

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Politics by night: histories of extraversion and rumours of body part theft on the south coast of Kenya

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Abstract

This article analyses an episode of public anxiety when, in late 2013, word spread throughout Kenya's rural Lunga Lunga constituency that politically connected gangs called *mumiani* were abducting and killing children for their eyes, tongues and genitals. The rapid spread of these rumours coincided with a regional drought, parliamentary election campaigns, and the apparent discovery of 'devil worship paraphernalia' inside a shipping container at the nearby port of Mombasa. I analyse the 2013 *mumiani* scare in relation to histories of famine survival strategies, predatory patronage and occult speculation to argue that the 2013 *mumiani* panic condensed and expressed these histories in figural rather than temporal form. As 'constellations' of coastal Kenyan historical consciousness, *mumiani* are (and have long been) a key feature of, and at the same time iconic of, a broader critical discourse about the dark side of political largesse – 'politics by night'.

Résumé

Cet article analyse un épisode d'anxiété publique lorsqu'en fin 2013, une nouvelle s'est répandue dans la commune rurale de Lunga Lunga, au Kenya, que des gangs politiquement affiliés, appelés *mumiani*, enlevaient et tuaient des enfants pour leur ôter les yeux, la langue et les parties génitales. La propagation rapide de ces rumeurs coïncidait avec une sécheresse régionale, des campagnes électorales parlementaires et l'apparente découverte « d'objets sataniques » dans un conteneur maritime au port de Mombasa, situé non loin de là. L'auteur analyse la peur des *mumiani* de 2013 au regard des histoires de stratégies de survie en temps de famine, de patronage prédateur et de spéculation occulte pour soutenir que la panique *mumiani* de 2013 condensait et exprimait ces histoires sous forme figurative plutôt que temporelle. En tant que « constellations » de la conscience historique du littoral kényan, les *mumiani* sont (et ce depuis longtemps) une caractéristique clé et en même temps iconique d'un discours critique plus large sur la face sombre de la largesse politique, la « politique de nuit ».

In October 2013, near the end of my first year of fieldwork in southern Kenya's Lunga Lunga constituency, I began to hear that gangs of body part thieves called '*mumiani*' had returned after a long absence.¹ This 'news' (*habari*) most often came in the form of warnings not to walk alone as I went about my research: '*Usitembee peke yako, Hamisi; utatolewa macho. Kuna mumiani*' ('Don't walk alone, Hamisi [my local name]; you'll have your eyes taken. There are *mumiani*'). *Mumiani* were said – and this is how speakers typically introduced information about them (i.e. '*nasikia*', I hear, '*ambiwa*', [I'm] told, etc.) – to be strangers from the north who prowled the roads at night in large vehicles with dark windows. If they see someone walking alone they lure them to their vehicle, incapacitate them with a powerful anaesthetic, and then transport them to a secluded location. There, they cut the victim's throat and remove their eyes, tongue and genitals to be sold on the black market in occult goods and services. So I was told.²

I had first heard about *mumiani* a few months before the scare began, from Alfani, the youngest son of my adoptive family (and as will be seen, children were at the centre of *mumiani* fears later that year). His mother and I were sitting on the front porch one evening, discussing an unusual halo that had appeared around the moon that night, as well as the names of the stars and planets and rituals formerly performed during lunar eclipses, when Alfani came sprinting up out of the darkness. Between breaths, he told us that while walking home from his uncle's house he had spotted an unfamiliar vehicle by the dirt road that borders the village on one side. Alarmed, he and his friends had run the rest of the way home. 'I don't know if they're *mumiani* or what,' he offered, before disappearing into the house.³

Already familiar with the figure of *mumiani* from the work of historian Luise White (2000) – but unaware at the time that they were anything other than a strictly colonial-era phenomenon – I was surprised at how unconcerned his mother seemed to be at the prospect of them lurking in the darkness at the edge of town.

'He fears *mumiani*,' she said with a chuckle, 'but it's not *mumiani*.' How do you know? 'It's not their time.' But I thought *mumiani* work at night? 'True ... it's true, they work at night,' her expression now serious. '*Epecially* at night. But their time is the end of the year.' The seasonality of *mumiani* predations was news to me. In the existing literature, they were described as an omnipresent feature of colonial life in East Africa. So, why the end of the year? 'Isn't there drought [*ukame*] at the end of the year? There's drought! The sun is hot. There's no money.'

I return to the significance of these observations below, but first I want to point out that throughout the scare later that year, *mumiani* retained something of the bogeyman quality they seemed initially to have for Alfani's mother. Adults teased children for being afraid of *mumiani* if they hesitated to be sent on some small errand (to the village kiosk for maize flour or kerosene, for example, or to retrieve a charging mobile phone from a house with electricity). On one occasion, while tending a damaged

¹ Lunga Lunga is Kenya's southernmost administrative district, bordering Tanzania to the south-west and the Indian Ocean to the east. It is also the name of a town on the Kenya-Tanzania border, but references in the text to 'Lunga Lunga' are to the electoral constituency – equivalent to a congressional or parliamentary district – not the town. My research (from January 2013 to July 2015) was based in the region's rural areas, and the 2013 *mumiani* scare was a constituency-wide phenomenon.

² Both the warnings and the description of *mumiani*, at this level of generality, were offered by old and young, men and women, friends and passing acquaintances alike.

³ All reported speech was in Kiswahili or Chidigo. All English translations are mine.

banana plant behind our house, I overheard our neighbour's youngest daughter sounding out the brand name on a bag of sugar, only to be corrected by her older sister, in a voice intended – successfully – to scare her: 'It's not "Mumias" sugar, it's "Mumiani" sugar.' The following week another neighbour, Mzee Saidi, returned home from evening prayers to find himself locked out of his house. He then loudly – for public amusement, it seemed, and good-naturedly – heckled his children through the locked door: 'Are you afraid of *mumiani* or what? At this hour they're just waking up! They're still brushing their teeth!' (implying, again, that they work at night).

