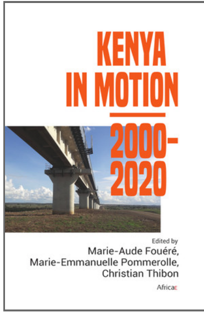


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**Kenya in Motion 2000-2020**

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Chapter 13

# Beyond its Whitewashed Past, the Unique Peoples of Precolonial Kenya

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Chapter 13

# Beyond its Whitewashed Past, the Unique Peoples of Precolonial Kenya

*Anne-Marie Peatrik*

*Translated by Jane Womack & Sara Doel*

Twenty years have elapsed since the first edition of *Kenya contemporain* (Grignon & Prunier 1998), even more if we refer to the point at which the authors wrote their respective contributions. The last chapter of the edited volume (Grignon 1998) on the "democratic invention," for instance, was an attempt at determining what the effects of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the new multi-party system were on political life. Obviously, since then, Kenya, like the rest of the world, has changed in this area, as in many others.

Taking stock of change is not as simple with regard to the topic to which we are paying particular attention here, namely the peoples and cultures or civilisations before the conquest of what was to become Kenya, as well as the advances in knowledge pertaining to them during those two decades. In this regard, the chapter on "Les sociétés anciennes et leur héritage" ("Ancient Societies and their Heritage") drafted by myself (Peatrik 1998) stands up reasonably well but the idea of "heritage" which underpinned a number of developments needs revisiting. "Heritage," defined as the implicit or deliberate transmission and reception of ways of acting and thinking which leave their mark on contemporary practices, is no longer understood in the same way in Kenya: the quite different notion of "heritagisation" (or "heritage-making") of culture has taken its place. This reappraisal of the status of the peoples and of their "customs," and the new anthropological theory on which it is based, is arguably the real intellectual innovation which came from those decades. Before getting to the heart of our topic, it is important to highlight these shifts as they shape the way in which knowledge of the populations under discussion is presented and disseminated, and more immediately, the content of this article.

## 1. How Current Events Affect Knowledge

The move towards freedom of speech and the freedom to broach a wide range of topics within everyday conversation and across various media, magnified by the availability of digital technologies, has undoubtedly led to introduce questions about "culture" within the public debate which would have been previously impossible or unthinkable to address in Kenya.

One must remember the reticence and self-censorship that existed in the shadow of a culture of informing, which restricted exchanges and conversations under Daniel arap Moi's presidency (1978–2002) until the early 1990s. Customs, music and "traditional" clothing, which are in many ways harmless practices, were no exception: it was impossible to refer to them, let alone reclaim them at the risk of being labelled anti-modern, backward and even unpatriotic. The author of this text, who carried out research among the Meru from 1986 to 1993 on their ancient (and highly original) traditional political system, well remembers the initial disapproval, refusal to speak or even disbelief of the people she spoke to. Kenyans were educated, modern, properly dressed, they said, adding that all these customs of yesteryear were long gone and only pastoralists from the semi-desert regions and their herds would cling on to these retrograde practices. The popularity of the Maasai was then at its height among tourists (foreigners, needless to say) and many incredulous Kenyans questioned what image these warriors with their braided hair, bodies covered in ochre and armed with spears were conveying about their country. The only belated concession to the tradition and to the Africanness it represented was made by Moi, who, ready to make concessions in order to counter claims of multi-partyism, began extolling the virtues of committees of elders, whether revived, or self-appointed without foundation, since they had been brushed aside for so long. The "reinvented tradition" (Ranger 1983) was thus reimagined for the purposes of political control: few were fooled by the U-turn performed by the skilful tyrant, but the move delighted certain local baronets for whom it was too good an opportunity to miss.[1]

A quarter of a century later, the shift is evident. There is no city, no village anywhere in Kenya where you cannot find at least one "cultural dance" group, approved, if possible, by the County committee[2]; no market where you cannot find signs promoting local plants and medicines or a little

1. At the very beginning of the 1990s, the Njuri Ncheke, at that time in decline, re-emerged among the Meru (Peatrik 1999: 455-470, 2020 [2019]: 372-384): President Moi saw them as a model council of elders and encouraged that such councils be (re)instated elsewhere in Kenya. Within the framework of the Organisation of African Unity, until 2011 these councils were financed by Muammar Gaddafi, the "King of Kings," who considered them to be better suited to managing populations than Western-inspired structures. This period in which traditional councils were manipulated to thwart multi-partyism, and which resumed the practices of the colonial administration under a different guise, is still in need of specialist research. Some elements can be found in Nyamweru & Chidongo (2018).

2. Since the reform of 2010, the county has replaced the district (an administrative division equivalent to the French department) and is governed locally by a county assembly which is elected by universal suffrage.

private museum that an elderly person will be delighted to show you around. During public meetings, the governing elites break into *isukuti* steps—a very popular dance originating from the West of Kenya (Kiiru 2014)—to break up the meeting, casually don shirts with "African" designs on, and their wives no longer think twice about draping themselves in billowing brown dresses decorated with braids, reminiscent of the clothes of their ancestors, made from tanned and softened hides, adorned with pearls and cowry shells. Could it be the fallout from the years of policies encouraging cultural diversity to stave off fratricidal ethnic rivalries, particularly the post-election violence of 2007–2008?

Or could it be the intensive heritagisation programmes funded by Unesco and relayed through local campaigns and NGOs who see it as a resource for tourism and potential development? And what about the YouTube videos and countless websites promoting one "ethnic group" or another, and the use of local languages? Never before has cultural diversity and the ethnic brand associated with it been as promoted or lauded as it is in Kenya today. To the extent that the ethnographer must now contend with interviewees who are too keen to allow their culture to be studied and mirrored back to them.

How are we to understand it when Kenyans now speak of "culture," that is, as an understatement or euphemism for what they used to call *customs* or *traditions*? Are they praising the idea of returning to a frugal, ecological way of life which nonetheless incorporates cars, mobile phones, electricity and running water? Are they championing the values of respect and solidarity even though they are now being divorced from the practices which instilled them, such as gruelling initiations, public male and female circumcision, or even restrictive rules like the "bride price[3]" that was paid to secure marriages and determine the parents of children yet to be born? Do they want a return to the funerals of the past, during which, so as to not pollute the soils, the remains of the deceased were left in the bush for the hyenas and vultures, and grief was relieved through ritual coitus, for fear that the stain of death would otherwise endure? What should we say about "pagan" ceremonies (to use the missionaries' term), which are a far cry from various festivities that exist today where just a few animals are sacrificed? And about *cultural dances* whose choreography draws freely

3. "Bride price" or "bride wealth" was paid in kind and/or in cash by the future husband (usually with help from his family) to guarantee the status of any future children by the woman, his future wife, who would leave her family of origin to set up home with their husband and start their own family. This transaction and social contract are often confused in both French and English with the "dowry" which refers to the material goods that a woman brings with her to her new family. The two transactions can co-exist but do not in any way follow the same logic.

from those rituals, with the sequences which seem inappropriate or out of place removed? As for witchcraft, that paragon of past customs, what should we make of the fact that the way in which it spreads and feeds rumours turns out to be closely linked with modernity (Middleton 1963; Luongo 2011)?

