

Augmented Authority: How ‘Simplifying’ Medicine Hurt Sukuma Elderhood

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Abstract

The paper describes changed elderhood in Sukuma-speaking villages in Tanzania through a combined situational and cultural analysis, starting with the traditional role of (re)generation and medicine in practices of greeting. Elderhood, I argue, has changed obliquely because of its interrelationship with medicine, whose union of recipe and rite was severed under globalizing pressures for ‘simplification’. By this we understand a process that simplifies a cultural practice, renders it predictable, through complicated substitution. Ethnographic synthesis demonstrates that the *kul* strand of natural growth and the *kum* strand of healing/regeneration are sources of production. Elders derive authority from the first source and augment it with the second. The latter’s medicinal claim to power antagonized the colonial administration in the 1930s and, for different reasons, also irritated the postcolonial state (with the exception of Magufuli’s presidency). The ‘simplification’ of medicine in the name of development has been aided by the demise of chieftaincy as well as by a national cultural divide and by dismissive attitudes to the institution of healing. Elderhood has indirectly paid the price.

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Tanzanian society has seen the authority of elders weakening, including in the Sukuma-speaking rural area, where cultural influences from the European colonizer, from the post-colonial state, and from other modernizing forces have been limited. The reason for this collapse of gerontocracy, which has been a mainstay of intergenerational discourse, seems not to be anything the younger generation did or decided. That would be the case, for instance, if adolescents defended the ‘modern’ orientation towards individual achievement as a determiner of social status, at the expense of ascription, which would be the ‘traditional’ value benefiting the elders (for a critique of the trope, see Geschiere 2020, 337). There are no indications of such a pervasive change of belief as in European or American secularization (see Verschraegen 2011). Nor do we have evidence of a more direct type of cultural influence, like the adoption of youthfulness or of monetary capital as positive values from western popular culture. Hence, an indirect cause may be at play in the weakening of elders’ authority. The central objective of this research paper is to find it. By an indirect cause at societal level I am thinking of the structuralist principle that institutions (established practices) are inter-related so that a change in one institution will affect the interrelated ones because of the logic that connects their symbols (Leach 1976). These oblique influences are manifold and probably common, although understudied.

The data presented here indicate that (traditional) medicine used to augment the elder’s authority and today no longer does. Elderhood thus changed because of an indirect cause. Initiatory, (re)generative, and medicinal knowledge lost importance through government intervention, as well as following the demise of chieftaincy, which had a largely medicinal type of rule. This research combines a cultural analysis, delving into the logic of local beliefs about age and authority, with a social analysis, describing actual habits and practices from the Sukuma nomos.

To learn about elderhood in a society, ways of greeting can be telling. We start with a quiz: How could a married woman, whom I had never met before, reverently approach me, an unmarried adolescent younger than her, kneel, and expect me to treat her as a grandchild?

A mysterious case of greeting

It was the summer of 1996. I found myself in the rural north of Tanzania in a village speaking KiSukuma. One late morning, as I entered the compound of the female healer Sele, a woman named Nkwimba left one of the dozen patient huts to greet me. She knelt and named the clan of Sele the healer, knowing that I had been adopted there and was classified as equal to my friend, the healer’s older brother.

To be exact, my friend was not Sele’s brother, but a cousin who was classified as an older brother because he was the son of the paternal uncle (brother of Sele’s father), born earlier than her father (who was a famous healer himself). Every morning, as is customary, Sele greeted my friend and me while kneeling (rather to my discomfort: I was happy enough to be accepted in this bustling setting to do research). She named our clan and we responded with “Of grandfather” (*ng’wa guku*), by which we indicated that we and Sele are of the same family. Moreover, the reference to a common ‘grandfather’ designated us as being of Sele’s generation since an individual’s family representative is always the grandfather. So, with those words, I addressed Nkwimba, hoping to relieve her from her kneeling position under the burning sun. Unfortunately, she refused, and waited patiently for the right reply. Due to my cultural background, which considers illness and healing as peripheral to social life, I had overlooked a key element.

Near us in the open space of the courtyard, patients and visitors had taken shelter in the shade under the large tree. I saw they were curious as to how I would respond. It seemed

they knew the right answer, and I was terribly slow at figuring things out. Then I remembered that patients come ‘to be born’ (*kubyalwa*) at a healer’s place. The healer becomes a parent with the lifelong duty of giving the patient the treatment (*bugota* ‘medicine’) whenever the illness returns. Healing creates a difference in generation.