Clearly *mumiani* could be a source of humour, especially at the expense of children. But young people were not the only ones afraid. Mzee Saidi's door *had* been locked, after all, but by his wife (as she later told me), not their children – and, indeed, out of fear of *mumiani*. And Alfani's father – a man I had seen just a few days earlier tease a nephew too afraid of *mumiani* to be sent to buy airtime in broad daylight – became panicked one night when his two daughters had not returned home hours after sunset. Rather than risk sending Alfani out to find them, he asked me to go instead (Alfani, in any case, was too frightened, and could only bring himself to stand in the doorway and shout for his sisters). 'Bring your machete [*panga*], Hamisi,' he cautioned me, quite seriously. 'I mean, there are *mumiani* . . . and they're in a froth [*wamechacha*].' I found the girls asleep on the floor of their uncle's house, but from that point on my family forbade me to walk the lonely mile to the main road at night to watch Premier League matches with the other young men of the village (although during Manchester United's lacklustre 2013 season, this was just as well, as far as I was concerned).

Unlike similar moral panics about disappearing children in Africa and elsewhere (Adams 1999; Ashforth 2014; Englund 2006; La Fontaine 1998; Scheper-Hughes 1992), in this case there was no clear precipitating incident, nor any public measures taken to address the situation. But the absence of a body and the lack of any action by authorities were not taken as evidence of *mumiani*'s absence, much less their non-existence. It was evidence that they had *not yet* struck (the only answer I ever received to the question of whether anyone from the area had been captured by *mumiani* since their return was '*bado*' – not yet). In this sense the 2013 *mumiani* scare was more an extended and diffuse 'affective atmosphere of terror' (Luna 2018) – but also of dark humour – than a clearly bounded and classically defined 'moral panic' (Cohen 2002 [1972]).

But three other seemingly unrelated events *did* coincide with the rapid spread of news about *mumiani*'s return. First, in early October, inspectors at Mombasa's Kilindini port discovered an uncanny cargo inside a shipping container alleged to have been imported by an unnamed politician (see below). Second, the *vuli* short rains appeared to have failed, threatening the agricultural livelihood of the majority of the local population. And finally, the Mombasa High Court had overturned the March 2013 parliamentary election results in Lunga Lunga and ordered a by-election. Campaigning began almost immediately. Posters of politicians' faces suddenly appeared on every available surface, campaign songs blared from mobile phones and radios, and caravans of SUVs bearing aspirants and their entourages canvassed the constituency.

And so, for two hot, dry months near the end of 2013, the roads of Lunga Lunga were in the grip of the powerful twin spectre of *mumiani* and politicians: the nights

belonged to *mumiani*, the days to politicians. In what follows, I argue that *mumiani* are an important part of what ‘politics’ (*siasa*) is understood to entail in southern coastal Kenya, especially during periods of heightened dependency on the redistributive capacities of patrons, such as drought. Their nocturnal predations are part of a local political understanding that I gloss as ‘politics by night’, rooted in a history of political and economic extraversion (Bayart 2009 [1989]). Before continuing to the details of that history, then, let me say a bit more about how I understand the region’s history of extraversion to be related to shadowy figures such as *mumiani*.

Extraversion and historical consciousness

A ‘key’ concept in the Africanist literature (Bayart 2009 [1989]; see also De Boeck 2015; Englund 2003; Hecht 2010; Lindsay 2014; Peiffer and Englebert 2012), ‘extraversion’ refers to processes by which individuals or institutions consolidate power locally through the cultivation of connections to more powerful outside entities. A Braudelian structure of the *longue durée*, it is also conceptually indebted to classic theories of African state formation as boundary- or frontier-oriented due to difficulties in effectively exploiting relatively weak internal forces of production (Goody 1971; Kopytoff 1987). It has the analytic advantage of insisting on what Jean-François Bayart calls the ‘historicity of African societies’ while avoiding the imposition of ‘external periodization’ (2009 [1989]: 5) – in other words, of recognizing continuities in Africa’s long-term historical engagement *with* ‘the West’ without locating the ‘determining dynamics’ (*ibid.*: 6) of that engagement *in* ‘the West’.

Bayart’s concept has most often been used to characterize the frequently unequal interfaces between African and European polities and political actors in a shared ‘historical situation’ and ‘social arena’ (2009 [1989]: 37). As I use it here, it is a scalar concept that can be applied to a range of relationships, from the interpersonal to the international, but my primary argument is not about its generalizability or scalability. I am interested instead in how a durable ‘matrix of action’ (*ibid.*: xxxiii) such as extraversion shapes political and historical consciousness. *Mumiani* are, I argue, one expression of that consciousness in figural, rather than temporal, form.

What I mean by this is that, in the *figure* of *mumiani*, history is manifest, but not as a continuous, linear sequence of events. As I have argued elsewhere (Dingley 2018), *mumiani* panics are examples of what Walter Benjamin called historical ‘constellations’ – moments in which discontinuous, fragmentary aspects of ‘what has been’ are articulated ‘in a flash’ with ‘the now’ to form a new ‘image’ (1999: 463). In such moments, ‘it is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past’ (*ibid.*: 463) – a temporal framing – but rather that certain fragments of complex histories and contemporary experience seem, like the stars that make up a constellation, to ‘shine brighter’ than others. Like the stars of the night sky there need not be any empirical link between them, but when seen from a specific place at a specific time, with the relevant cultural knowledge and enough imagination, they *seem* (hence historical *consciousness*) to be connected in a specific way – combining to form a meaningful *figure* (one that in this case, felicitously enough, only comes out at night). This is what it means to say that *mumiani* are a ‘constellation’ made up of rearticulated fragments of a history they express, and of which they are also a part.