It appears that in Kenya, culture, customs and traditions cover a broad spectrum of meanings, ranging from the quest for identity in a post-colonial context to membership of clientelist networks or self-defence groups; from an imaginative space from which creative inspiration can be drawn, to stereotypes which can promote folklore-influenced brands or breed ethnic violence; or even knowledge and straightforward skills passed down by a parent to implicit ways of categorising which are conveyed through use of the mother tongue. We must not overlook geographical patterns, ways of roaming the land, the fact of staying in certain sites more than others, ways of perceiving the landscape, and associated land and property claims.[4]

To illustrate this abundance of meanings, conducive as it is to syncretism and a mish-mash of ideology, let us consider the astonishing movement called, "The Multitude" or Mûngiki (from the verb *kwonga*, meaning to multiply). This is the name of a generation of reinvented traditionalists, among them a small number of young Kikuyu who joined in the 1980s at the time of the first ethnic conflict and formed self-defence groups. Aimed at young men faced with unemployment and low achievement, these Mûngiki activists, who also called themselves heirs of the Mau Mau uprising (which, we must remember, led to independence in 1963), advocated a return to family "traditions" and to the ancient practice of passing official powers down through traditional generations.[5] This young Multitude, in search of neo-patriarchal models and practices (Maupeu 2003; Lafargue 2010), even if they failed to rally anyone beyond their accomplices, still managed to frighten the middle classes, both Kikuyu and Kenyan, and those within powerful circles.

Yet all of this is a very long way from what the *ante*-colonial populations referred to using the ethnonym kikuyu, or by any other ethnonym. More than a century has passed since the military conquest, longer than that if we

4. In short, a civilisational process which anthropological scholars have incorporated into the notions of *ethos* or *habitus*, and have set about deconstructing across many analytical fields such as kinship, powers, modes of production, rites and religion, beliefs and knowledge… The collection recently published under the direction of Hughes & Lamont (2018) which addresses the way in which 2010 constitution promoted culture to the status of "cultural rights" puts forward interesting avenues.

5. The subject of traditional generational classes is explained in the section 4, p. 363.

refer to the arrival of missionaries in the middle of the nineteenth century. This has been a century and a half of major transformation across Africa and the world, over the course of which traditional institutions and ancestral practices, themselves shaped by a unique history, have been continuously put to the test.

Whilst in recent years, knowledge of the history of contemporary Africa has grown considerably, supported by an increasing number of written sources which are at last available—consider for example the reappraisal of the Mau Mau uprising (Ogot 2005; Charton 2011) or research into writing in African languages in Kenya (Peterson 2004; MacArthur 2016)—, knowledge of the societies and cultures that really existed prior to the conquests has progressed very little, with a few exceptions. The crisis affecting Kenyan national museums is proof of this. The prestigious site is now a sad thing to behold, after the reform of 2006 which resulted in the ethnographic galleries at the Nairobi National Museum being closed[6]—they were judged to be "colonialist" but were a mine of information about ancient societies and customs—and in devolved responsibilities to counties who were supposed to revive the national museums locally. Apart from a few well-equipped rooms, one wanders past mostly empty, dusty display cabinets, with a few photos and several plaques which make up the temporary exhibitions that are always there. And the groups of schoolchildren who go for extracurricular visits hardly make up for the sluggish visitor numbers. A new national museum of ethnography and history of peoples and past civilisations is still looking for its creators in Kenya, as is also the case in other African countries.

Unravelling Africa's distant past presents a number of methodological difficulties (Spear 1981; Sutton 1990). Written sources remain limited and oral traditions have a specific relevance but their analysis requires precaution. Regarding the history of languages, it is difficult to come up with reference points that are easy to use. Ethnographical data is poorly mobilised and historiography lacks reflexivity. As for archaeological digs, they are insufficient: they are costly and seen as less prestigious than research into hominisation and early man by the academic world and by financers, thus attracting fewer researchers even though there are many sites listed. In Kenya, according to the accounts of researchers at the national museum,

6. The superb Kikuyu hut which demonstrated the skill of traditional builders and was located outside was also destroyed, on the pretext that it perpetuated the confusion between national identity and Kikuyu identity... At the same time, the open-air *Bomas of Kenya* museum on the edge of the *Nairobi National Park*, where the national dance company is based and habitats ("bomas") which represent national diversity have been built, has not undergone any specific renovation even though its more national character would make this highly worthwhile.

working on 1,000,000 year old history potentially offers more prestige and credibility than that which dates back 10,000, 5,000 or 1,000 years BP. And yet it is during these last millennia that key elements of the historical framework of today's East Africans have fallen into place (Lane 2016). Very recently, a few studies have been carried out on the history of ecosystems linked to the climate crisis and the question of preserving natural heritage. Similarly, progress has been made in settlement history thanks to the rise of population genetics but the major socio-human frameworks are still rarely questioned. Highland societies are still considered to be limited in their historical richness. This is of course contrary to the cities of the Swahili Corridor which left behind "traces" and accounts that are more in keeping with the conventional tools of historical and archaeological research.

In the absence of debate around these areas, while the cultural heritage craze is in full swing, the gap between the knowledge of contemporary East Africa and the East Africa of the past is widening. One must, supported by specific knowledge, be increasingly imaginative in avoiding anachronisms and capturing the unique spaces and peoples of East Africa. How long will it take for intellectuals and the educated elite to realise that the institutions and practices which underpin "customs" are born of a history that is social, political, religious, aesthetic, demographic, which pertains to heterogeneous timescales (emic and etic) and which should be investigated? This is the way things happen in science and knowledge production. As soon as there is evidence of a social and political expectation regarding these questions, coming from the new generation, the academic momentum and stewardship will follow.

The overview presented below is based on field research and monographs carried out in the twentieth century, at a time when witnesses and participants from before the conquest were still able to provide *first-hand information*. Ethnographic in its content, this broad portrait aims to draw out the original characters from unique worlds, which have undergone profound change but whose influence can be found in a number of ways in the present-day reality.[7]

## 2. A Unique Geography and Economy

Who and which peoples from the time before colonial borders were created are we talking about? In what became Kenya, the smallest populations and groupings, wherever they were located, were often identified by proper names which are rarely used and are not well known today. According

7. It is impossible to detail the countless references which support this overview. At the end of the article, the selected biography suggests further reading and provides links to further references.

to whether these peoples named themselves or other people named them, they had changing ethnonyms. And many contemporary names, which seem to carry the hallmark of antiquity, are as much the product of tenuous transcriptions and opposing representations as they are of the improvised way the colonial administration was implemented.