Now I thought I could safely assume that she was a patient of my sister, which meant that her grandfather was my father, so I said “of father”. Laughter ensued. Nkwimba was in fact the daughter of the patient that Sele cured. That caused her to descend one more generation in relation to me. I was her grandfather and deserved that respectful address, even if I was younger than her. I had to call her “of me.”

Moreover, a joking relationship exists between grandfathers and grandchildren. That is why she felt the playful atmosphere, compelling me to guess, was appropriate. Culture frames a situation. Feelings correspond.

To solve puzzles of culture, an anthropologist can operate in three steps, as I will in this paper. Having described this vignette, a case collected during participant observation, I will undertake a cultural analysis and a social (situational) analysis to understand the principles of the greeting institution and its application in practice. Together, these analyses reveal not only what people customarily do but also how they frame the practice, in contextually and interpersonally varying ways. The kneeling in the case suggests a cultural principle of status difference, which is relevant to our study of age and authority, the latter being defined in Weberian fashion as ‘socially recognized power’ (see legitimate authority, Weber 1978 [1921]). Whether the norm translates into an actual difference of authority depends on the situation, and whether people socially recognize this person. Their frames of perspective may vary. This is what the social analysis reveals.

The third step offers a synthesis which probes into reasons for stopping or continuing

the institution which associates healing with seniority. Changes in interdependent institutions may be one reason. If the interdependence is strong, ‘sources of production’ might be at play, which are put at risk by disappearance of the institution. Sources of production comprise ‘the commons’, the elements of nature, the species, ecosystems, and the matter we draw on to produce anything and to keep ourselves alive (Meillassoux 1972). Sources also include affects and desires that energize members of the species and motivate them to produce things together, like knowledge and intimacy, or food. What keeps people greeting each other every morning, honouring age and kinship, is a source of production. According to the structuralism of a certain logic connecting symbols, the sense of greetings contributing to life may dwindle when once-related practices such as medicine are symbolically transformed. The transformation whereby medicine acquires a merely mechanical quality of cure and loses its life-sustaining dimension I will denote as ‘simplication’, which the second half of the article illustrates. A simplication is a special type of complication (under colonization and globalization) whereby a cultural influence is simplified and quite cleverly reduced to one-layered (simplex) causation.

Cultural analysis of greeting logic: (re)generative status

After describing the events, which require participant observation and mastery of the local idiom, we must derive the principles of the practice. A cultural analysis reconstructs the ‘nomos’, a historically determined set of laws governing behaviour (Stroeken 2022). The goal of the cultural analysis is to know the ‘logos’, that is the logic by which individuals apply the customary laws and can adapt them. By inventing new practices that obey this logic, people legitimately transform the nomos. They do this unconsciously; it just feels right according to their inculcated logic of practice, or what

Bourdieu (1980) called ‘habitus’. Discerning such logics is no easy task. Where to start in the case of Sukuma greetings? Contrasting the Sukuma case with a known *nomos*, like that of Swahili greetings, can help.

One of the first things the student of a language learns is to greet correctly. (Ki-) Swahili, the common second language in east Africa, is particular in that a specific greeting is expected when addressing an older person. The younger greeter pays respect by saying *shikamoo* to the older, who replies *marahaba*. The age difference between the two should be large enough for this form of greeting to be used, preferably a generation. The estimation of age is done at a glance. In Swahili, it is not just age that should be taken into account though. Established authority and social status, coming with a title of honour, call for the respectful address as well.

In the grey zone when an established authority meets an elder person in public, the former will usually oblige the elder so as to gain credit from onlookers. Strictly speaking, according to the norms of urban Swahili speakers, the honoured guest or minister could go for exacting humility despite being of younger age. However, it is probable that the person will think this a petty objective in comparison with the approval received by paying respect to the traditional norms of rural Tanzania. The mere fact of elderliness suffices to command respect, as in KiSukuma, yet a wider set of criteria can determine the mutual assessment and negotiation of social status. The negotiation can be influenced by the ulterior motive of the conversation, such as hoping for a favour by granting the respectful address to an actual peer, or even to a junior person with a government position, academic title, or successful business. The negotiation happens barely noticeably.