Understanding *mumiani* in these terms thus avoids the charge of sociological reductionism levelled in recent years against the invisible – not to say spectral – college that Terence Ranger, in this journal, famously called the ‘occult economies consensus’ (2007). With characteristic wry wit, Adam Ashforth distils the critique in the following terms: ‘Please note: when people gather at a borehole in rural Malawi and talk of bloodsuckers, they are not, unbeknownst to themselves, engaging in a critique of neoliberalism’ (2014: 856). But to say that cultural phenomena are mediated by broader social transformations is not to say that they are ‘about’ something separate from them that is somehow more ‘real’. It is instead an analysis of (and argument about) the dialectical nature of the relationship between practices that, when viewed undialectically, seem to pertain to separate scales and domains of social life (Lukács 1971). It would be a mistake to interpret one as a mere mask, metaphor or ‘reflection’ of the other. But only if one separates out a complexly mediated social formation like an ‘occult economy’ into reified abstractions like ‘the occult’ and ‘the economy’ could they seem to be related in such ways at all. Empiricism, too, is the expression of a certain kind of historical consciousness.

To say that figures like *mumiani* are socially mediated is also to say that they are historically mediated – hence my emphasis on the *longue durée* in what follows. For Luise White, such ‘vampire figures’ are ‘new imaginings for new relationships’, but the details of stories told about them are ‘drawn from a store of historical allusions that have been kept alive and given new and renewed meanings by the gossip and arguments of diverse groups’ (2000: 22, 82). Reconciling these claims dialectically, we can say that, as ‘new imaginings for new relationships’, they are also new imaginings of old imaginings of relationships that were once new. Figures such as *mumiani* must be understood, in other words, in relation to the history of their forms of appearance⁴ – which are, again, an important part of the history of the societies in which they have appeared. Such figures are not ‘just’ metaphors for extractive inequality, nor something that literally ‘just is’ in a putative South Coast Kenyan ontology. They are part of, and, as ‘constellations’, figural expressions of, a history of speculation into the production and distribution of wealth in a political economy of extraversion that has included Arab suzerains, Indian financiers, European colonial administrators and Kenyan politicians over the last 200 years.

To show how this is so, let me begin by laying out both the history of extraversion and the transformations of *mumiani* (both term and referent) in the region since the nineteenth century. The reader may, at times, feel far removed from the paralyzing fear that kept Alfani standing in the doorway crying for his sisters (and which, if I am honest, I began to share as I set out to look for them, *panga* in hand). But it is the clearest way to show how specific transformations of the figure of *mumiani* express – rather than causally or unidirectionally ‘reflect’ – historical transformations in prevailing relations of extraversion. And it will allow the reader to see how, in the 2013 *mumiani* scare to which I return, multiple fragmentary forms of historical knowledge, anxiety and analysis were brought together suddenly in an historical constellation, which then vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

⁴ For an early attempt to do just this, but from a different theoretical standpoint, see Pels (1992).

Figures of extraversion: *mumiani* in historical perspective

The late precolonial period, c.1840s–1895

Nineteenth-century sources describe the peoples of Kenya's coastal hinterland as living in fortified and densely populated political and ritual centres (called *kayas*) along the ridges that separate the coast from the more arid interior, as well as in scattered homesteads in the coastal plains to the east (Krapf 1860: 111–14; Guillaing 1856: 244).⁵ In *kaya* settlements, senior male representatives of resident lineages held ritual and juridical authority as members of governing *ngambi*⁶ councils responsible for allocating land, adjudicating disputes and imposing fines for legal and ritual infractions (Spear 1978; Brantley 1978). In the dispersed hamlets of the plains, homestead heads established local councils and political rituals of their own, asserting their relative independence from *kaya*-based *ngambi* control (Willis and Miers 1997). And among the Digo-speaking peoples of what is now Lunga Lunga, a more centralized and hierarchical political formation – the chiefly office of the Kubo – is also attested (Le Roy 1893: 47), bearing a closer resemblance to the precolonial polities of the Shambaa peoples who neighbour the Digo to the south-west (in what is now north-eastern Tanzania) than to the other Mijikenda peoples (Feierman 1990).

Two features of a shared cultural grammar of authority across these political forms are worth highlighting. The first is the association of political authority with rain. Kubo controlled powerful rain magic given to him by either his sister or his mother. *Ngambi* councils were the custodians of proprietary rain magic and protective charms called *fungos*, and members were sometimes threatened or physically assaulted when they failed to secure adequate rainfall (Willis 1993: 45). And among the ritual forms developed by the councils of homestead heads during this period was the creation and burial of new *fungos* to protect their proliferating settlements (Willis and Miers 1997: 488). But while older *kaya fungos* contained powerful (but unspecified) substances said to have been brought from Singwaya – the claimed point of Mijikenda origin in what is now southern Somalia (Spear 1978) – *fungos* created during the nineteenth-century expansion are said (in oral histories collected during fieldwork) to have been created through the live burial of junior matrilineal kin.

The sacrifice of junior kin could take less literal forms as well, raising the second shared feature of precolonial Mijikenda political formations: the cultivation of relationships with powerful coastal patrons at the interface with a broader Indian Ocean economy as a key 'strategy of extraversion' (Bayart 2009 [1989]). Called '*matajiri*' (tellingly, a Kiswahili term meaning 'wealthy persons' derived from the Arabic word for 'merchant'), these patrons were stereotypically land-owning and money-lending 'outsiders' partially incorporated through marriage and rituals of blood brotherhood (*kurya tsoga*), and with whom members of hinterland communities established exclusive relations of credit, trade and marketing. A key example of the ambiguous exchanges mediating these relationships was the widespread practice of 'pawning' (*kuweka rahani*) children for food loans during famines or to settle debts in an expanding market economy. A series of devastating famines made such arrangements a regular feature of coastal life in the nineteenth century, over the course of which the

⁵ There is considerable debate among historians about the nature of coast–interior settlement and society before this period. For an overview, see Spear (1978), Willis (1993) and Helm (2004).