The Meru ethnonym was coined in 1908 by the conqueror and first administrator of the area, derived from a Maasai name, which also appears to echo a toponym of the place where the first administrative and military post was established. In reality, at least five groups came under the label "Meru": the Igembe, Mwiko jwa Ngaa (still called Tigania), Imenti, Chuka, Tharaka. The "Kikuyu" ethnonym was reappropriated in the 1930s to embrace all the people living between the northeast and southwest, and west of Mount Kenya—Meru, Embu, Mbeere, Gichugu, Ndia, Gaki, Metume, Karura—all of whom came under the single "*Kikuyu Land Unit*" by the colonial administration.

The Samburu, herders from North Kenya, known by this name of Bantu and/or Maasai origin, call themselves Lokop, an ethnonym that only they use. Further west towards Mount Elgon and Nyanza, the name (Aba-)Luyia incorporates, in simple terms, the Vugusu, Hayo, Marach, Wanga, Nyala, Tsotso, Marama, Holo, Isuxa, Idaxo, Kisa, Nyole, Logoli, Tiriki. Returning to the hinterland of the coast of the Indian Ocean, we find the Mijikenda (literally "the nine settlements"), an ethnonym that was coined in the 1930s to distinguish it from the Swahili (also an exogenous ethnonym) and to replace their unflattering naming as "bushmen" (*wanyika*), bringing together nine different groups: Giriama, Jibana, Chonyi, Ribe, Kambe, Kauma, Rabai, Digo, Duruma.

The list is long. An interactive, multi-scalar map would best accommodate these ancient and contemporary onomastics. This would be a very solid introduction to the relativity and historicity of designations, which would look good in the entrance hall of a renovated and reinvented Kenyan national museum of ethnography and history, something which it is pleasing to imagine in this text. However, this does not mean these labile or arbitrary designations should be seen to reflect vague, ill-defined and unstructured communities, in line with another idea conceived in the minds of the first conquerors and administrators of these groups. Behind these names, or within them, there lie memberships and affiliations, rights and bans, solidarity and conflict, and also several limits—in sum, institutions, all without the use of writing or state bureaucracy, which it fell to anthropology and ethnography to decipher. Briefly, and without going into too much detail, the notion of "people" used here refers to the effectiveness of marking out political units which have been formed within or by the generational system (or traditional generations) and initiations—

we will explain these two institutions later in the text. Otherwise, we are referring to more modest human groupings, which are expected over time either to expand or to merge or join together with more powerful neighbouring groups, or even disappear.

The highlands and lowlands of Kenya, like those of the border regions of neighbouring countries, are part of a unique environment made up of long, mostly gentle slopes, which are exposed to seasonal winds mainly coming from the Indian Ocean, bringing maritime influences and with them, rain. With the slopes acting as a shield against the humid winds, clouds form and rainfall increases in intensity in line with altitude as the temperature cools. And because these air masses come and go twice in the year, they trigger two rainy seasons (bimodal rainfall pattern) which allows for the possibility of two harvests, continuous lactation of herds and the regular production of beehives. The layering of ecosystems is another characteristic and additional benefit. Thermal gradient and humidity combine to produce environments that are versatile, according to altitude: lower down it is drier and suited to cereals and peas; at altitude it is cooler and more humid and suitable for roots, tubers, sugar cane, beans and bananas. Land at around 1700 metres has (or had) many advantages conducive to human settlements: in an intermediate position and at a reasonable distance from those mentioned above, land at this altitude which is comparatively cool without being too cold, was unaffected by the anopheles (carriers of malaria) or by diseases that spread in hot and humid environments (lower morbidity).

However, this natural potential is limited by irregular rainfall. Such irregularity owes to the contrast between the well-watered slopes and the dryer leeward slopes, but also to the irregular rains from year to year, whether these are *short rains* in autumn or *long rains* in spring which can be insufficient, excessive, late or early. Current changes in the climate are, for the moment, only exacerbating this irregularity. There are a number of responses that people, over centuries and millennia, have learned to identify, to protect themselves and make the best use of this potential. The most sustainable of these was to have sufficiently large and varied land available and to practice a range of economic activities. Taking the opportunity to open gardens, graze a herd, hunt and forage for food in places where the rain is more abundant and moving to another slope or altitude without having to negotiate the move or the land's ownership is the most appropriate response. The political drivers behind such a territorial arrangement are examined below.

Carrying out multiple economic activities in these spaces does not fit well with the portrayed image of the Maasai herdsmen, whose pastoral specialisation would have been a quintessential aspect of the traditional East African economy. Again, we must correct the stereotype that the

Maasai themselves often employ. This problematic and exceptional specialisation was probably a late decision in the history of these peoples, and the Maasai, although highly visible, are not very representative. The other peoples combined, to varying degrees and made up in many different ways, foraging and hunting, breeding (large and small ruminants, bees), agriculture (cereals, legumes, tubers, bananas, sugar cane), handmade items and bartering.

A wide range of items were made by hand, from the construction of various buildings (varying in size, life span and purpose) to the tanning of skins for clothing and bedding, as well as jewellery, ropemaking and containers: decorated gourds, wooden buckets sewn with leather, earthenware pots made by women during the cool and dry season, a period of plenty, conducive to feasts and rituals. Only the manufacturing of iron tools was carried out by specialists. Blacksmiths, who used pits for ore reduction, were craftsmen who were both feared and despised. These people and their activities were avoided and were subject to prohibitions. For example, they were not allowed to marry non-blacksmiths and a blacksmith's wife could not practice farming, with the exception of small gardens within the family homestead. Blacksmith's wives traded iron tools for agricultural goods, sometimes by means of force. Blacksmiths often owned large herds which had been amassed in exchange for their products, in particular essential weapons with which to equip the warrior classes.

The idea of "caste," however, is inappropriate since these societies were non-hierarchical, egalitarian and by no means imbued with the ideology of purity. For both pragmatic and symbolic reasons, blacksmiths were considered to be abusive and ill-mannered. Since people could not do without them, it was best to protect oneself from them. But their Oolitic iron deposits were kept secret and guarded by warriors, as were some clay pits which were reserved for female potters, and salt deposits which were essential for health of herds and people. Medical knowledge was widely shared to such an extent that the same pharmacopoeia was used to treat herds of animals and human beings. The diviner-healer was a little unusual: a healer who was visited by the sick or victims of repeated misfortune, he was also the diviner that warriors would consult before embarking on a raid. These skills did not overly set him apart; as he was obviously paid for his consultations the traditional diviner-healer tended simply to be richer than average.

