

BOOK REVIEW

Daren E. Ray. *Ethnicity, Identity and Conceptualizing Community in Indian Ocean East Africa*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2024. 319 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$36.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780821426135.

This detailed and well-researched book, drawing on rich ethnographic, linguistic, and archival records, examines the malleability of ethnicity and identity across precolonial, colonial and postcolonial eras with a focus on Sabaki languages on the Indian Ocean Coast. Relying on the Swahili, Mijikenda, and Arab identities, the book traces how these groups have continued to navigate identity, belonging, and political life in the context of a littoral society. The book notes that these identities have been negotiated and reimagined throughout encounters with the Portuguese, the Arab influence, and the British during the colonial period. These connections and influences are linked to transoceanic commerce, colonization, and religious influences, particularly Islam.

The book provides a fresh nuance on the concept of ethnicity by demonstrating through a historical approach spanning over two millennia how ethnic identities have been framed with a lens on the Kenyan coast including the Indian Ocean. In historicizing ethnicity, the book demonstrates how Sabaki languages have historically framed their belonging. Ethnic affiliation among the Sabaki languages, the book notes, has been fluid depending on the context. These notions of belonging have been elaborated in the context of kinship, clan, and title societies.

The book demonstrates that clans have remained an enduring feature for belonging in identity groups. Furthermore, the study relying on the concept on clan confederation, argues that Sabaki language speakers have chosen categorizations that are either exclusive or inclusive depending on contextual circumstances. By collapsing into identities such as the Chimijikenda, Swahili, and/or Mwambao (Coastal strip), the argument in the book speaks to the fluidity of identity at particular moments. In other times, single identities are chosen, such as being Digo, or Duruma, to show distinction but also to claim identity and resources such as land. Moreover, religious affiliation has been used as a marker of ethnic belonging especially with reference to Islam.


The book notes that the constructed and sometimes “imagined” identities have been applied in distinguishing themselves from other Kenyans. This distinction enables the author to illustrate how the Sabaki speakers frame their history and political positioning at different junctures. At Kenya’s independence, for example, these identities at the Kenyan Coast preferred a regional government (Majimboism) in contrast to a centralized state and were represented in their party preferences, such as the pivot to Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU).

In a similar vein, the book notes that they “exploited” colonial boundary making to show not only distinction from other parts of Kenya but also to express exclusion and fear of domination by the so termed “up country communities” such as the Kamba and the Kikuyu. These tensions, the book notes, allows categorizations akin to “guests” and “immigrants” with exclusionary categories such as “Wapwani” (Coastal people), to the exclusion of outsiders. Such categories as the “Wapwani” allow collective political identity that would be distinct from ethnic loyalties that are displayed in political contests and/or in the deploying of political violence—a key criterion of this distinction being their connections to the Indian Ocean.

The book finds resonance with existing debates in scholarship, such as the notion of autochthony or what has been termed as politics of belonging. The framing of the Chimijikenda identities in colonial Kenya is cited as an example of belonging, yet the nine “confederations” have remained politically and socially fragmented. This quest for a common identity has been linked to their mythical Shugwanya homeland. The rationale for claiming a common ancestry is a further illustration of how distinct ethnic groups can be organized for political purposes. The construction, therefore, of a Mijikenda identity and the establishment of a short-lived Mijikenda Union highlights how identities can be fashioned to claim a common history but also to show distinction from Kiswahili speakers. This, in a nutshell, allowed these two main identities to claim indigeneity as “people of the Coast” but further to claim that the causes of their disunity could be linked to the Arabs, Asians, and the Europeans. When these two groups (the Mijikenda and Swahili speakers) overcome their historical strains, they have tended to frame communities such as Kamba and Oromo as immigrants to the Coast.

The book ends with conversations on how a collective identity continues to be weaved at the Coastal part of Kenya around shared common interests to the neglect of the Chimijikenda and Kiswahili speaking communities’ competing identities. This forging of a common identity was largely around shared interests, such as development in the post-2010 Kenyan constitution that provided for a decentralized government. The author notes other fissures that have continued to shape community debates in that region. The author references the calls by the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) with roots in Kwale for secession of the Coast from Kenya. This served to illustrate similarities but also differences in imagining a postcolonial Kenya.

This book is a welcome read for scholars and general readers interested in African history, identity, politics, and Indian Ocean studies. The chapters are chronologically organized allowing an excellent weaving of history, showing how identities are formed and reshaped contextually. The book’s strength lies in its historical approach that ties the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial epochs to understand the interplay of ethnicity and identity drawing on selected Sabaki communities.

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