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Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Predissertation Fellowship: Final Report

I traveled to Kenya from June-August 2012 with the support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Fellowship to spend 10 weeks conduct preliminary research for my dissertation. My dissertation project examines the history of the Kenya coast and its immediate hinterlands from 1000 to 1850, with a particular focus on the ancient concepts that undergirded notions of community in the Mombasa region. My project challenge conventional, deeply rooted perceptions of coastal East Africa as an urban, Islamic, and Swahili space by focusing on communities in the hinterland regions immediately outside of Mombasa. Communities in the coastal hinterlands and interior of East Africa were crucial contributors to the politics and trade of the western Indian Ocean world. Nonetheless, they have been obscured from the regional history of the Kenya coast and more broadly, the western Indian Ocean world.

The first stop for my preliminary research was Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, where I conducted archival research in the Kenya National Archives and the library of the British Institute in Eastern Africa. In these archives I located a number of reports from archaeological excavations conducted in the Kenya coast in addition to rare documentary and ethnographic sources from the nineteenth century and earlier. Following a week and a half of archival research in Nairobi I traveled to Mombasa which served as a home base for the remainder of my research trip. Once I arrived in the coast I was able to quickly establish research affiliations with Pwani University and with the Research Institute of Swahili Studies in Eastern Africa which is a subsidiary of the National Museums of Kenya. By establishing these affiliations, I was able to apply for research clearance from the Kenyan government which I obtained until 2015. This will take me through the duration of my dissertation research.

While staying in Mombasa I had three primary aims. First, I planned to examine a number of archival and library collections including the Coast Province Archives, the Mombasa Wakf Commission, and the Fort Jesus Museum Library. Second, I wanted to develop my network of contacts in communities throughout the coast and identify informants for when I return to conduct primary fieldwork. Finally, I hoped to collect word lists to use for developing a preliminary classification of the languages spoken in the region. I located the richest body of documentary evidence at the Fort Jesus Museum Library where I spent considerable time scouring occasional papers and manuscripts collection. I found an abundance of unpublished material that will be invaluable for my project. This included word lists, archaeological site reports, interview tapes and transcripts, maps, ethnographic reports, and rare historical documents and journals.

With the assistance of my research affiliates I identified a number of individuals willing to help with my research either as interview informants or facilitating introductions to potential informants in their own communities. As my network of local contacts expanded I began to

focus on the preliminary word lists. Word histories from the linguistic groups living in the hinterlands regions of the Kenya coast will be my primary evidence for my dissertation. Since there are very few dictionaries or texts in non-Swahili languages spoken in the Kenyan coast, I will word lists of basic and cultural vocabularies in order to build an archive of linguistic data for this project. In my research I will use word histories to make historical arguments about interactions between linguistic groups and the development of new practices, beliefs, and institutions. For example, attestations of the term used for “healer” in each speech community can tell me about the development and dynamics of healing practices in different linguistic groups.

While based in Mombasa I made several trips between one and four days in length to communities up and down the Kenya coast to collect basic word lists and short preliminary lists of cultural vocabulary. I also used these interviews to ask historical questions and explore discursive spaces within the oral historical record, laying the groundwork for future interviewing. I was able to collect 20 preliminary wordlists of basic vocabulary from eleven different speech communities in the Kenya coast. This was important for two reasons. First, I now have valuable contacts in the majority of the linguistic communities that I will with during my primary research. In addition, the preliminary basic word lists have allowed me to begin developing preliminary classifications for these linguistic groups. The classifications will be invaluable to my continuing research when I return to the field next year. The final leg of my trip involved a return to Nairobi in early August to make a final examination of the national archives and to visit the library of Bible Literacy and Translation of East Africa. In the BLT library I located a number of dictionaries, vernacular language texts, and sociolinguistic reports which I will be able to more fully explore when I return for my primary fieldwork.

Overall this was an extremely productive research trip which would not have been possible without the generous support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Fellowship. This preliminary research trip was crucial to my project in that it helped me access the feasibility of collecting linguistic, ethnographic, and oral data from a number of different speech communities and develop a research plan for when I return for my primary fieldwork. I was also able develop contacts with a number of grassroots cultural organizations and intellectuals with an interest in language preservation. I plan to continue working with these groups to make the linguistic data generated in my research available for the production of vernacular language dictionaries, texts, poetry, and music since fewer and fewer members of younger generations are speaking these languages.