⁶ '*Kambi*' in northern Mijikenda dialects.

distinction between pawning and enslavement could become blurred. Slave raiding blended with the kidnapping of substitutes with whom pawned or enslaved kin could be redeemed, and the paths connecting fortified settlements became increasingly threatening spaces of abduction (Morton 1994; Willis 1993).

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, *matajiri*-mediated access to foreign capital became an increasingly important strategy for the consolidation of power by Mijikenda leaders in the hinterland, even as the growing commodification of such exchanges threatened to undermine the already fraught morality of arrangements such as pawning. And although the ultimate origins (in a global capitalist economy) of the new streams of wealth and power flowing in from the Indian Ocean were obscured by the 'gatekeeping' structures of extraversion (Cooper 2002), East Africans *did* develop a detailed understanding of the intermediary *matajiri* social types populating those gatekeeping arrangements:

East Africans saw plainly who benefitted from the control of commerce. Trading chiefs dominated the countryside in part because of their ties to the Shirazi merchants and Arab state elites who dominated the port towns, and behind the new Omani regime of the coast stood Indian financiers and European consuls. (Glassman 1995: 47)

Crucially, these figures were precisely those to whom was attributed the disturbing production of a new form of medicine: *mumiani* (Dingley 2018: 394–5).

Etymologically '*mumiani*' derives from *mum*, *amomum* or *mumia*, Arabic and Persian for 'wax', 'perfume' and 'mummy' (Pettigrew 1834). During the medieval and early modern periods, it was the name of a bituminous substance widely used in the Galenic and Paracelsian medical systems of both European and Indian Ocean societies, but in the course of widespread inter-translation of medical texts between Arabic, Persian, Latin and Greek, disagreement developed over the exact nature of the substance to which it referred (Dannenfeldt 1985). In the mid-nineteenth century, however, a new understanding developed in East Africa and the Western Indian Ocean that gradually displaced these older debates: '*mumia*' and its cognates now referred to a medicine made not from long-dead mummies but from the blood or melted fat of the young and vital abducted and killed for its creation (Dingley 2018: 384–5, fn. 17–24). Although production and consumption of the substance were said to be controlled by Arabs, Indians and (increasingly) Europeans (Pels 1992: 174), African bodily fluids were its raw material. This link between a quickening medicine made from the fat or blood of African youths severed from their kin, on the one hand, and members of the stereotypically *matajiri* segments of coastal society to whom they could be 'pawned', on the other, persisted until the early twentieth century, by which point pawning arrangements had been banned and a new, more powerful patron had established itself at the coast.

The colonial period, c.1895–1963

In 1895, the British government took over (as a protectorate) the Imperial British East Africa Company's lease of the so-called Ten-Mile Strip of Kenyan coastland from the Sultan of Zanzibar. Over time, a new administrative apparatus of 'local native

councils', 'chiefs' and 'headmen' supplanted the political forms described above, serving as the interface between the inhabitants of newly territorialized 'tribal reserves' and a new coastal patron – the Provincial Administration, in the guise of its district commissioners and officers. Backed by these new powerful outsiders, 'Native Authorities' were no longer accountable to their dependants in the same ways as before, and their authority was no longer supported by the command of rainmaking and protective ritual substances, which they lacked (Willis 1993: 133).⁷ But this patron, too, demanded its due from its 'protected' subjects, now in the form of taxes and communal labour in exchange for the security and famine relief rations it provided.

Native Authorities, for example, oversaw a large-scale labour conscription scheme in Digo District from 1944 to 1945 – the year of a major *mumiani* panic in the region (Dingley 2018).⁸ But by then *mumiani* imaginaries had shifted, expressing the tensions of this reconfigured relationship of extraversion. As Luise White (2000) has shown, stories about Europeans killing Africans for their blood – no longer the Arab and Indian patrons of the precolonial moment – were widespread throughout colonial East and Central Africa. But this stolen blood was no longer made into *mumia* medicine. Instead, it was sold to colonial hospitals for their own obscure uses, retaining its medical associations in a transformed way (Brennan 2008a: 96; White 2000: 105–12). The term '*mumiani*' itself, meanwhile, had come to refer to the African intermediaries who did the killing on behalf of their colonial employers (White 2000: 104, 232; Dingley 2018).

The 1944–45 *mumiani* panic also coincided with the failure of the rains and the provision of government 'famine relief' rations in exchange for conscript labour. From the administration's perspective, this was a bureaucratic and technical exercise. But from the perspective of the matrilineal Digo and Duruma peoples of the southern Kenyan coast, fathers and mothers' brothers were being pitted against each other over their 'right' to pawn their sons or sisters' sons to a wealthy patron in exchange for food in time of need, as they had done in the past (Dingley 2018: 391–3). And as in the precolonial period, these patrons were understood to organize the conversion of kin into valuable substances for their own consumption on the one hand, and desperately needed life-sustaining food on the other (*ibid.*: 392–5).⁹

During the period of decolonization, finally, debate over the legal status of the Ten-Mile Strip and its increasingly rigidly defined ethnic, racial and religious constituencies reconfigured hierarchies of authority and the norms, obligations and entitlements they entailed. Recent scholarship on this moment emphasizes the processes by which various forms of 'nativist territoriality' (Prestholt 2014) became plausible bases of political claims making (Brennan 2008b; Willis and Gona 2012), but I wish to highlight a different aspect of this process as a continuation of older strategies. The flipside of delineating units on the basis of which claims to sovereignty are articulated is the creation and management of a new interface with outside entities. Extraversion is thus not a simple looking outward; it is also a struggle over the nature of the

⁷ Rainmaking and ritual knowledge remained important aspects of political claims making in coastal Kenya in complex and changing ways, however. See the references cited in note 15 below.

