kirungu, 19 June 2015.

passage point.”⁴² This turns on creating new modes of visibility, which will transform the temporality of gains for industry workers.⁴³

If Speed Governors were designed to put mechanical limits on a driver’s acceleration, the cash-free payment console is also concerned with putting limits on number, in this case it is designed to determine “fair” price. Fare schedules will be programmed into the system and locked in place, thereby ensuring that “crafty” crew members are not able to dictate premiums.⁴⁴ The digital platform, however, does not stand in simple opposition to existing repertoires of price. Indeed, designers hope to scale up and routinize the flexibility of the fare structure that crews have informally established over the course of many years. As Mwangi told me, prices will still be subject to variation, and “the jam” will still be the main variable of account. This is critical to the success of the system in Kenya, Mwangi continued, because Kenyans have come to expect variation—they “like to bargain.”

To satisfy what Mwangi positioned as a fundamental Kenyan trait, the system’s fare structures will not be fixed; however, there will be limits on what increments of increase are possible. Thus, while variation will remain, the possibility of “the bargain” will not. For proponents of the new system the issue is not the charging of premiums, per se, but how the premiums are established, to whom the margins generated are distributed, and by what means. Platform designers are very clear on this point. As Mwangi said with a sigh: “Sadly,” these days when it rains, “even when [people are] charged 300 KSh, only 100 KSh goes to the owner.” Rhythms and strategies accreted over years of experience—experiences managing the interruptions of rain, the perennial breakdown of vehicles, and the overloading of colonial-era road networks—have made the tactics of these men valuable. The goal here was, in sum, to scale up that value generating work and relocate where the gains so secured end up.

Owners will be able to marshal these new modes of visibility at a distance. Not only will the machine generate a “correct history,” but owners will have real-time access to the vehicle. As Mwangi excitedly explained, the system will be equipped with a “fleet management platform,” which will allow the owner to tap into the system, see the location of the vehicle, and the rates of

⁴² Michel Callon, “Elements of a sociology of translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay,” In John Law (Ed.), *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?* (London, Routledge: 1986): 196-233.

⁴³ Interview with James Gacheru, 9 July 2015.

⁴⁴ Interview with James Gacheru, 9 July 2015.

collection. In the past, the conductor had done this work of embodied calculation. Now these labors would be delegated to a machine. All of this, Mwangi said with great satisfaction, could be done remotely, once invisible practices made transparent and accessible from owners' smartphones. Rescaling and reframing the work of *matatu* men will have discursive as well as material effects. As designers embed the everyday practices of industry workers in the digital platform, the practices themselves will be rebranded—no longer “theft,” these premiums for service will be formalized and rehabilitated as licit increases in price, and transparent, digital efficiency will have ‘succeeded.’

From Boys to Men: New Temporalities of Work and Future-Making

To a person, reformers acknowledged that the changed labor regime that will come on the heels of the digitization of payments will produce frictions between owners and crews. But in true paternalist form, reformers of various stripes are convinced this is in the best interest of industry workers. Like the Speed Governor before it, in other words, the digitization of payments is designed to enact moral as much as technical reforms. And, like the Speed Governor, this new legislation is accompanied by a bundle of other reforms, not least the enforced transition of the industry from one based on a logic of piecework to one of salaried wages. For the government, this move will create a salaried workforce, this the first step in generating a taxable base. For owners, this move works in tandem with new regimes of visibility in ensuring the end of “pilferage,” through enforcing the “death of cash” in the industry.

While the size of salaries remained unsettled, all conceded that crews would be making less than they do under the conditions of the piecework regime—a minimum of 10,000/month less. But, reformers insist, the whole of the salary is greater than the sum of its units. The value of the salary, they argue, does not inhere in the number amount but in its discursive framing and the redistribution of agency it will enable. As Mwangi put it, salaries will change the definition of industry workers' labor, which will now “actually be a job.”⁴⁵ Going a step further, the Chairman argued that salaried wages are going to change crews' subjectivities, for they will

⁴⁵ Interview with Mwangi, 20 July 2015.