Tasks were distributed according to limits of age, generation and gender which in turn helped to maintain those limits. Again, one should not view this division as inflexible and its limits as insurmountable: within the sphere of economic activity, practical reason and the demands of everyday life took precedence. Beekeeping (and mead) and hunting were reserved

for men, while pottery and making beer were reserved for women. The domestic economy relied largely on the contributions of children and young people. And when they grew older, leaving the family homestead to become warriors and join the warrior class, or to marry into another homestead, was delayed for as long as possible. Adults worked in the gardens and with the herd for as long as they had the strength. The most common mix of activities was agriculture and animal husbandry, to varying degrees depending on time and space. Some non-farmers combined blacksmithing, breeding and foraging. Everyone, including those who had a small number of herds or no longer had any, loved and idealised cattle, which were seen as the very best way to conduct contractual relations between humans, as well as offerings and sacrifices to the deity: called by different names according to the language, this principle, around which the world would come to be based, was universally recognised by these peoples.

One final aspect relating to exchange and movement deserves further explanation. The idea that these peoples were isolated and inward-looking, that they were self-sufficient, in line with the stereotype that has been so prevalent in relation to these "primitive" precolonial people, is not appropriate. People moved around East African areas quite freely with almost no insurmountable obstacles, with only a need to know routes and take precautions. Over the centuries, networks were created, undone and rebuilt. Bartering was in operation across short or long distances: it was practised within domestic markets by people living short distances away, between producers of goods grown on higher and lower ground (cereals in exchange for bananas, roots and beans, and agricultural products for small cattle or iron objects). It was also practised between neighbouring people: women would go on trading expeditions under the protection of warriors, carrying bags of various goods—grains and cereals—on their backs, which they would trade for skins which were abundant among pastoralists. Conversely, pastoralists went up to markets at high altitudes in search of agricultural products, iron objects etc, which they traded for cattle.

There was no money, in the strict sense of the term, hence the concept of barter, but exchange values existed, which were determined from place to place and according to the seasons. A plausible value attributed to cattle was used as a focal point which varied according to the quality of the animals. A certain number of bags of grain were traded for iron tools; herds of small cattle for bananas or even large cattle, cows, heifers, calves, bulls, oxen, both fat and scrawny; and salt cakes for bags of yams. Blue or cowry shell pearls were given in exchange for cereals or herds of cattle… These transactions took place alongside other forms of trade and debt such as cattle contracts, marriage contracts and child fostering. These oral contracts, sealed in various ways (animal sacrifices and blood pacts together with the

threat of curses and retaliation in cases of non-compliance) were based on interpersonal relationships and mutually recognised contacts. Thus, the names of categories relating to generation and age, by means of comparing lists specific to each group of people, very often made it possible for people to locate any given person they had met in passing. Here, as elsewhere, people could break their word, or break a contract but these interactions would involve nearby or distant communities. Trading networks of widely varied kinds interconnected these peoples and communities. Distances beyond the reach of a trumpet call were given a value according to the number of days of walking, for the warriors in particular, one of whose main functions was to survey the country—theirs and others'—sometimes with hostile intentions. It was usually women who would carry things over shorter distances. Processions of men would cross each other while travelling longer distances. The tsetse fly limited the use of donkeys almost everywhere; and dromedaries roamed the more arid Northern regions.

These areas had relatively gentle terrain and were outward-looking. Various products were introduced: cowry shells, coloured pearls, blue Persian pearls in particular, new species and varieties to farm, which were adopted and adapted according to soil cultivation, transforming and improving them: American or South Asian species (beans, bananas, taro, sugar cane…) that arrived via the Nile basin and the coasts, which facilitated the development of more elevated land and allowed for new economic combinations and an increase in population. Products were transported to the coast of the Indian Ocean where coastal societies had been formed, long before the so-called Swahili cities appeared, this time in collaboration with well-established Arab-Muslim traders. For a long time products from highland blacksmiths were exported. Cattle were also brought to the coast. Valuable goods such as rhinoceros horns and elephant tusks arrived through the Kamba and other people too, who had established themselves as essential intermediaries. Lastly, contrary to what happened in the hinterland of what was to become Tanzania, Swahili and Arab merchants' caravans did not penetrate, or not to a large degree, the continent in the hinterland of today's Kenya. The people who lived there had a reputation for being "savage" and barbaric and for being protected by cruel warriors, a reputation that the Kamba were careful not to dispute, all the more so since the fate that met Swahili or Somali caravans that never returned confirmed this.

In this ancient economy, being rich and accumulating wealth were by no means held in contempt. The rich man, one who was successful in his various occupations, was an important person who was constantly called upon: he was "the one who makes people happy," according to the literal meaning of one of the local names for these "big men." He became

someone who provided benefits and was a resource for his citizens. He could not avoid the demands that were made of him as they went along with his reputation and position, which were determined by the number of "dependants" and by his ability to widen his networks. After a while, however, the accumulation and transfer of wealth were doomed to fail. Despite people's proven expertise in conservation, any potential surplus from harvests could not easily be stored for long periods. Herds, despite being spread out across different areas, just as people lived in scattered settlements, remained exposed to epidemics or raids.

In short, the primitive accumulation of capital, so dear to economists, was not possible. It was the accumulation of people that mattered. The ability to overcome food or political crises, or increased mortality, was what set apart groups or individuals: this is one of the merits of having a range of activities, along with the possibility of having a sufficiently large and versatile area of land. Raids also made it possible to quickly recover what was needed to survive and start again: raids were carried out to seize cattle, or take captive—women and children who were taken and integrated to replenish the workforce. But it was important not to set off a cycle of retaliatory attacks. The use of raids had to be contained, otherwise widespread war would set in, something which had obviously happened in the past,[8] but not to the point of causing lasting depopulation. We must adopt another point of view in order to understand that these peoples and their modes of organisation created the possibility of another form of accumulation, one which resulted in increased population density.

## 3. Peoples and Speakers

These versatile highlands were conducive to human settlements, provided the settlers were equipped to benefit from them and enjoyed a lower prevalence of disease. The varied economic activity mentioned above is the result of a complex process spanning centuries and millennia. Unlike many underpopulated or depopulated areas of pre-colonial Africa, these regions appeared to the conquerors to be "bastions of population" (or densely populated highlands) according to the classical expression used by French geographers: high undulating plateaus of the lacustrine kingdoms to the west, highlands and peaks towards the Indian Ocean, Mount Elgon, Mount Kenya; in Tanzania, Mount Meru and Kilimanjaro and other regions with

8. The least well-known example is that of the internal Maasai wars which devastated these peoples at the end of the nineteenth century after their herds were destroyed by rinderpest (not to mention the drought and small pox epidemic which affected all populations in these regions), which again puts into question the risk they would have taken and the choice they would have made to undertake only one kind of activity.

bimodal rainfall; to the north, beyond the semi-arid Turkana Basin, uplands which spring up again in Ethiopia.