⁸ Digo District became Kwale District in 1948, then Kwale County under Kenya's 2010 constitution. Lunga Lunga is Kwale County's southernmost constituency.

⁹ See interviews 68a and 73a by Justin Willis in the Oral History Archive at the British Institute in Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya.

political units involved in such relationships and the identities of those who manage them. The recreation of such simultaneously articulating and differentiating thresholds through which individuals or groups consolidate power internally has characterized coastal Kenyan politics in one form or another since at least the nineteenth century, and continues to do so up to the present.

The postcolonial period, 1963 to the present

The regionalist ferment of decolonization was quickly reabsorbed into the independent Kenyan state through mechanisms of political patronage whose coordinates it only reconfigured. President Jomo Kenyatta skilfully secured the allegiance of regional and ethnic ‘brokers’ (such as Ronald Ngala on the coast) through offers of cabinet posts and other emoluments in exchange for joining his ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) (Berman *et al.* 2009: 471). Kenya soon became a one-party state with Kenyatta at the apex of its distributional networks as the ‘gate-keeper’ (Cooper 2002) to its comparatively high Cold War levels of international aid.

Extraversion remained a viable strategy for Kenyan politicians to the end of the Cold War, which again only led to a renegotiation of terms (Branch 2011). In 1992, under pressure from the foreign donors on whom his own patronage capacities depended, President Daniel arap Moi introduced multi-party elections and implemented structural adjustment reforms. Under these conditions, ‘a new moral ambivalence pervaded patron–client transactions now understood to be evil simulations of morally valorized relations of exchange’ (Blunt 2004: 295). In particular, KANU’s distribution of ‘more than a billion shillings in the form of gifts, donations, and beer’ during the 1992 election campaign stoked popular fears of ‘devil worship’ and other occult practices by elites (Smith 2012: 63). To fund this campaign of spectacular largesse, Moi’s government printed a still unknown quantity of ‘official counterfeit’ banknotes, increasing the money supply in Kenya by 40 per cent in the last quarter of 1992 alone. As one of James Smith’s informants put it: ‘It was just too much money, and it was everywhere. We knew that Moi had to be getting that money through some kind of sacrifice’ (*ibid.*: 63).

That the state and its representatives seemed to be sinister deceivers was not new. In early twentieth-century *mumiani* imaginaries, colonial administrators who toured the districts by day also organized the exsanguination of Africans by night. But the proliferation during the 1990s of what Robert Blunt calls ‘fake fetishes’ – counterfeits of ‘already fetishized symbols of state power’ – meant that not only was the state not what it seemed, but what seemed to be signs of the state may themselves have been artefacts of a second-order deception (2004: 316–17). Reforms in the name of ‘transparency’ generated a gnawing sense of its opposite: an occult economy in which narratives of satanic and occult ritual – including elaborate descriptions of human sacrifice and the consumption of body parts and substances – expressed a shared sense of social breakdown while holding out the possibility of eventual deliverance (Blunt 2004; Smith 2012).¹⁰

¹⁰ Clearly, *mumiani* are not the only malevolent ‘occult’ agents capable of provoking public anxiety. For Mijikenda concerns about *atsai* (‘witches’), see Brantley (1979) and Ciekawy (1992). On *majini*, see Ciekawy (2015), McIntosh (2009a) and J. H. Smith (2001).

The 1990s were also the moment to which many South Coast Kenyans date the transformation of *mumiani*'s nocturnal activity from draining blood to stealing body parts. The local explanation for this move is striking in its market logic. According to informants, it became impossible, with the rise of HIV, for *mumiani* and their buyers to know whose blood was 'safe' and whose was not. As a result, the market for blood dried up (as it were) and *mumiani* diversified to meet a growing demand for body parts in the rapidly expanding 'occult economy' of the structural adjustment era (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999).¹¹

No one with whom I spoke was willing to speculate about the uses to which these body parts were put. '*Wanjua wenyewe*,' I was repeatedly told – '[Only] they themselves know.' The most that could be said was that they were bound for a market in 'traditional' medicine and witchcraft substances, rather than a 'global traffic in human organs' (Scheper-Hughes 2000). *Mumiani* do not use the body parts themselves, and as middlemen their work is believed to be facilitated by politicians: they operate, as they did during the colonial period, with the full knowledge of the government (*serikali*), if not directly under contract to it. I return to the link between *mumiani* and politicians below, but note that even as the physical substances and people in power change, '*mumiani*' retains these long-term associations with medicine and power in new guises, under new conditions.

It is important to see that in this common local explanation, *mumiani*'s move from blood to body parts was due to a sense that they could not know, to use a local idiom, 'what someone has inside them' based on outward appearances. Anxiety over the trustworthiness of appearances (of bodies, currency, etc.) in 1990s Kenya drove *mumiani* into a trade in human body parts that was itself undergoing a dramatic expansion facilitated by the connections of political patrons. *Mumiani* activity is moulded, in other words, by concerns they share with fellow Kenyans about hidden depths, visible surfaces, and the ability to know the former through the latter. Importantly, even those (like *mumiani*) who participate in the occult economy of the neoliberal era – who manage to tap into obscure sources of wealth through the mediation of political patrons – are subject to the same uncertainties as those who find themselves excluded from it.