The contrast with greetings in Bantu languages other than Swahili is interesting. The rule applicable for everyone barring the chief is straightforward in KiSukuma and will

be publicly sanctioned. Age and specifically generation are the criteria: respect is shown to the member of the elder generation by naming the clan. Gender does not come in between. Persons with higher status due to village leadership or initiatory rank will not be greeted differently. The exception is healing, which culturally grants the status of parenthood in relation to the patient. After being cured, the patient is literally said to having been ‘born’ (*kubyalwa*) at the healer’s. Thus, what greeting affirms in Sukuma culture is (re)generative status: to have healed or given birth. Healing, the saving of someone’s life, seamlessly enters the genealogy of life that greetings publicly confirm. That is why, as in the above case, the patient’s children have to treat and greet the healer (and all of her or his classificatory siblings) as a grandparent. The difference between this and Swahili-speaking society, with its longstanding cosmopolitan culture, is revealing. By not taking into account healing and by prioritizing age and public reputation over life-giving, the Swahili cultural system encroaches on the centrality of (re)generative status in Sukuma society. That, at least, is what a cultural analysis suggests.

Within the same generation, the order of birth (hence age) determines seniority. The senior responds to the junior’s clan naming by saying the name of the latter’s grandfather. Saying the names of each other’s grandfather would be strange, so members of the same family mention the kinship position: “of grandfather” (if greeters are of the same generation), “of father” (if one generation apart), or “of me” (if two generations apart). My younger sister will greet me by naming our clan, and she will do the same for my friend who has been adopted by the family, and thus is equated with me. He is a classificatory older brother to her.

Table 1 schematizes the course of action when a junior speaker addresses a senior. The row in bold marks the two types of greeting after the speakers have determined each other’s generation, or age in the case of the same

Table 1: KiSukuma greeting sequence in the morning

Junior	Senior (non-kin)	Senior (kin)
<i>Ng’wangeluka, baba/ mayu</i> ‘Sun has risen, father/ mother’	<i>Ng’wangeluka</i>	<i>Ng’wangeluka</i>
(First encounter) <i>Lwimbo lwako?</i> ‘What is your clan?’	(First encounter) <i>Ng’wa nani?</i> ‘Of whom (are you)?’	
<i>Iminza / Ing’washi/...</i> (clan name locates the senior)	<i>Ng’wa (Frank)</i> (grandparent name locates the junior)	<i>Ng’wa guku / baba / nene</i> (Of grandfather/ father/ me)
<i>Wamishaga mhola?/ Uli chiza?</i> ‘Did you wake up in peace?’ / ‘Are you well?’	<i>Wamishaga mhola?/ Uli chiza?</i>	<i>Wamishaga mhola?/ Uli chiza?</i>
<i>Nali mhola</i> ‘I am at peace’	<i>Nali mhola</i>	<i>Nali mhola</i>

generation. Generative status – who gave birth to whom – remains the one criterion for showing respect. Kinship is a secondary discriminator determining which of the two variants applies.

Besides healing, there is another special case with regard to the determination of seniority. More than once did I see it occasion a quarrel. Because of the rule of bride inheritance, which is now defunct, the son of the paternal aunt can claim to be of a higher generation. In this institution, known as levirate, the son took his maternal uncle’s widow as a (second) wife, which her children anticipated throughout their life by calling him father (*baba ngwana wa sengi* ‘father, son of paternal aunt’). The institution elevated sons of paternal aunts by a generation. A person invoking this old custom can object when being greeted as a peer instead of being named by the clan. This negotiation, however, is done explicitly and in the open, often involving bystanders, for instance when the speaker claims to be a classificatory son of the peer’s paternal aunt, through an adoption that a bystander can confirm. The contrast with Swahili greetings could not be clearer.

The Sukuma speakers I lived with, who, like most of their fellow speakers, farm for a living, conversed daily about matters affecting greeting. They were genuinely interested

in keeping track of memberships, adoptions, alliances, initiations, and healing careers that affect the status or seniority of a person. Given the cultural importance of lifegiving, it is logical that they put much emphasis on the right way of greeting and that they teach this to their children from an early age. From the age of five a child should be able to use the greetings appropriately (Varkevisser 1973). I was told that a child is considered a human once it knows how to greet. At later ages the emphasis on knowledge continues with medicine, defined in the broad sense of both recipe and rite. Medicinal knowledge and initiation are not at all required in order to claim elderhood and be addressed accordingly, but they augment the elder’s authority. In cases where a person has actually cured someone, it replaces that authority (regeneration bypasses generation). To comprehend, we have to distinguish the semantic Bantu strands of *kul* and *kum*.