“recognize themselves like any other employee.”⁴⁶ Jane thinks this will be for the benefit of these young men, because it will “instill discipline, which [these youth] sometimes lack.” But most importantly, it will enable new forms of futurity. Specifically, salaries will generate the paperwork required for *matatu* men to access loans. This will be a game-changer because, and seemingly for the first time, “they will be able to plan.” The reforms, as this suggests, promise to do more than reshape the meaning of work, but aim towards generating more thoroughgoing transformations in the subjectivities of workers. Transforming them from ‘youth’ who “eat well, drink well, sleep with beautiful women,”⁴⁷ “drink[ing] Guinness and tak[ing] Choma” everyday into men with new “life standards” and a new “lifestyle.”⁴⁸

The vision of inclusion that frames these debates is part and parcel of a wider discourse on poverty alleviation that characterizes the new developmentalism of the present. States, in this framework, are no longer responsible for remedying widespread social inequality through investments in large-scale infrastructural projects, or reforms aimed at a politics of redistribution.⁴⁹ According to this new thinking, the lives of the poor will be ameliorated as they are included in new markets.⁵⁰

These men, now included in the formal sector, will be transformed from an unproductive “menace” into a pool of new borrowers. Now able to “access loans because of the papers they will receive with records of earnings,” these men will be reconstituted as a new market for financial service providers, Safaricom among them, to tap. This, then, is the vision of responsabilized futurity that reformers have in mind. Now able to “plan,” the short-sighted investments of *matatu* men will be replaced by longer-term visions of futurity, visions backed by credit. But what of *matatu* men’s existing practices of future-making? It is to some of these strategies to which I now turn in this section, where following Richard Waller, I give these ‘youth,’ men often my age-mates if not my seniors, some “room to dance.” In this case, on a 32-seater *matatu* rented to undertake an important journey through Kenya’s Rift Valley Province.

⁴⁶ Interview with James Gacheru, 9 July 2015.

⁴⁷ Interview with Benji, Safaricom, 20 June 2015

⁴⁸ Interview with James Gacheru, 9 July 2015.

⁴⁹ For a discussion, see Bear, *Navigating Austerity*

⁵⁰ For a discussion, see Julia Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Julia Elyachar, “Next Practices: Knowledge, Infrastructure, and Public Goods at the Bottom of the Pyramid.” *Public Culture*, Vol. 24, No 1 (2012): 109-129.

Early one April morning I met Faysal, a friend and conductor, in Kenya's Central Business District (CBD). Faysal had invited me to accompany him and his colleagues to visit a small community outside of Nakuru. This was an important occasion, as these *matatu* men were accompanying one among their number to initiate *mahari* or bridewealth payments. This was the first visit, called the *kũhanda ithĩgĩ*, or planting the branch of a tree. When we arrived at the assigned meeting place, we joined a group of some thirty *matatu* men. Reflecting on the scene, I wrote: "Everyone was dressed nicely, though no one over the top. There was one man in a suit called 'Senior.' Faysal told me this was because he talks a lot and is older than the others. There were a few guys with *shukas* draped over their shoulders but, in the main, these guys were dressed in 'international' youth style—football jerseys, button-down plaid shirts, baggy pants, t-shirts bearing brands, and so on."⁵¹

After no-small measure of negotiating, seating was finally agreed upon, and we were on the road. The bus got lively as we moved, the music—mainly reggae, and then Kikuyu music—blasting. The aisle was full of fellow travelers. 'Senior' smoked joints with practiced expertise as we drove into the countryside. Faysal strolled towards our seats. In his hand was a plastic Fanta bottle full of a liquid, which was a wan light yellow in color. "*Muratina*," he told me. He pointed to the front of the *matatu*, where there were three jerry cans of the stuff, which, he explained, the travelers had commissioned especially for this trip. *Muratina*—a slightly sour, slightly chalky alcohol made of fermented fruits of the same name—was historically the preserve of Gikuyu elders, sipped while seated following important negotiations. On this day, it was the preserve of these men, gulped down while dancing on the road; its consumption a preemptive celebration of the negotiations to come.

We continued drinking *muratina* as the caravan wended its way through Rift Valley. The journey, however, was not simply an excuse for a party. Amongst Gikuyu, having friends accompany you for *kũhanda ithĩgĩ* is critical. It demonstrates to the family of the would-be bride that the husband-to-be is respected and well connected with the people making up the communities of which he is a part.

⁵¹ Fieldnotes, 25 April 2015.

In this instance, this symbolic support was matched by material investment—shillings made in the city converted into other forms of value. As Faysal and I drank, he explained to me that everyone there had contributed 1000/= to their colleague's dowry. I did some math; between our 32-seater and the two other 15-seater *matatus*, that was around 60 people. "60,000/=," I remarked, "not bad." Faysal corrected me, it's more like 150,000/= he told me, 150 being the number of people who work at his *matatu* stage, not all of whom were able to join the group on that April day.