So note how the form of this suspicion is structured by the historical forms of political and economic extraversion that I have just summarized. In such arrangements, actors consolidate power locally by mobilizing resources secured through a connection to more powerful outside forces. A more powerful *someone* or *something* stands behind such intermediary figures, but its identity is obscured by the 'gatekeeping' patron managing the interface itself (Cooper 2002). As a political and economic strategy, then, extraversion invites speculation about the sources of wealth and power standing behind the gatekeepers with whom one actually engages. And, as I have briefly shown in the coastal Kenyan case, imaginaries of those hidden sources are mediated by the contemporary forms of relations between patrons and clients, by the stereotypical identities of those inhabiting these positions, and by older

¹¹ Although the phrase 'occult economy' was coined by Jean and John Comaroff (1999), I stress that my Kenyan interlocutors themselves remember the 1990s as the decade in which the trade in 'occult' paraphernalia took off, and that *mumiani*'s market logic is *their* 'rational-choice theory', not mine.

imaginaries of those relationships and identities. With all of this in mind, then, let me return to the *mumiani* scare of 2013 and the wider context in which it unfolded.

'Bizarre cargo': extraction and extraversion

On 10 October 2013, a shipping container from China was opened for inspection at the port in Mombasa. Although labelled 'Normal Household Goods', the container's contents were decidedly 'unheimlich'. As the *Daily Nation*, Kenya's largest newspaper, reported:

An unusual and bizarre cargo was opened at the port of Mombasa Thursday. The cargo . . . comprised plastic human skeletons, skulls, limbs, palms, huge black spiders, tombstones, corpses, mummies and bats. A senior Kenya Revenue Authority official said the grotesque items had been imported from China by 'a very famous' Kenyan politician . . . [S]ome superstitious people at the port claimed the items are used in the occult . . . The plastic limbs, some dismembered at the knee or elbow, have red paint to represent oozing blood and raw flesh. (Nyassy 2013)

It was later revealed that the items had not been imported by a 'very famous' politician at all, but by the owners of Village Market (a high-end shopping mall in Nairobi's posh Gigiri neighbourhood) for their annual Halloween party – but not before at least one politician felt the need to hold a press conference to clear his name.

I happened to be watching the evening news at a tea shop in the coastal town of Shimoni when reports of the incident were first broadcast. As it was explained to me in the animated discussion that followed, this politician – whoever he was – had been caught importing 'vifaa vya madevoli' ('devil worship paraphernalia') with which to sacrifice others to increase their own wealth and power.¹² My interlocutors also compared the report to news stories about shipments of drugs or ivory occasionally also intercepted at the port. Coast politicians are widely rumoured to be major importers of heroin into the country, and to facilitate the smuggling of ivory tusks out of the country, primarily to China. In the South Coast moral imagination, in other words, the movement of illicit, socially destructive materials in and out of the country is an important technique of extraversion by which politicians accumulate the wealth needed to fund the political campaigns and displays of patrimonial largesse that keep them in power. Their 'devil worship paraphernalia' was just another example of this, and to the handful of older men watching the nightly news at the All Weather Cafe, hardly surprising. 'Do they need devil worship to win?' I asked. 'Can they not ask Uhuru and Raila [the president and his main rival] for "support"?' An old man at the next table clicked his tongue in disgust: 'Aa! *Madevoli wa mwisho, wale!*' – 'Ah! The ultimate devil worshippers, those two!'

The incident at the port was immediately 'nationalized' through intense news coverage, but was quickly re-localized in almost inverted form. Within days of the initial

¹² In contemporary discourse on satanism in South Coast Kenya, 'devoli' ('devil', but also 'devil worshipper') seems partly to have replaced the Arabic-derived 'shetani', the latter retaining its wider associations with regional spirit possession cults unrelated to 'devil worship'.

reporting, excited acquaintances began telling me that another politician's container had been discovered in Mombasa filled with 'heads' bound for China. I assumed at first that they were talking about a shipment of illegal ivory – 'vichwa' (heads) is smuggler argot for elephant tusks, and the coffee stand near the highway where the story was being told is an important hub for news about such economic opportunities (I had already been offered heroin and 'uranium' among other startling goods and services over the preceding months). But I was quickly corrected: these were human, Kenyan heads. I asked the speaker – Juma, a young mechanic who had recently repaired my motorcycle's fuel filter with a piece of foam mattress – if he were sure it was not a shipping container full of *plastic heads from China*? He was. This was a second container, full of real human heads collected by *mumiani* and organized by 'the government' to fill an order from 'the Chinese'.¹³ I must have looked unconvinced, because his co-worker chimed in: 'They even announced it on the radio.'

Initially taken up through a news-mediated national preoccupation with the involvement of politicians in devil worship (and its own occult instrumentalization of body parts and substances (Blunt 2004; Smith 2012)), the story of the shipping container was quickly recalibrated and began to circulate alongside itself as two separate incidents. Through its retelling, the discovery at the port was transformed to express more faithfully a South Coast social truth: that the 'development' and gifts of cash that constituencies seek from politicians can come at a steep price, as the fruits of an amoral patron's successful execution – with the help of *mumiani* – of a strategy of extraversion that demands, from their clients, a sacrifice.

Funds and rain: patronage in South Coast, Kenya

As noted above, politicians were very much in the public eye in Lunga Lunga at the time of the shipping container incident. Two weeks earlier, the Mombasa High Court had nullified Khatib Mwashetani's March 2013 election as member of parliament for Lunga Lunga constituency, finding that his gifts of 'money for school fees, supply of school desks, supply of water tanks, supply of iron sheets, cash to churches, supply of *sufurias* [aluminium cooking pots], sinking of wells and building of toilets' amounted to 'improper influence' contrary to the language of the Kenyan constitution.¹⁴ The court also ordered a by-election, scheduled for 2 December. And although formal campaigning did not begin until November, October (the month when the container incident transpired) was characterized by eager anticipation of, and speculation about, the redistributive capacities of the candidates.