How does one become an elder in Sukuma society? Within the difference between old and young, a second interesting duality appears. On the one hand, with age alone, a person naturally grows into elderhood. An elder, *n-kul-u*, automatically receives respect, *ikujo*, which literally signifies ‘make (someone) grow’ (*i-kul-y-o*), a causative form of the root for ‘elder/senior’. On the other hand, a person needs to get initiated into the society

of elders, whose organization depends on an oracle proving the blessing of the ancestors. As I argue, one can be an elder without initiation and be respectfully greeted as a ‘big one’, *nkulu* (*mkuu* in Swahili). Yet to act as an authority in the community requires something extra: fame, *lu-kum-o*. *Kum* status yields patronage. The status does not come by itself. It requires a discontinuous act, exemplified by the sacrifice one makes by risking one’s life in the forest (seclusion for a month is required for a healer, of which the three days of the *ihane* is the light version). After every sacrifice (the smaller ones are gifts of beer to members of the group without expecting favours in return), knowledge of a certain rank is obtained in the medicinal society. The accumulation of status in the various initiatory medicinal associations of Sukuma society happens independently from the wishes of clan elders. The semantics of *kum* and *kul* are those of patron/ client and elder/ younger respectively, on the understanding that patronage fits within the medicinal tradition of initiation. Medicinal societies across Bantu-speaking Africa initiate and heal through the same principle of ‘cooling’, *kupoja* (Janzen 1992, Stroeken 2010). To cool is to wed the wild forces of the forest to the peaceful goals of the village. From that, domesticated fertility emerges. The professions of healer and chief tap into these forces; they specialize in them, whereas village headmen and clan elders only exceptionally act medicinally, namely during initiation. *Kul* and *kum* are two aspects of elderhood, the second explaining why having healed someone elevates one’s generation in relation to that someone.

Social analysis of frames and their sphere: ‘simplication’

Namhala is the KiSukuma word for a man of old age; *ngikulu* is that for a woman of old age. The abstract terms *bunamhala* (male elderhood) and *bugikulu* (female elderhood) refer to associations that organize the initiation. The

members are called elders but young members are allowed to get initiated (*kuhanwa*) and climb ranks (from ‘grass’ to ‘log’ level, *ngogo*). Membership and the climbing of ranks do not change the terms of address during greeting. Entrance into *bunamhala* provides medicinal knowledge. An elder who has not done initiation (*ihane*) can count on the same respectful term of address. His social status and authority in village affairs will be less though. How much less depends on factors that vary interpersonally. A high administrative position can neutralize the negative effect of non-initiation. However, in the last two decades the *ihane* has been declining. Its contribution to status has decreased dramatically.

To theorize this social analysis in contrast with the cultural analysis, we can state that greetings take place in a *sphere* of exchange whose rules are known, yet whose *frames* of experience vary. The previous step, which was a cultural analysis, evinced the rules of the game in the sphere of greeting, based on someone’s position and role in the social system. The analysis did not say how elders are perceived in a situation where they are being greeted correctly. A social analysis describes the interactions between the subjects via their frames (attitudes, interests, appraisals). It assesses how the rules are applied in practice, and in this way complements the static picture of cultural analysis.

Due to social change, the frames of experience differ. The young greet the old respectfully, as they should, but they experience the respect in a differently layered manner. Consider the negative connotation of the elder in Professa Jay’s seminal hip-hop song *Ndiyo Mzee* (Stroeken 2005; on its sequel, *Siyo Mzee*, see Bulaya 2017). The song depicts a corrupt, authoritarian politician expecting his voters – the choir in the song – to repeat *Ndiyo mzee*, ‘Yes elder’, after each false promise he makes. The choir sounds submissive, as in ‘yes sir!’ The respect that the term of *mzee* should exact is overshadowed by the docility of the choir

in this new frame of experience. The politician’s authority, socially recognized power, is diluted to mere power, with the connotation of coercion. An illustration is his abuse of the traditional Swahili greeting *mzee* for personal gain. A new generation ready for modern democracy will not be led on anymore by traditions keeping corrupt leaders in power. The social analysis of the situation reveals how two frames of experience collide. Conservative elders are confronted by youngsters seeking social promotion and altering the criteria for status along the way. A social analysis finds this tension in micro-situations and extends it to the macrolevel of a society and its changing power structure. Therefore, this social (situational) analysis has been coined the extended case method (for an appraisal, see Kapferer 2005).