Various peoples slowly moved into these areas, in search of hunting ground and places to fish, seeking new pastures to keep pace with new crops and slow but definite demographic growth. The existence of three major linguistic families—Cushitic, Bantu and Nilotic—in the present day attests to this, even if it is difficult to piece together the history of how they spread and mixed together.[9] Whilst some can be seen to predominate, the mixing of populations is nonetheless active and dates back a long time. A number of terms pertaining to ancient political institutions are commonly used, demonstrating the *melting-pot* effect that some of them had and points to them having been actively used in the past. Some Bantu speakers gradually mixed with proto-Nilotic speakers and/or proto-Cushitic speakers, which, little by little, were "Bantu-ised," a mixture which is probably at the root of so-called oriental Bantu languages (around Kenya's Central Province) and differs from other branches of Bantu speakers. In the same way, Nilotic speakers—aside from the very staggered arrivals from South Sudan—can be separated into southern Nilotic speakers who arrived long ago and whose language borrows considerably from Cushitic languages (Nandi, Kipsisgis, Tugen, Pokot, Okiek…), eastern Nilotic speakers who arrived more recently (Samburu, Maasai, Turkana) and most recently, western Nilotic speakers (Luo). All groups, however, mixed with other pre-existing groups.

Beyond the differences in languages or their division into different dialects, the modes of existence of the various families of speakers remained very similar. Human settlements became permanent, and attracted and integrated other migrants. The warmer, lower areas which were suitable for grazing and cereal but exposed to recurrent droughts could be easily abandoned simply by moving to higher ground and settling on higher and better resourced slopes. Over the centuries, many territorial communities organised themselves according to slopes by combining diverse soils and grasslands on higher and lower ground. If groups differed from each other, due to distances that were too far to travel, close ties were forged between highland and lowland societies, which were sanctioned by various rituals. In the west of Kenya, we can refer to the famous case of the Luo, Nilotic speakers and agropastoralist fisherman who came from South Sudan as their herds were displaced and they mixed with pre-existing populations; by settling on the eastern shores of Lake Nyanza-Victoria, an area rich in resources, they forged strong links with the Gusii, communities of farmers and breeders who were established on the hills to the east. The Gusii, Bantu

9. All the more so since the current speakers are the last recorded; their presence in no way rules out other families of speakers having existed and then disappeared without leaving easily detectable traces (Philippson 2009).

speakers who had lived on these highlands for many years, were themselves a product of mixing with proto-Nilotic speakers who long preceded them.

This settlement process was made all the more likely to happen when a significant resource made the area at the bottom of the slopes an initial focal point, which led to a pioneer front heading upstream: salt deposits, surface iron, quality clay and wells that were easy to dig. Long-term settlement at the water's edge was avoided due to exposure to the tsetse fly. Ithanga, a clay deposit at the southern foot of Mount Kenya, was probably the basis for a settlement of people that became long after the Kikuyu. Blacksmiths in what became Mbeere set up permanent populations, then expanded to higher ground, eventually becoming the Embu. To the northeast of the Nyambene Hills, Ngombe—a crater lake rich in salt and minerals and a source of vitality for humans and herds—agglomerated, in association with sites controlled by blacksmiths, one of the centres of populations that much later became the Igembe and Tigania (Meru). In southwest Kenya, beneath the Loita Hills, farmers and breeders settled around foothill springs, and became known as the Loita Maasai; these people married within groups of farmers, the most well-known example being the Kikuyu, among whom mothers and fathers are of Maasai descent and two traditions of initiation co-existed (the Maasai tradition and Kikuyu tradition).

More widely, any eminence that provided two rainy seasons and a defensive ridge was able to attract permanent populations: the Taita settled on the mountains of the same name, behind the Swahili coast; to the northwest, if it benefitted them to roam the dry lowlands, the Kamba would often settle on any of the hills that were dotted around towards Mount Kenya and make them their territory. As a counterexample, the people who eventually became the Turkana worthy of note. They had very good reasons for leaving the highlands of the Karimojong peoples from the sixteenth century onwards and scattering across the semi-desert foothills. In short, the exception that proves the rule is that settling on higher ground while taking control of lower slopes and foothills is the winning combination. And tracing the movements of ancient populations and human settlements requires detailed knowledge of the geographical frameworks and ecological potential of the areas concerned, which are themselves unstable.

One final subject deserves clarification: the scattered settlements that characterise these regions and go far beyond Kenya. This is something which is difficult to explain. The "villagisation" imposed on the Kikuyu and on some of the Embu and Meru during the 1950s under the state of emergency and anti-Mau Mau repression conversely reveals how prevalent this custom was. It is reminiscent of the contrast between *bocage* (a French word designating a landscape of hedges and settlements scattered across

hamlets) and *open field* (settlements grouped together in villages) which have long been observed in the West, along with the stream of analysis it elicited; or closer to the world of Africa, in Cameroon, the enduring controversy around the Bamileke *bocage* and its scattered settlements. The scattering of settlements as a way of meeting the need to develop diverse ecosystems, within secure areas, is the simplest explanation that can be provided within the scope of this article. Especially since as family settlements appeared along the slopes and on the preferred land situated at 1,700 metres (roughly), there was a custom of congregating for various purposes: the promotion of warriors who were placed in kind of warriors barracks in strategic places; processions of novices and newly initiated members travelled across the land reasserting its boundaries; occasional meetings in public grounds, barter markets, assemblies for Fathers of the Country and at a different location, assemblies of women. When the time came, these localities, often used day to day as communal pastureland, were transformed into dedicated or sacred areas by means of sacrifices and suitable invocations, which brings us straight on to political and religious structures.

## 4. East African Government and Politics of the Past

The highlands of today's Kenya, like those of the border regions of neighbouring states, were known for an original form of social and political organisation, a kind of polity based on class systems relating to generation and age.[10] Within the polities in question, each put in place by its own traditional generational class system and identifiable through a specific list of names, the population, primarily the males, were included in generational classes of people who exercised power in turn. If a man was in class "A," his sons would be in class "B," his grandsons in class "C," etc. When there was a transfer of power from an aging generation to the successive younger generation, the other classes would also change position. In this often antagonistic phase of reordering positions (particularly in connection to the variable number of individuals who were born too early or too late relative to the time when their class came into power), names which were provisional then permanent were collectively chosen for the newly promoted classes. Another characteristic was that the manner in which power was transferred varied considerably from one polity to another: partial transfers occurred every eight years (Borana), every 15 to 20 years (Meru, Samburu, Maasai, Nandi, Kipsigis, Pokot, Gabbra, Dassanatch…), or

10. "Polity" in the sense of a political entity characterised by individual socio-political institutions: here there are generational systems, elsewhere there could be chiefdoms, kingdoms, empires, city-states, the latter of which can be found on the so-called Swahili coast, and there are as many different kinds of polity. However, some of their characteristics can be combined to a certain extent.

the transfer took place every 30 to 40 years (Kikuyu, Karimojong peoples, Giriama…).[11]

These variations reflect tensions relating to reproduction within traditional generations and to the specific methods by which classes were recruited, such as by organising rituals, by controlling, mostly successfully, the time at which people married or through the practice of polygamy; but the methods and *ethos* through which power was exercised were very similar. The ruling class of men, or Fathers of the Country, had authority through assemblies which would meet in public grounds: the fathers debated public affairs, judged the cases put before them, modified traditions if necessary, such as altering the "bride price" (see note 3) when it tended towards increasing too much. It was their particular responsibility to keep control of the class of young men from which their own sons were often recruited, and who made up the official warrior class. When the warriors came of age and expressed the desire to establish themselves as fathers of families, then a new group of warriors had to be promoted, even if it meant putting pressure on Fathers of the Country who were ageing but reluctant to accept being replaced by new fathers of the Country.