Political campaigns are moments of excitement in rural Kenya, when politicians and their entourages ply the roads in large vehicles to engage in competitive displays of wealth, rhetoric and other signs of suitability as patrons. Campaigns also temporarily employ large numbers of people – especially young men – to organize village rallies, put up campaign posters, distribute hats and T-shirts, circulate campaign songs by mobile phone, and so forth. It is also often the responsibility of these young

¹³ On the 'proliferating social meanings' of 'China' and 'the Chinese' in contemporary Kenyan discourse expressing 'everyday anxieties' about local governance, see Kimari (2021).

¹⁴ 'Gideon Mwangangi Wambua & Another v. Independent Electoral & Boundaries Commission & Two Others', Election Petitions Nos. 4 and 9 of 2013 (Consolidated).

men to hand out gifts of cash on their employer's behalf. For a brief moment these figures go from being regarded with some concern by older generations as unemployed 'idlers' to being highly mobile, highly visible minor 'big men' (*wakubwa*) in their own right – all by virtue of their connection, again, to a more powerful patron who draws their own power from elsewhere.

But the November campaigns also took place during a drought, and under these conditions candidates' largesse was even more eagerly anticipated than it might otherwise have been. By the time campaigning finally began, modest personal finances were even more jealously guarded than usual, and village networks of food sharing had begun to contract towards their household hubs as the sun seemed to grow hotter with each passing day. In this regard, it is important to note that, in South Coast vernacular hydrology, the absence of rain when it should be falling is not just experienced as the lack of what should be there – coolness and moisture – but as the intensification of what should not – dryness and heat – beyond what is normal during the already oppressively hot dry season. Recall what Alfani's mother told me about the end of the year: 'There is *drought!* The sun is hot. There is no money.' The intense sun of a drought thins the blood and accelerates its circulation, she went on to say, rendering people simultaneously feeble and anxious, and these effects are part of why *mumiani* attack when and where they do: when 'the sun is hot', blood is thinner and thus easier for *mumiani* to drain from already weakened victims. Note that this was her explanation despite the fact that *mumiani* are, in other contexts, said to be no longer interested in blood, giving a sense of the unevenness with which the elements of such historical constellations change over time. *Mumiani* (and figures like them) have complex histories whose traces persist unevenly in the present. As E. E. Evans-Pritchard demonstrated of the Zande poison oracle, they do not amount to an 'indivisible concept' (1937: 319). Rather, their multiple facets emerge differentially in relation to specific contexts and cues.

Returning to Mama Alfani's explanation, when 'the sun is hot' and 'there is no money', people are also more likely to take desperate measures to make ends meet – including collaboration with *mumiani*. In the nineteenth century, recall, such famine survival strategies included the abduction, pawning and sale of children to coastal *matajiri* – the figures who made *mumia* medicine out of African blood – in exchange for loans of grain or cash (Morton 1994; Willis 1993). In the early twentieth century they included striking deals with *mumiani* working for colonial officials – who were themselves busy conscripting labourers in exchange for food rations (Dingley 2018).

Famine survival strategies have long been structured, in other words, by contemporary relationships of patronage and extraversion, prevailing market imaginaries, and the increased vulnerability of dependent populations under conditions of economic hardship and ecological disruption. And throughout the periods in question, children have consistently been regarded as the most vulnerable segment of the population under such conditions. Just as they were liable to abduction by strangers or pawning by kin in the past, so too are they at increased risk of capture by *mumiani* in the present. As one middle-aged man with a long history of involvement in shadier aspects of the local informal economy – but employed at the time by a politician's election campaign – explained, chronically unemployed young men may be susceptible, under difficult circumstances, to make a deal with *mumiani* to lure children into their vehicles (by telling them that their parents or the police have sent for them, in

his example). 'If a child disappeared,' he explained, 'young men like these' – gesturing to a small group, each of whom he knew well, decked out in campaign T-shirts and chewing *miraa* (khat) near the village kiosk – 'would be the first to be lynched.' Those employed by politicians to organize village rallies and distribute gifts of cash, in other words, were also thought liable (in this man's estimation of broader public sentiment) to collaborate with *mumiani* in the evil deeds that secretly funded their employers' campaigns. Just as *mumiani* moved from blood to body parts because of a sense they shared with other Kenyans that one never knows what someone 'has inside them', in this instance a man who himself worked behind the scenes of a political campaign shared the popular suspicion that such a job might also involve working with *mumiani*.

Recall, finally, that rain has deep historical associations with politics and power on the coast, both as an idiom for patronage and as a form that that patronage could take. In the precolonial and early colonial periods, *ngambi* councils and the Kubo were responsible for ritually provisioning their dependants with adequate rain.¹⁵ *Ngambi* members could be physically attacked for blocking the rain (Willis 1993: 45), and a genealogy collected during the First World War indicates that one nineteenth-century Kubo 'was almost at once deposed because he was supposed to have stopped the rains and caused a famine'.¹⁶ Failure of the rain was a political failure, too, potentially necessitating a change in leadership. I do not claim that this is how the failure of the 2013 short rains was interpreted, but it was available as a rhetorical trope – at times to comedic effect. During a jocular public disagreement over a game of draughts in the local marketplace, for example, a cane cutter from the nearby sugar plantation loudly teased his opponent for backing Mwashetani a second time. 'Don't make your same mistake this time around,' he said, referring to his opponent's political preferences, not his gameplay. 'Look at how the fields have dried up!' I turned to another spectator to clarify. 'The fields?' I asked. 'It's true,' he said with a chuckle. 'Here in Pongwe we have no leadership.'

Failed rains could, however, also present wealthy patrons with opportunities to expand their followings. In oral histories I collected, for instance, Kubo was said to have taken slaves and wives from the homesteads within his domain in exchange for protection and food during lean periods. Among the neighbouring Shambaa, Steven Feierman encountered the claim that 'a particular chief held back the rains, creating famine, so that peasants ... would join the chief's personal dependents' (1990: 54). Famine could thus enable powerful patrons to swell the ranks of their dependants through pawning arrangements, or precipitate the ousting of those unable to extend loans of food or money widely enough.