While it is true that the piecework regime of which industry workers are a part does not, perhaps, enable the individual to, as an individual, secure futurities with extended temporal horizons, the piecework regime does, in a piecemeal way, enable forms of collective pooling that can be invested in in the future. In this case, these men were ensuring their colleague's capacity to achieve adult masculinity through marriage.

The *matatu* stopped close to Nakuru, pulling over at the side of the highway. I looked at Faysal, confused. "Every time we go for one of these things," he said, "we stop at the houses of people whose parents live along the way. Now we're stopping at the house of the father of the driver." He continued, informing me that everyone had contributed 100/= to the driver, so that he could bestow it upon his father. The group crowded around the slightly bent but strong-looking older man. The money was handed over, as were a cluster of jerry cans, which had been affixed to the roof of the vehicle. The driver's father made a speech wishing us well on our journey, and thanking us for stopping to greet him. When he concluded, the group began singing, praising the man, celebrating his successes as a man, as a father.

As we approached the gate of the bride-to-be's compound, the women representing the husband's side beseeched the women on the other side of the compound gate to let us in, singing and clapping. Those driving honked their horns. The women refused until they were satisfied with the solicitations being sung by their counterparts on the other side of the gate, and finally the doors were opened. Following a short prayer, people immediately got in line for food, which was being served in large *sufurias*—*mukimo*, *pilau*, stew, *chapati*. We ate quickly, and before I knew it we were moving back towards the vehicle.

Our time at the bride-to-be's homestead had to be truncated, Faysal explained. There was another stop we had to make before embarking on the 4–5 hour journey back to Nairobi. The father of another colleague had some health issues, Faysal told me. Each of the men had, at that

time, contributed to help pay his medical bills. The father wanted to thank them, and so, we drove deeper into the interior and entered into a small rift, a beautiful valley flanked on both sides by steep inclines. Again, collections were made, 50 KSh per person this time, which they would offer to the father and mother of another colleague. We arrived at the house, and the group danced around the older couple as they sat in their small, dimly lit living room. Sentiments of gratitude were exchanged, and we continued on our journey back to Nairobi.

In other words, periods of urban gain described as *kahawa ni keru* here, on this day in early April, were matched in practice as these *matatu* men collectively parlayed their work in the city—marginal gains included—into social reproduction in the countryside. If, as Guyer notes “the struggle for the gains embedded in [new regimes of rationalization are at base struggles] to define time, money, and their mutual implications,” to this we might add that they are struggles over value. They are disputations over who and what authorizes the generation, storage, and circulation of value.⁵²

Conclusion

Descriptions of these conflicts as evidencing a neoliberal tendency towards financialization would miss much of the granularity of the politics at play in the push to digitize payments in the *matatu* industry that were on display in 2014. In keeping with the Chairman’s insights regarding Near Field Communications technology, such a reading would miss the ways in which ideologies regarding development, and the technologies and infrastructures designed in their name, are firmly rooted in this particularly and “peculiarly” Kenyan milieu. To gloss over the processes by which globally circulating technologies are reformatted as they are rescaled would, furthermore, render invisible the ways in which the tacit, embodied, and everyday knowledge practices and forms of expertise of *matatu* industry workers are poised to become the basis for the generation of new value-generating services. If ‘successful,’ this will involve both material and discursive shifts. Indeed, as historically salient practices are tethered to new digital networks and

⁵² Guyer, *Marginal Gains*, 169.

formalized, the illicit will be rebranded as the licit, the informal will be reformatted as the formal, and theft will be reframed as development in a digital register.

As in the past, while the discourse of the digital and its technologies tap into globally circulating ideas and material networks, the technopolitics embedded in the new system are in no way generic. Indeed, the debates surrounding the migration of payment structures in transport articulated with long-standing cultural politics that frames young men in the city as a problem. Indeed, as we saw (Chapters 1 and 2), for elders in the countryside, unsanctioned movement to the city, and the new forms of value-generation it enabled, threatened to unseat an existing moral economy framed by the concept of *wiathi* or “self-mastery.” Through the lens of value we can situate the new modes of formalization being unrolled in Kenya under the sign of the digital today as disclosing anxieties of a much older vintage. These are struggles over where value is accumulating, yes, but they are framed through enduring anxieties over the place of young men and their work in the city. These were struggles over who gets to define what counts, pace Waller, as “socially productive ways.”⁵³

⁵³ Waller, “Rebellious Youth,” 77.