The main trope in our social analysis is that the elder, *mzee*, opposes progress, ‘development’ (*maendeleo*), both of the young and of society in general. The trope has been ubiquitous since the 2000s among young Sukuma farmers’ sons without land or employment (Stroeken 2008). One of the variants of the trope is the so-called clash of modernity and tradition, recurring under different names in ethnographies of diverse settings across the African continent. The trope lowers the elder’s status. Its origins are a national discourse disseminated in schools, policy, and the media. The discourse is not directed against the elderly, nor against a specific culture, and yet it creates a cultural divide within the nation. The reason, I will argue, is the institution it marginalizes, namely the medicinal knowledge that elders otherwise could choose to specialize in.

Our synthesis of cultural and social analysis points to ‘simplication’, a process of *simplifying* (reducing semantic layers) through *complicated* substitution, resulting invariably in diminished agency (Stroeken 2024). The medicinal layer of authority, which uniquely and variedly differentiated the social status of each elder, has been replaced by the ideology

of ‘development’. Its ideas are complicated, for they compute the needs of various strands of society. A certain kind of development is imposed on individuals. The reduced choice curbs the autonomy that peasants used to have in relation to the state.

The strands of *kul* (growth) and *kum* (medicine) have bifurcated. The bifurcation was anticipated by the government, among others, which set up a research institute of ethnobotany in the 1990s to study traditional medicine. Medicine was simplicated, that is, tolerated for the plants and severed from the spiritual part, which is only acceptable as religious folklore (*utamaduni*). To pair the *kul* of wisdom with the ‘superstitious’ *kum* of initiation supposedly jeopardizes development. A first set of data will demonstrate that the reduction of traditional medicine to a business, the omission of ritual in favour of botanical effectiveness, and the disappearance of ancestral altars from public view are simplications that together undermine the status of initiatory medicine. They prevent medicine from augmenting the authority associated with Sukuma elderhood.

A second set of ethnographic data illustrate the postcolonial depreciation of chieftaincy in favour of rule by clan elders. Because the Tanzanian nation denudes those elders of their initiatory ranks and cult memberships, the favouring is ambiguous. It amounts to the downgrading of the elders to wise old members without clout or crucial knowledge. Our synthesis begins with the first set of data.

Depreciating the source of production: A nation’s cultural divide

The advantage but also the limitation of social analysis is its reliance on what people actually say and do in a situation. The social analyst observes the conflicting frames of the young and the old, but what drives the tension is the relation between the frames, namely the emotion (affect) each invests in the frame that

seems good for society. A logic of practice, the *logos* derived from a *nomos*, is an organic basis of thought energizing the speaker. In Professa Jay’s song, the urban environment of Swahili speakers is improved by subverting the concept of *mzee*. Another place, like a Sukuma village, experiences the negative side effects of the change. In both situations, the speakers feel so strongly about their opinions that they panic when the other view wins in a debate, election, court ruling, or so on. Then they do not merely defend their distinct identity but sense that the future of society and its sources of production are at stake. I say ‘sense’ because the tension is implicit, which poses a problem for social analysis. To unravel the implicit yet significant tension, we must synthesize, that is, we must wed the social to the cultural, which is to delve into unspoken assumptions (culturally internalized and practised in social interactions). One such glaring if tacit assumption dates back to about four generations ago when colonialism peaked. It reveals the structuralist depth of change. It shows the cultural divide and the ‘simplication’ of medicine that the colonizer was responsible for.

Hans Cory, ‘government sociologist’ of Tanganyika, writes, in his paper from 1955 about the *buswezi* spirit medium association:

I joined the society in 1932 at an initiation ceremony held at Makuyuni, a station on the railway line between Tanga and Moshi in Tanganyika. A number of novices participated in the ceremonies under the leadership of a *munangogo* (senior member) who was a member of the Sumbwa tribe (1955, 923; see supra: *ngogo*).