Life was often broken up into clearly defined stages, *i.e.* age grades or age status, in which rights and responsibilities were set out, and which had to be reached either on a personal basis or, more often, together with one's own age and/or generation class. The initiation process to become a warrior was a crucial step for men. Warriors—the Maasai *morans* provide an example made popular by tourism—carried out offensive or defensive raids, bringing back herds taken from enemies; we have also mentioned that women and children were taken captive and integrated through initiations to boost the numbers among populations which were deemed insufficient; there was no slave trading or slave status. However, the Fathers of the Country took care to reign in the warriors' aggressive zeal. They feared retaliation from neighbouring polities, who could very often put together armies of warriors who were capable of similar attacks. This allows us to understand the importance of the link between warriors, territory and Fathers of the Country which was the foundation of each polity: it is not inappropriate to talk in terms of "territorial sovereignty" and, in the case of the fathers,

11. On this huge topic of social and political anthropology, see, among others: Baxter & Almagor 1978; Bernardi 1985; Legesse 2006; Marmone 2017; Muriuki 1974; Peatrik 1995, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2019; Tornay 1995, 2001; Spencer 1973; Stewart 1977. These political organisations have presented particular challenges in terms of description and analysis. The overview being offered is a (condensed) response to the key question the purpose of these forms of society which have become prevalent in these regions of East Africa, and the twofold question of their historicity or historical depth, and their historical bearing on East Africa.

of "collective sovereign." Even when travelling, or indeed migrating, each person belonging to an age or generation class remained a member of that class and a citizen of that polity, even if they did not live there. That is unless people left, in cases of a crisis or a disagreement with their fathers and along with fellow dissenters. They would leave to try to create their own polity under the pretext of seeking new pastures, often taking groups of girls with them as accomplices.

Over the centuries, some polities disappeared and others were formed, bringing together the populations of defunct polities. This simple and effective form of government which was self-referential or even self-established but not free of intrinsic tensions and reproductive crises, was based around it being possible to quickly get institutions moving again after the inevitable disasters which leave their mark on human societies: human and animal epidemics, environmental problems, small-scale wars that descend into full-scale conflict, for example, as previously mentioned in note 8, the conflicts and disasters that struck East Africa at the end of the nineteenth century and helped pave the way for the colonial conquest by justifying it. By putting a group of self-appointed Fathers of the Country on one side and their sons who were in charge of defence on the other, a territory was established and social life could get back to being less chaotic; later, initiation sessions and ritual processions would strengthen the collectives and reinforce ties to the newly established territory. There was no chief here, no dynasty descending from a founding hero. Rather there were groups of men who shared the same traditional ethos, remarkable individuals who were also able to influence others, who were determined to work together to set up their own society.

These political systems, with their collective authority and shared power, were egalitarian. These societies were not very hierarchical and fostered an individualism which was unconnected to modernity and drew upon a farming *ethos* and pastoralist practices. There was little hierarchy because all young people, who at one time were subordinate, were called upon to become Fathers of the Country. The order of birth was almost unimportant in these matters, and the idea of differential roles and status depending on who is first born, second born… or last born, as is typically seen in the lineage societies well-known within African Studies, have no real relevance. *We are looking at a different African paradigm.* Everyone, provided they lived long enough, would cross the age thresholds along with their class and take on various roles relating to family, politics and ritual. With everyone potentially in the same boat, this system valued the achievements of each person, creating and also legitimising the idea that some people (men and woman) were more successful than others.

These democracies of yesteryear were also capable of amalgamating relatively large populations through generation and age classes: it can be estimated that the numbers ranged from 20,000 to 90,000 inhabitants. Under 20,000, it was no longer possible to line up sufficient numbers of warriors and a polity whose existence was under threat risked having to merge with its neighbours. Above 90,000, the distances needing to be crossed became too long but sometimes neighbouring polities would join together on the basis of jointly organised initiations. These grand rituals were a focus for the populations and enemies were sometimes tempted to attack groups while they were busy recruiting a new class of warriors. Historical-mythical accounts explain this clearly and help us understand how, step by step, territorial sections grouped together in larger areas which were made peaceful through co-initiation. We discover the capacity of collective rites of passage to integrate, as well as their importance in governance, forming assemblies and controlling peace and war in any given territory. In this way, these polities were able to control sufficiently large territories within which anyone considered a member of the polity, or even as its ally, could move around. The adaptive advantage these territories displayed has already been mentioned. These polities were not defined by borders in the Western sense of the term, but by boundary areas which were identified by different notable ground features, very often considered "consecrated" sites where sacrifices were made during initiation processions which crossed the length of the territory. Lastly, the citizens of each of the polities could be identified through a common list of class names (relating to generation and age). This identification was a preliminary part of meetings and meant that everyone could find their bearings and move around far from their respective bases.

Without going into too much detail, it should be noted that women were included in the system through classes of wives who were named and associated with their husbands' generation classes; they usually had their own councils and deliberated matters that concerned them, and remarkable women emerged from this. Rules of kinship, in terms of children and marriage, as well as how quickly people married and prohibitions within marriage, were often regulated by the system of generational and age classes. A man could not have sexual relations with a woman who was the daughter of a man of the same generation as him, or even marry that woman. That would amount to him marrying his own daughter, and for a girl to accept the advances of a man considered as her father was taboo and a form of incest, in this case generational, in addition to the more well know taboo of family incest.

In these polities there was therefore no chiefdom or dynasty; the principle of hereditary succession in a lineage within a predominant clan could even be said to contradict the principle of replacing a class of aging fathers with

the consecutive class of sons. The colonial administration, in the beginning, evidently concluded that these populations devoid of centralised power had no government—"anarchic" was the word used to describe these "archaic" indigenous people—until the most astute among them, including district commissioner Harold E. Lambert, realised the complexity of the traditional systems, their capacity for integration and the principles of devolving authority. These principles—elicited by Jomo Kenyatta (1938) in his pioneering monograph on the Kikuyu—were at the root of the resistance fought by Africans, who then became colonial subjects, even after their generation class system had been disrupted by the conquest.