Conclusion

“Infrastructural Attachments” began with a political street preacher who argued that the presidency of Uhuru Kenyatta’s *de facto* monopoly over the means of communication and the means of exchange, as well as the infrastructures undergirding them, had undermined the ‘public good.’ I want to end with a position that on first glance takes much the opposite perspective. In 2016, *Nairobi Law Monthly* began publishing a series of articles regarding the outsized role that communications giant Safaricom plays in everyday life. These articles turned on the perception that the company holds a monopoly over the country’s financial, security, and media infrastructures—as well as the services they offer. It is Safaricom, these articles argue, that is undermining ‘public good.’ In a 2017 article, ArKan Yasin wrote:

Safaricom is the primary arbiter of all social and economic relations for the population of the entire territory... Safaricom is unique not just in the fact that it straddles commerce, banking, voice and data communications, security surveillance and entertainment, but in the depth of its dominance in terms of reach in numbers, brand and socio-political power.¹

Here rather than the state dominating corporations—the argument of the political preacher with whom we began—we have the corporation taking the place of the state.

At the center of Yasin’s critique is the perception that Safaricom’s outsized role across the domains of its operations has rendered it state-like. For Yasin, this has presented a fundamental conundrum. As he continued: “Safaricom wields all the societal scale tools of arbitration, power and oversight without societal scale authority and culpability, and here in [*sic*] lies the problem.” Despite Safaricom’s state-like power, its status as a corporation ensures that it has none of the obligations of a state. It is not, in other words, responsible to the Kenyan public, writ large, but to a more discrete set of social categories: shareholders, customers, and

¹ ArKan Yasin, “Safaricom: Empire, Kingdom or Republic?,” *Nairobi Law Monthly*, 2 June 2017.

management structures located in the United Kingdom, Kenya, and, recently, South Africa. This truncated vision of ‘the public’ has dire social consequences, Yasin argued. While the corporation has taken on state-like functions, it has eschewed its social responsibilities to Kenyans in their status as both citizens and, crucially, as generators of value. To remedy this state of affairs, Yasin offered a solution:

Given the sheer scale of Safaricom’s dominance over the social entity, political theory dictates it should bear the burden and weight of the entity’s social and economic challenges proportionately. The M-PESA transaction fee by virtue of its ubiquity and inescapability (given it is extracted from over 88% of the adult population), is a society-wide economic rent and de-facto tax.

In reframing Safaricom’s fees as first rent, then as a form of taxation, Yasin gained critical analytic and political traction over the problem Safaricom presents. Conceived of as rent, Yasin argued that Safaricom’s fees for service are best conceived of as uncompensated value that it extracts from the public without making any contribution to productivity. Yasin’s next analytic move was crucial. Yasin argued that Safaricom’s extraction, given its reach into the lives of “over 88% of the adult population,” should be reframed as a form of taxation. This final turn of the wheel brought him to his conclusion: “Safaricom...has a social and economic obligation to this 88%, which transcends public relations false wealth re-distribution ‘photo-op’ exercises like Corporate Social Responsibility.” By reframing Safaricom’s fees as a kind of a tax, Yasin argued the company has an obligation to provision for the ‘public’ not as a divisible category, but as an undifferentiated and generic one. The company, he here claimed, is on the line for reinvesting its profits and ameliorating the lives of Kenyans *as* Kenyans.

What are we to make of these two perspectives? We would miss much if we saw in this an example of the weakening of the state, with the incremental ceding of its authority to a multinational corporation; this is one of the typical narratives of neoliberalism, which sees an inverse relationship between state authority and “neoliberalism’s varied global dispensations” (Chalfin 2010: 37). It is true that on the face of things Safaricom is a publicly traded multinational corporation. However, and as I have argued (Chapter 6), this designation obscures more than it reveals regarding the relationship between the company—which is both partially held by Kenyan shareholders and by the government “in trust” for the Kenyan people—and the Kenyan state. But so, too, would we be doing a disservice if we accepted the claim that the state

in Kenya today holds a monopoly over the fields of finance, communications, and exchange, the claims of the street preacher notwithstanding.