Sumbwa speakers at the time neighboured Sukuma to the west, together with Longo and Zinza groups. The network of *Bu-Chwezi* (pronounced ‘Bu-Swezi’ in the south; the members are *Ba-Swezi*) used to span most of Northwest

Tanzania and southern Uganda, bordering Rwanda. Yet Makuyuni station lay some 500 kms east of that area. Assuming that participants were not merely Sukuma immigrants, how could the spatial and cultural-linguistic distance be overcome? Is the initiatory society of spirit mediums an institution crosscutting language groups?

The short answer is yes. However, intercultural access for the novices is not just a matter of translating the words of the ceremony and songs. In fact, the words matter less than the ritual activities that tap into frames of experience. Such frames also vary between groups, but their links to life and to sources of production ensure affinity. Experiences of healing and fertility are not characteristic of one particular group alone. Moreover, at the level of cultural specifics, the rituals display ‘family resemblances’ with those of other groups speaking Bantu languages (see Needham’s [1975] application of Wittgenstein’s notion). Those family resemblances have allowed initiatory institutions of various names to loosely connect into a medicinal network which covers a much wider area than the *Buchwezi* society just mentioned in northwest Tanzania. The extended intercultural affinity follows not only from contact, influence, and migration, but also from the initiation’s recognizable sphere and frame, which are interrelated with something as widespread as a community’s sources for producing peace.

Given the wide expanse and cultural significance of the rituals and dances that characterize medicinal societies, a second fragment from Cory’s (1955, 923–924) text surprises. Apparently, the *Buchwezi* association needed protection from (semi-)official pressures. Some members did not want to publicly admit their membership despite the association’s “very strong position in the life of the community”:

There is no close connection between the different branches of the society, though certain members

wield authority over large areas because of their exceptional abilities in the field of magic medicine. There is no superior central organization to which members have a right of appeal (...) Though a position in the Native Administration does not automatically elevate a man to a higher rank or influence in the society the Baswezi will serve such members in matters that are remote from their official duties, and in return they expect protection from influences which may be exercised officially or semiofficially. The Baswezi still holds a very strong position in the life of the community and there is no decrease in the number of members, though nowadays members who have a reason for wishing to remain in the background do not join in the public dances.

Cory does not explain what could be wrong with such a widespread institution that in the heydays of the colony some wished to stay in the background and conceal their membership. Is the reason for marginalizing the initiatory spirit society the backwardness attributed by colonial officials, the evil claimed by the Christian clergy, or the local reticence about spirit adorcism (versus exorcism; see Heusch 1981, 151)? The 'government sociologist' Cory does not deem it necessary to elaborate. In this he does not differ from today's analysts in the country's newspapers, who note the changed perspective on initiatory institutions and explain it in terms of citizens 'going with the times' (*kwenda na wakati*, Sw.). After all, Westerners too, thanks to schooling, have come to reject the existence of spirit agents, have they not? No questions are asked about the affective consequences. In Tanzania, though, such change is culturally momentous, given the extent to which medicinal societies were until recently and in some places still are

rooted in local education, status attribution, political office, and healing. The roots went as deep as the sources producing sociality and peace. The spiritual is part of the medicinal (and not vice versa like in religion), in fact so inextricably part that it forms an invisible background to interactions, like air to mammals and water to fish. The third, synthesizing step of the analysis emphasizes these background elements that the colonizer wanted people to ignore. The third step sends us back to the drawing board. In sum, adherence to a medicinal layer pervades society to the point that insiders hide it from outsiders. We saw this layer to inhere in the greetings and to elevate seniority. Integration of the medicinal layer into our analysis will shed better light on Sukuma elderhood.

The point I am making is not that the colonizer was a bringer of modernity at the expense of local tradition, but that certain local traditions were acceptable to the colonial administration and others not. A self-image of the modern is that of progress thanks to meritocracy, as opposed to stagnation due to entitlement, referred to earlier by 'achievement versus ascription'. The ascription of status, like the titles of chief or king and symbols of aristocracy, is surely an acceptable tradition in modernity as long as it does not dominate but merely gives varied colour to capitalist society. So too do moderns love annual rituals and revive or reinvent them (Hobsbawm 2012). Another acceptable tradition is the attribution of wisdom to elder age. Neither of these acceptable traditions is what Cory's participants were avoiding supporting. What they were avoiding was public dance, initiation, and sacrifice, which interact with a realm that escaped the colonizer's control and yet yielded status locally. The colonizer and the insider who identifies with this outsider are faced with a source of production, the spirit realm, with which they entertain no relation and cannot interact. For an administrator wanting to be in

power or in the know, this void is unacceptable and is best disregarded or its source silenced.