It is telling that in terms of regional distribution, these political regimes disappear in places where, for reasons relating to geography and historical heritage, other regimes asserted themselves. If you head west towards the Great Lakes region, you find kingdoms that deeply fascinated the British such as the Baganda and their *kabaka* which was not dissimilar to their own monarch. This affirmation of dynasty goes hand in hand with the increasing importance of lineage based on proven filiation and the ancestralisation of some of the deceased. To the south, towards what is today Tanzania, chiefdoms were formed when chiefs managed, to the detriment of the Fathers of the Country, to sustainably manage the process of initiating and training the warrior class which they would use to their own advantage (Chagga, Rwa). To the north, towards Ethiopia, peoples with a generational class system like the famous Oromo *gadaa* system, after having conquered the southern half of the Ethiopian plateaus, became principalities before later being absorbed into Menelik II's empire at the end of the nineteenth century. Towards the coast of the Indian Ocean, there is good reason to think that the Swahili cities are the result of the transformation of local societies probably organised in the remote past according to classes of generation and age, similar to the system which remains in the Comoros archipelago. Generation and age systems of East African origin, as evidenced by a common vocabulary and principles continued to exist there while they were transformed by the influence of traders, then by Arab-Muslim principalities. This situation is indicative of ancient links between the continent and the archipelago which have recently been picked up by historians.

## 5. The Religion of Initiation

East African peoples, with their generation and age-based systems, had little interest in stories about the origins of the world, cosmogony or the genesis of the beings who came to populate it. A different conceptual and symbolic framework prevailed and other themes informed the stories and legends that they liked to tell. The world was considered to be originated from an

abstract power seen as working continuously for its self-maintenance. This abstract, energising power was regarded as a kind of deity called Ngaï, Murungu, Akuj, Waaka… depending on the language. It could be felt in the air people and animals breathed, in the wind that makes the leaves rustle and the water ripple; and also in reproductive substances, in the seminal reproductive forces of men and bulls, forces of germination seen in harvests and the fertilising forces of saliva mixed with mead. The world's ills and misfortunes were a result of human misconduct which disturbed exchange and balance; and rituals, prayers and sacrifices to the deity or higher power aimed to redress this balance and restore proper flow and exchanges.

Ritual activities were of great importance in the life of these populations. The household economy, besides everyday food provision, was a way for the head of the family and his wives to fulfil their ritual obligations in a dignified manner by providing what was needed in order for them to take place, and by feeding the largest possible number of spectators. Paul Baxter, ethnographer of the Boran, even maintained that these populations lived in a sea of rituals and blessings, also implying that it was difficult to separate activities that could be classed as rituals from those that were part of everyday life.

In order to really characterise the religion of these East African worlds, we have to talk of a *religion of initiation*, and relate it to the link between the initiator and the initiated, as with the worship of ancestors, which relates to lineage—and has long been identified by religious studies—or, more recently, outside of Africa, the principle of the shaman and the shamanic journey to the spirit world. Nowhere else, in fact, have initiation and rites of passage, biographical and political, taken on such importance: rites of passage that mark a person's life from birth until death, and the collective rite of passage when a new class of fathers comes to power, causing all the other classes to change position. The organisation of rituals legitimised the political; and generally speaking the effect of a rite was not only symbolic or magical, it had a practical effect that changed people in concrete ways, reconfiguring social ties and social precedence. Some rites were modest procedures, almost surreptitious but no less significant, such as the first shaving of a child's hair which was carried out long after they were born, within the family homestead, at a time when it was sure that they would survive. The child would then receive a name, the first of several during his existence, which would be that of a grandparent of the same sex. This grand-parent, through the gift of his or her name and the principle of the identity of the alternating generations, was thus granted a kind of longevity. Other rituals such as the initiation to promote someone to warrior status—some involved circumcision but many other initiatory ritual procedures existed—could take place over the course of a year. Various groups of the population would

perform as part of a true spectacle with the initiation process starting only when the granaries were full, the herds were well fed and there had been peace for a sufficiently long time; these ritual gatherings or co-initiations helped to incorporate groups into larger collectives, as mentioned above.

In accordance with the egalitarianism of the political and social system, no religious leader was responsible for conducting the rituals but some dignitaries sometimes worked in conjunction with the Fathers and the "Accomplished." A person's intangible and spiritual capacity to influence the course of life depended firstly on having the power to bless, and also to curse. Every person potentially had this gift but the effectiveness of their power depended on the person's age status and reputation as an individual. The blessings of those who had reached the last age grade were particularly effective and sought after: having succeeded in overcoming all the crises of existence, these "Accomplished" men and women were considered to be closest to the Deity, if not as part of it. In some polities, certain figures were known for having a particular aptitude for giving blessings, such as the *mûgwe* among the Meru, whose blessings using the left hand were beneficial and sought after. Outside the setting of rituals, nothing really distinguished them from their fellow citizens. These specific dignitaries simply honed their particular skills which it was useful to draw upon during times of excessive or insufficient rain, among other examples, in an eclipse or even when an epidemic indicated a disturbance in the cycles of rain and sun (Bernardi 1959; Legesse 1979; Waller 1995; Wood 1999).

The requests for protection that these figures or the Accomplished persons would address to the Deity, their benevolent words interspersed with jets of saliva mixed with mead, the rubbing of clay or fat on to certain parts of the body—all their actions were very effective and the presence of the Accomplished men and women was essential during the many rituals that marked age-grading and the progress of generation classes. The opposite and complementary practice of cursing, in which menacing words were publicly declared interspersed with saliva projected from the top teeth, was available to everyone; but again, its effectiveness corresponded to the age of the speaker, and cursing was a powerful instrument of social control not be used lightly. Among certain peoples, a curse was irreversible (the Maasai for example) while for others, it was possible for it to be lifted after a certain length of time, when the speaker of the curse had come to accept the request put forward by the person being cursed. Reconciliation took place through a ritual based around the sacrifice of a particular animal followed by the sharing of the carcass which was eaten immediately. Blessings and curses forged links between the living and, in some cases, the recently deceased whose word had not been respected and who people tried to appease through sharing a sacrificed animal (Peatrik 1991).

Since they were publicly announced, blessings and curses were known to everyone, and were everyone's responsibility, unlike attacks through witchcraft which were thought to be secret acts by certain wicked people who spoke evil words to themselves, buried certain objects that were considered dangerous in specific places and slipped poison into the food of those they wanted to harm. A source of fear and anxiety, rumours of witchcraft constituted a serious disruption to public order. The individuals accused were judged by councils of fathers and subjected to ordeals, and the guilty were condemned to death and executed, only after being subjected to torture and enduring "exemplary" suffering. The work of the assembly of fathers was broader as they decided on the ritual procedures to be performed when misfortune and hardship repeatedly struck the polity: excess water or drought, epidemic and increased mortality… there was a complete sacrificial process which included the dignitaries mentioned above and aimed to restore balance to the cycles of rain and sun. Sometimes even disturbances in the atmosphere indicated that the time had come to renew the social and political body, to urge the older generation to depart and bring in a new class of Fathers of the Country. Ideally, aging and rejuvenation would be a part of the way in which institutions kept going: individuals would come and go but the polity, distinguished by its list of names of generations, would remain.