Today, both the corporation and the state are poised to profit from these relations of intimacy; both are poised to benefit from these infrastructural attachments. Safaricom is not only the single largest tax payer in the country, thereby generating revenues that line state coffers. But given that the government of Kenya is also a shareholder, when Safaricom profits, so too does the treasury. The new “security” system, which the state single-sourced when it quietly granted Safaricom the tender in 2014, is another site where historically consolidated infrastructural attachments are poised to benefit both the corporation and the state. Not only will the corporation be footing the bill in the initial instance, but as it links up new data with those gleaned through its financial and telephonic services, the prospective surveillance apparatus will be more robust than anything the government could have assembled without foreign capital and expertise.² Finally, the massive cache of user data that Safaricom has amassed is not only entering new capital markets as Safaricom sells the particulars and preferences of users to new companies in a bid to generate new markets. But the state, too, is rumored to access this data in its rhetorically powerful, but predictably misguided, “war on terror.”³ Drawing a line between the state and the corporation, between public and private interests, is evidently no easy task in Kenya today.

Rather than reading these two infrastructural tales as indicating confusion, then, I think we are better served holding them together and asking what, as pieces of a single puzzle, these stories reveal about the relationship between private capital, state power, developmental responsibility, and the politics of belonging in Kenya today. The crux of both critiques turns on boundary crossing—the indistinct lines between the state and the corporation, the public and the private, these Kenyan cultural critics argue, has undercut a generic notion of ‘the public.’ As ‘the public’ is disaggregated, the meaning of the infrastructures constructed in its name is also called into question. Not least, these critics suggest that this routine blurring of lines has undermined a vision of infrastructures as public goods to which all should have equal access. This has consequences for Kenya society; the routine transgression of these borders attenuating the

² Beatrice Obwocha, “Government, Safaricom sign deal for Sh15 billion security surveillance system,” *Daily Nation*, 25 November 2014.

³ N.A., “Kenya: Safaricom Partners With Msurvey to Measure Kenya's Digital Economy” *All Africa*, 29 June 2017.

relationship between the Kenyan state and its citizens. These claims have empirical legs. In the 1990s, when the state began incrementally privatizing what was once a state-held entity—Kenya Posts and Telecommunications Corporation—it was, among other things, a means of outsourcing the risk and costs of the development of telecommunications infrastructures and services from which the state nevertheless stood to profit. This distribution of infrastructural and developmentalist authority has led to a viable set of concerns regarding who, ultimately, is responsible for provisioning for the Kenyan people.

Analytically, reading these narratives together suggests that attention must be directed to understanding how shifts in the balance of public and private within the state *and* within the corporation, as well as along their edges, has mediated social, political, and material dynamics over the longer term. Indeed, Kenya’s postcolonial technopolitics do not begin in 1963 on the eve of independence. As it has been the task of the preceding chapters to demonstrate, contemporary infrastructural technopolitics build on colonial inheritances. Specifically, contemporary infrastructural politics are the outgrowth of the lumpy technopolitical assemblages of the past as they were shaped by administrative practices that produced a divisible public. This, then, is a particularly Kenyan story with a “peculiarly” Kenyan history.

Indeed, the entangled relations among state-formation and capital, read through the infrastructures that often brought them together under the mantle of the “common good,” were at the core of the British presence in the region. In 1888, unwilling to outlay the capital required to administer the territory, the Crown granted a Charter to the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) to assert British authority over the region under the dual mandate of “commerce and civilisation.” The Charter gave the IBEAC wide discretion, not only granting it a commercial monopoly in the region, but bequeathing to it the right and responsibility to act as the *de facto* administrator of the territory. This distribution of developmentalist authority was not unusual in the nineteenth century. Indeed, when the IBEAC first cut its teeth, Britons would not have apprehended the corporation as a private entity, *per se*, the very existence of such an entity turning on the receipt of a government charter. But, of course, infrastructures were not public entities either. Indeed, while the corporation was responsible to the sovereign as a representative of the public, it was *not* responsible to the public itself.⁴

⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

Discursively, these tensions were, in part, remedied by the fact that the IBEA received sanction from the sovereign as representative of the people. In a roundabout way, then, the sovereign's Charter ensured that the corporation *did* remain accountable to the public writ large. Materially, these contradictions were 'resolved,' such as they were, in the form of infrastructures, which administrators conceived of as the foundation both subtending a new economic order, and the basis for social betterment.