These contests among patrons and clients over the provision of rain and food took on new layers of meaning during the colonial period. During the 1944–45 labour conscription campaign mentioned above, government 'famine relief' rations during a drought were locally understood through the lens of older patron-client ties of 'pawnsip' (Dingley 2018). *Mumiani* also returned during this period to prey on a

¹⁵ For accounts of the colonial and postcolonial fates of 'kaya elders' in their capacity as rainmakers which support an analysis in terms of extraversion and suspicion, though framed in different terms, see Parkin (1991), McIntosh (2009b), Mitsanze and Giles (2014), Ciekawy (2014) and Bresnahan (2018).

¹⁶ Kenya National Archives, KWL/1/3/5 Political Record Book, G. H. Osborne, 'Notes on the Wadigo of Vanga District', n.d.

vulnerable population obliged to a new colonial patron for whom they were again being made to work for food. And, in 2013, as the fields dried up and the opportunity for a change in 'leadership' emerged, so too did *mumiani*, in the employ of patrons – now parliamentary aspirants – who were once again putting the young men of the district to work and distributing cash, maize flour and rice to their families in a moment of apparent drought.

Conclusion

As the drought wore on and the campaigns gathered momentum, so too did rumours of *mumiani* activity. But on 27 November the High Court's nullification of the original election results was itself overturned, and Khatib Mwashetani was reinstated as MP for Lunga Lunga. The by-election – then only days away – was cancelled. The short rains arrived (months late, but in sufficient quantity to stave off serious drought), and *mumiani*, in the midst of all this, seemed to disappear. By mid-December it was as if the whole thing never happened, leaving neither documentary trace nor, when I returned to Lunga Lunga in 2017 after two years away, any local memory of late 2013 as a period of heightened *mumiani* activity. And yet it had been.

I have used Walter Benjamin's concept of historical 'constellation' to describe such ephemeral historical formations. Unpacking the significance of this specific constellation necessitated an historical presentation that disaggregated the elements into a temporal sequence, but only to show how that sequence is fragmented and collapsed in the figure of *mumiani* prowling the roads of Lunga Lunga in late 2013. That figure is also a reimagination of past such figures (Shaw 2002). Assembled out of fragmented elements of the past and present, they represent, in figural form, the pasts and presents out of which they are constructed: to the extent that *mumiani* are believed to work for or with politicians, stories told about them are part of a broader critical discourse on the nature of political power mediated by the historical experience of patronage and extraversion. But *mumiani* also condense, reimagine and express those concerns in a bodily language of depletion, dismemberment and death. They are *part of* a critical discourse about those who mediate, restrict and redirect flows of value between home and away, and they are, at the same time, a *figural expression of* that discourse – a constellation.

At one level, the image of *mumiani* prowling the roads at night is the negative image of the campaigning politician. Unlike the politician's dawn-to-dusk speeding between settlements in search of crowds for the noisy, public distribution of cash, *mumiani* operate at night, avoiding densely settled areas and creeping slowly along the roads that connect them in search of solitary victims for the silent extraction of value. Like well-known descriptions of the invisible night worlds of witches, these stories present an inverted vision of the normative order as the hidden truth of that order (Geschiere 1997; Shaw 2002; West 2005; Smith 2008). But *mumiani* are part of a local theory about the hidden sources of wealth and power in *this* world, not an invisible other world. They are not said to *be* politicians, but rather to work *for* them – in secret, and at night. Rather than an 'occult theory of politics' – of how the rise and fall of political fortunes are tied to the possession and control of powerful occult media – *mumiani* stories are, in a sense, part of a 'political theory of the occult' – of how the political and economic extraversion of communities, politicians and unknown outsiders structures the production, distribution and consumption of occult goods.

Regarded with horror and fascination as something deeply strange and frightening, *mumiani* are, at the same time, an integral part of the political landscape and *only* make sense within it. There is no separating their nocturnal predations in the present from the largesse of campaigning politicians by day; they are each other's reciprocal ground. This is what it means to call *mumiani* 'politics by night'. Election campaigns and droughts are moments when politicians – the archetypal patrons of postcolonial Kenya – find themselves hard-pressed for financial assistance by their constituencies, and *mumiani* are a key source – among a range of possible others, including drug trafficking and ivory smuggling – of the 'fast wealth' (D. J. Smith 2001) they need to be able to mobilize in such situations. Politicians, meanwhile, provide *mumiani* with victims from their constituency and buyers for their body parts through connections they cultivate in the execution of strategies of extraversion (in the case of the shipping container, with 'the Chinese'). *Mumiani* are the dark half of a relationship of power on which rural South Coast Kenyans have historically found themselves especially dependent during periods of heightened vulnerability such as drought. The 2013 *mumiani* scare is only intelligible, I argue, in relation to the history of that relationship.

Adam Ashforth has recently argued that when rural Malawians share such vampire stories they are not 'commenting on their marginalization within the global order or reflecting on the ironies of dependence on the largesse of outsiders'; rather, they are 'sharing the dangers, doubts and fears that beset their lives' – and should, therefore, 'be taken seriously' (2014: 856–7). My point is that to do so – to take seriously Alfani's fear, his mother's explanation for the timing of attacks, and their neighbour's concerns about the young men working for a campaigning politician – means analysing the history of the form and content of these dangers, doubts and fears. In this case, it is a history of extraversion in which South Coast Kenya's 'marginalization within the global order' has been inextricably bound up for centuries with the dependence of its inhabitants on the 'largesse' of a rotating cast of 'outsiders'. When Juma the mechanic told me about the shipping container full of heads collected by *mumiani* at the behest of 'the government' to fill an order from its Chinese creditors, he was not speaking allegorically. But neither are his fears separable from the global order on which he was reflecting, and to which he – and we, and they – all belong.

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