It fell to the diviner-healer to deal with individual and family troubles and find the causes (Fratkin 2011). He would examine the entrails of a goat which was sacrificed for this purpose or the diagrams drawn by the tiny objects projecting from his divination gourd. There was a wide range of causes of unhappiness which could involve family or community networks. Misfortune or illness could result from accidentally or deliberately committing a forbidden act considered particularly improper, from insufficient blessings or intentional curses, or from witchcraft. Again, making amends meant sacrificing an animal from the herd, with the procedures varying according to the type of animal: its age, sex, the colour of its coat, the method of killing and the way the carcass was used, whether it was shared or completely destroyed. Other methods of treating diseases existed such as herbal medicine and initiation into therapeutic associations, but the use and the sacrifice of animals from the herd, even if it was only a few goats' heads, remained the quintessential way of carrying out acts of reparation.

Funeral rituals were strictly a family matter, involving no public display, and differed according to the age of the deceased. This was in accordance with an indifference to the idea of individual *post-mortem* existence besides grandchildren, but not to a collective existence after death since bringing back the names of old generational classes made sure of this.

Everything was thought to take place during a person's lifetime which accounts for the high value placed on initiations and the final stage of accomplishment. Protocols were similar from group to group, with some variations. Therefore, the deaths of people who died before this stage had been completed were considered tragic and their remains were left in the bush for predators; in contrast, the remains of the Accomplished which sometimes dried out quickly due to fires that were kept going day and night, were buried and considered beneficial to the ground in the pit where the herd's droppings were collected. And as is logical, if one looks *outside* the area where systems relating to age and generation predominate, one comes across ways of worshipping ancestors, well-formed lineages, rules of inheritance for widows, recognisable funeral rites—in short, all the workings of other ritual-social societies, for example of the Luo or the Luyia. However, social hierarchies, despite having different features, were not expressed and were characterised by the same high value placed on the herd and the same central importance of cows.

In light of this picture of East African and Kenyan worlds before they were transformed by the colonial conquest, then by decolonisation, there is clearly food for thought and a case for imagining a new national museum of Kenyan ethnography and history, which could make use of multimedia collections and resources in ways not seen before. The emphasis could be on processes and dynamics—technological, organisational, ritual—, on variations of scale which highlight specific geographical and historical features, on biographies, not of kings but of figures who have left a wealth of material in collections of oral sources, which could make up a highly original gallery of portraits. The historical depth of these phenomena—even if we only partially know about it—, could be enhanced and conveyed through synoptic tables displaying the different methods—those used by archaeologists differing from those of linguists for example—and separating likely or plausible dates from proven dates, with this being modified as and when there are advances in knowledge. The display would also need to show the mixture of both what is permanent and the profound changes that makes up the real Kenya: a variety of languages but a homogeneity in terms of economic conditions; environmental contrasts and conflict relating to land use but also ancient trading systems and the active circulation of goods; societies with collective power, forms of territorial sovereignty, forms of individualism, not without their parallels with contemporary political processes. Age-grading and learning through initiations echo the schooling which Kenyans have championed, as well as the readiness for hard work and the value placed on individual achievement which, in the early days, fuelled for example the energy of Kenyan runners… Beyond the undeniable rupture that the colonial conquest represented, now that

a sufficient number of years have passed since decolonisation, we have a better sense of the way in which Kenya is a product of these legacies. In a nation that sometimes doubts itself, we can allow ourselves to think that perhaps becoming (re)acquainted with a shared past, with all its rough edges and differences and not just made "heritage," would allow for a clearer look ahead to a shared future; perhaps the use of critical and reflexive knowledge of the past and identities is not incompatible with nation building, in fact quite the opposite.

## Conclusion

Broadly speaking, the subject of Kenya as presented in this article is an invitation to further research which will be set out by way of a conclusion. When considered alongside other situations in Africa and elsewhere, it could provide the basis for a comparison incorporating two starting points: the status of customs and nation-building. Thus, in analysing the "folklorisation" process that popular customs underwent following the French Revolution, which accompanied the advent of the industrial world and modern nation-states, it is revealed that customs were subject to a double transformation at the very moment that they were destined to disappear. They were regionalised and folkorised, even inspiring regionalist literature and became knowledge objects for the first methodical ethnographic surveys which were designed to rescue them before they died out (Fabre 1996; Thiesse 1999).

African states, beyond some common dysfunction analysed by political scientists, display great diversity. Concerning East Africa only, how can we keep thinking of the institutions of Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania as fitting into the same mould, as if the distinctive features of their *ante*-colonial circumstances have had no effect on their modes of existence? Kenya, with its unique configuration, appears to be permanently influenced by the generational polities which once prevailed across a large part of its territory. However, these old political systems—still partly in existence in the northern counties of Kenya—as well as inviting us to look beyond the idea that a state-based society and a stateless society are opposed to one another,[12] have to do with the practical values and methods that have permeated the various emancipation movements and remained within contemporary practices. Thus, there exists a continuity, one which is often underestimated and misunderstood, between territorial sovereignty (Mbembe 2005) and the *ethos* of these ancient democracies, on the one

12. This opposition seen in the first major study of African political systems (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940) should not be jettisoned but rather qualified, amended or built upon, drawing upon the great number of monographs which have been produced in different regions of Africa since this pioneering work.

hand, and modern democracies, on the other. The current situation of cultures in Kenya is best clarified in a different way. The "heritagisation" in progress could be less indicative of a whitewashed past, instead displaying an awareness of a past which is in the process of becoming the past, and of customs disappearing. In a kind of dialectic movement being passed down through successive generations, the folklorisation called for in most Kenyan counties could serve as a prelude to distancing from the societies and cultures of yesteryear, and to the sustainable[13] development of systematic knowledge, this being the task that lies ahead for the future of history in tomorrow's Kenya.

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13. Sustainable because in the decade that followed independence until the end of the 1970s, the desire to "know" and to objectify the past informed a number of methodical works carried out by Kenyan students and academics (Kipkorir 1973; Muriuki 1974; Ogot & Ehret 1976; Peatrik 2014). These movement subsequently came to a halt. Could this be an effect of the succession of historical generations and their different relationships to the past and present? Generations who lived through independence were certain to embody an emancipatory sense of modernity. This feeling later declined, leading to a newly defined status attached to customs and therefore to the fabric of the past.

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