But this resolution, such as it was, articulated in peculiar ways in the colonies. In Eastern Africa public works projects such as road networks were of value to shareholders in the form of dividends, the Crown in the form of extended territorial control, and Britons in the form of monies partially relocated to state coffers through the taxation of commodities.⁵ And incrementally in these years this British public was expanding as the government extended the franchise.⁶ And this produced contradictions. Just as 'the public' was expanding across much of Europe, in the colonies it was taken for granted that would-be colonized communities would not be fully folded in to this growing public. Securing the commonweal in the UK, then, depended on mobilizing new forms of coercion in Eastern Africa, *while* bringing to these same communities "commerce and civilisation."

How, then, were would-be colonial subjects to benefit from the developmental side of the dual mandate? The answer was as odd as it was convenient. Africans living in the region were to benefit from the existence of new infrastructures *and* the new regimes of labor and taxation required to build them, both of which were held to have a civilizing effect on both persons and the landscapes they called home. While not a conceptually dissonant marriage in these years, the dual mandate of "commerce and civilisation" was bound to produce contradictions. Not least, the bottom line of capital gains, in tandem with a bifurcated vision of the public, undermined infrastructures' purported function as 'public goods.' These contradictions would not end when the Foreign Office took over the administration of the region, but instead became the foundational logic of the early colonial state. Conquest "on a shoestring," undertaken at the

⁵ See Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire*, 436-439, for a discussion of the difficulty the IBEA faced in securing shareholders.

⁶ Leigh A. Gardner, *Taxing Colonial Africa: The Political Economy of British Imperialism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

behest of a public-private partnership to invoke a financial anachronism, set the stage for the emergence of the austere state in Kenya.⁷

This tension persisted throughout the colonial period. Indeed, in this corner of Eastern Africa, the developmentalist aspirations underwriting projects of infrastructural expansion, and undertaken under durable conditions of austerity, have always depended on the mobilization of private capital and the construction of new markets—“development” and marketization in this austere geography have been but two sides of the same coin. But this marriage, while routine, has generated unexpected consequences.

Indeed, as I have argued, state efforts to leverage private capital as infrastructural prosthetics designed to extend administrative control have not always ‘succeeded.’ By the 1940s, for example, it was widely acknowledged that Cable and Wireless’ monopoly in the region had unduly affected the state’s ability to develop an infrastructure of broadcasting for African listeners. The corporation, in that instance, weakened the technopolitical aspirations of the state. In other instances, people pointed to these contradictions as new regimes of extraction, ostensibly seized to finance the construction of infrastructures as ‘public goods,’ became key nodes of conflict between subjects and the state. As people observed the uneven provisioning of infrastructures that broke down along the lines of race (Chapter 1), ethnicity (Chapters 2 and 4), and class (Chapter 6), they routinely called the state, in its various iterations, to account. The state’s ‘failure’ to smooth out these contradictions in both material and ideological terms, in other words, led to a redistribution of agency, opening up possibilities for people to claim their inclusion within the infrastructural state.

Indeed, when the Foreign Office took over administration of the region, it not only built on these practices but augmented them, though the sub-categories of ‘publics’ that this new bureaucratic apparatus worked to enact had different coordinates. No longer shareholders and financiers, but “natives” and “settlers,” “tribes” and ethno-linguistic groups. As a result, it was along the lines of these striated categories that people calculated whether or not they were being included in the infrastructural state, whether they were the beneficiaries of the commonweal that

⁷ Sara Berry, “Hegemony on a Shoestring: Indirect Rule and Access to Agricultural Land,” *Africa*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (1992).

was one of the state's proffered dispensations. Indeed, the technopolitical history of infrastructures in Eastern Africa has routinely turned not on technical intervention but its inverse: popular perceptions of infrastructural absence. As people debated how the state was provisioning for themselves and their communities, they engaged in comparative work, contrasting how the state was provisioning for them as against various 'Others.' In Eastern Africa, in other words, the contradictory vision of the public initiated under the dual mandate was compounded by the highly stratified racial and economic order that guided colonial administrative practices and shaped everyday life.

Tracing out these dynamics has been the task of this dissertation, which conjoins an ethnographically informed analysis of state-building and market-making with a close reading of the cultural politics of Kenyan communities. Working across these domains I have tried to parse out the contradictions of colonial rule on the ground by tracing the popular debates and practices that assembled around the state and its allies' most concrete and visible interventions—infrastructures. When and where they existed, these networks were the everyday materialization of state power. Their absence, too, was politicized by colonial communities as they demanded that the state make good on its promise as an entity tasked with provisioning for the commonweal.

But, as I argued, people did not experience state networks in terms of the generic colonial subject that theoretically sat at the heart of the colonial project. Nor in the present do people experience these networks in terms of the unmarked political subject that sits at the heart of liberal democracy. Instead, Kenya's infrastructural politics have been shaped in critical ways by colonial administrative practices that produced a divisible public. Specifically, people's experiences of infrastructures—both as infrastructural workers and as users—have been filtered through the racialized hierarchies and ethnic categories that have structured social, political, and economic inclusion and exclusion in Kenya more broadly.

Confining this story to the contradictory dynamics of state building and market-making would only enable partial understanding of the complex politics of infrastructures in Kenya, however. As I have shown, infrastructures were never merely materializations of abstract state power. By tracking Kenya's infrastructural technopolitics as they moved out of the hands of designers and into the quotidian lives and everyday conflicts of African communities, I have shown that people mobilized these networks as platforms upon which to assemble and generate

new social and political subjectivities. Telescoping into the micropolitics of infrastructures, I have argued, reveals how people mobilized new networks and their technologies in domains that far exceeded the reach of the state. At this scale, infrastructures have featured in battles over the parameters of community, debates over the ethics of new forms of accumulation, and disputations regarding the means and metrics of becoming a social adult.

If understanding how people leveraged infrastructures as objects of political and social dispute has been one core concern of this dissertation, exploring how these networks were enacted in material terms under conditions of austerity has been the other. Policies of austerity routinely meant that designers were asked to do more with less as they planned projects of infrastructural expansion. Over the course of each of the infrastructural tales narrated in these pages, technologists and engineers, and their plans for social transformation, have been stymied. Novel material, social, and cultural conditions have forced these men and their plans to confront the limits of their expertise. Against these material constraints, African knowledge workers and experts have been called upon to do prosthetic infrastructural work, to fill the breach between the state's aspirations and material conditions.

These men and women, over the longer term, have been responsible not only for mobilizing their "cultural" and linguistic expertise. But their labor, their skill, and their acumen have been mobilized to close the gap between the developmentalist ambitions of the state and its proxies and the material realities that were borne both of Kenya's unique geography and of long-standing policies of colonial austerity. Indeed, just as men like Ambrose Wakaria were essential to making radio broadcasting 'work' in the context of an infrastructurally thin state, so too have the tacit arrangements and everyday tactics of Nairobi's *matatu* men emerged out of infrastructural absence.

The retention of colonial road networks and the absence of the development of a large-scale transportation system in Kenya's capital city in the independence period set the stage for the emergence of the *matatu* industry. These material constraints have formed the basis for the forms of marginal gains-making by which *matatu* men 'get by' in the context of a largely informal economy, where the possibilities for formal work are unlikely for the majority. And these tales have a kinship with that of Nyawira and the tens of thousands of men and women that take charge of the M-PESA kiosks dotting Kenya's urban and rural landscapes. As in the case of *matatu* men, for Nyawira it is the absence, rather than the presence, of robust harder

infrastructures—here a banking infrastructure—which has required these workers to jump into the “breach.” And yet historical experts, like *matatu* men, like Nyawira, have not been recognized as knowledge workers nor as experts. Instead, systems’ builders refer to people like Nyawira as “Human ATMs,” and we can well imagine those interested in the digitization of transport referring to Faysal as a Human-NFC (Near Field Communications) console; one to be replaced at that.

This effacement of expertise is pernicious and it is political. Indeed, technologists and administrators have routinely appropriated this knowledge and expertise even as they sidelined the importance of this work. This is a scalar move in at least two ways. First, as I have argued across the histories narrated in this dissertation, as the value-generating work of African experts and knowledge workers is appropriated, their authorship is obscured. And yet, as we saw in the case of Nyawira and Faysal, systems’ designers *do* recognize this work as value generating. Indeed, they hope to use the patterned exchanges of the poor and the norms that they reveal as the baseline from which to reform globally circulating technologies (for Mwangi), and as a means of generating new data and from it new services (for Safaricom). Second, as this value-generating work is appropriated and scaled up, the infrastructures themselves are transformed, rendered “peculiarly” Kenyan. Indeed, as designers such as Mwangi and the Chairman are well aware in the case of the digitization of the *matatu* industry, the peculiarly Kenyan arrangements that shape dynamics in the transport industry need to be accommodated if this digital system, NFC, is to take hold. In an earlier iteration, technologists and administrators referred to this work of embedding as “tropicalisation.” Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, infrastructures are not eminently flexible but require ‘localization,’ translation, and transformation to take hold in new material, cultural, and social zones.

In each of these infrastructural tales, however, designers and technologists have reframed the work of these innovators and experts of both technics and culture as banal. Both in the past and in the present, the underwriting presupposition is that African knowledge workers and technical experts simply *act like infrastructures*, that they simply act infrastructurally.

Narratives of austerity as a feature of contemporary organizations of technology and capital markets have a durable history in this one postcolonial space. This is a space where incomplete networking has long been the norm. This is a space where ordinary and extraordinary expertise

has been mobilized to close the gap between an ideologically dense but materially austere infrastructural state. To frame this work as mere labor is to accept the representational practices of designers and technologists, both past and present. Rather, what I have argued in these pages is that people have not only acted as laborers, but as critical knowledge workers, as experts. A human ATM, in other words, is a value-generating knowledge worker and expert of both the technics and culture. Absent this expertise, these technologies, both past and present, simply would not work.

If we are to write histories of capital's present and the types of inequalities that it shores up, particularly in the face of claims to ethical capitalism—of which Safaricom, Nyawira's company and the company backing the migration to the digital in the transport sector is a key proponent—we must dig in different directions. We must see Nyawira—the human ATM—and Faysal—the Human-NFC—not simply as an effect of these forms, but as, in fact, constituent to making these forms work; not simply as laboring bodies, but as sites of knowledge production. Their work, like that of radio experts such as Katele and Wakaria, and the unnamed experts of topography whose knowledge shaped early road infrastructures, forms of expertise.

But it has not only been at the hands of technologists and designers that this work has been devalued as *mere* labor. As I have argued, African communities have routinely brought their own ideas regarding the social good and work to bear as they have evaluated the extension of new markets, and the technologies and infrastructures with which they were associated. In the 1920s and again in the 1940s, elders castigated young people's attempts to rescale their work on the road in a bid to enter new markets and leverage themselves into positions of social maturity. Similar patterns are evident in the postcolonial state's bid to digitize payments in the *matatu* industry. Here the state and technologists hope to rescale foreign expertise and capital in a bid to reform the behaviors and futures of unruly *matatu* youth in the city. These young people, they argue, are an unproductive “menace.”

There are critical political reasons to take this expertise and its routine devaluation seriously, critical reasons to push against arguments of “unproductivity.” James Ferguson has recently suggested that we need to reframe our understandings of ethics and politics if we are to take stock of a new but ever more ubiquitous condition. He writes:

It is common to suppose that people make their livelihoods by being “productive” – that is, by producing, via their labor, goods and services that either meet their own needs...or meet the needs of others in such a way that either their goods can

be marketed...or their labor can be sold...In fact that has never been an adequate account...[But] recent developments in the spatial and social organization of production...[mean] that [the] commonsense linkage of livelihood with production [is] under considerable strain.⁸

The bulk of the population living on the African continent, he argues, is today “simply left out of the global production regime.” In response to these new conditions, Ferguson argues, we must come up with a new politics of distribution, one that accepts that we are living in conditions of “surplus labor.” He proposes the universal income grant as one solution.

The conditions obtaining in South Africa are not altogether different from those obtaining in Kenya. Except that in Kenya, as across much of the continent, it is unlikely that the state will intervene and “give a man a fish,” in Ferguson’s formulation. And these differences matter to the types of politics, the types of ethics, and the genre of redistribution for which we advocate.

Indeed, as the example of Safaricom suggests, while people are not necessarily included in today’s formal wage labor economies, their data is generating value. As people’s everyday strategies, along with the daily practices and expertise of infrastructural workers, are captured, they become the foundations upon which new products are designed and new markets are assembled. This value-generating work is being mobilized by companies such as Safaricom (but in earlier iterations the IBEA), and new modes of accumulation are sometimes the result. The labor of these people, like the labor of Nyawira, while generating value is not recognized as value-generating activity. If we are to generate new critiques of contemporary capitalism on the continent, we need to attend to these new modes of capture *and* their histories. We need to move away from a frame that naturalizes “people as infrastructure” to consider the particular arrangements of capital and work that have demanded that people act infrastructurally.

This perspective is, I think, critical not only for doing justice to the histories of this work and these experts, and to reckoning with durable inequalities. But it is also critical to understanding our global present, one wherein innovation often looks like waste, when promised prosperity often looks like prolonged precarity, and when *both* informalization and formalization threaten to devalue work as simply labor all the while capitalizing on human expertise.

⁸ James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

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