Tanzania has, since its inception as a country, sought unity (*umoja*) via the language of Swahili and nationwide literacy at primary school level. At the same time, Tanzanians know that development (*maendeleo*) varies across regions, some of these areas having quite a longstanding precolonial heritage, like the northwest with its ten million Sukuma agro-pastoralists. Those groups do not readily identify with national progress or, on the whole, they pay lip service to it, which means fewer expectations and a distance kept from the power centres in the capital and on the coast (which the ruling party, CCM, has not been too unhappy about, as we will see).

A recent political figure who (as a Sukuma) claimed to bridge this distance with 'the people' and played into concomitant popular suspicion about government officials was Tanzania's late president John Magufuli. He acted as one siding with the underdog. In a speech a few months before his death, he called farmers the real *wasomi*, 'the learned', because they came up with eco-friendly alternatives for electricity production, whereas his engineers in the parastatal TANESCO were lagging. He had a confrontation televised between the two groups in the field. Why his choice of words?

While *wasomi*, the literate, are normally contrasted with the illiterate, Magufuli inverted the term as a metaphor to imply another type of learnedness than tertiary education. The claim supportive of grassroots ecology was received among the university lecturers I work with as a bid to boost popularity among a crucial mass of peasant voters who used to be too culturally (in)different to challenge government. The claim also relied on the listener's awareness of a national divide. The division between a Tanzanian population politically engaged in formal and informal ways on the one hand (Kelsall 2002) and an uncaptured half of the nation on the other hand (Hydén 1980) has conspicuously remained in the

background (as has research on the contemporary use of precolonial concepts of power). Yet it is an accepted frame of reference in the media discourse. The silence rather confirms the negative associations with the frame and concurs with the earlier mentioned discomfort of the state with the medicinal layer.

The NGO I worked with in 1997 stumbled on the divide within village communities, quite inconveniently, as they needed to prove their poverty-reducing impact to the Belgian donor. A survey of 63 men and 48 women in 11 villages of Mwanza Region compared the project farmers with randomly selected respondents from the same villages. A difference in 'cultural affiliation' emerged among those respondents who reported that they consulted traditional healers and believed in them, that they had been initiated, that they built ancestral altars in the compound, that they married through bridewealth, and that they did not practise the Christian or Islamic faith. Each of these indicators correlated with medicinal, including ritual, knowledge. Farmers working with the NGO scored significantly lower. The general conclusion was straightforward. The project farmers avoided the medicinally oriented practices their fellow villagers commonly participated in. They supported the values disseminated by the NGO in accordance with national policy. Two conflicting frames emerged, reflecting the national divide in the village. So much for Feierman's (1990) peasant intellectuals: how could this progress-oriented minority within the villages represent the people, 'all' the people?

Sukuma cosmology does not delimit space like the nation-state does (Brandström 1990). The gap in the nation begins at the level of the village executive officer, unfamiliar with the local language and temporarily stationed there by the government. The VEOs I knew rarely left their iron-sheet roofed offices to mingle with the community. They were absent from the village meetings under the tree. Tanganyika has a colonial history of limited

government presence where economically profitable pickings are few (Ilfie 1979, 261). Between 1995 and 1997, when I lived in two off-road villages, I never heard of an official or police officer passing through. Pentecostal preachers associate medicinal traditions with witchcraft and situate these at the heart of the community. As a growing influence in society, the preachers reproduce the divide.

National politics and elections truly were a major topic in the conversations of the NGO personnel. Not among Sukuma farmers though. Perhaps they had been disappointed too often, like on the night I witnessed military service troops enforcing additional taxes to make up for the regional head’s white-collar embezzlement. Little taxes in return for minimal state had been the informal agreement. Peasant autonomy mattered most.

Sukuma-speaking communities have for centuries developed practical knowledge in cultivation, medicine, and conflict resolution, transmitted by family members and peers through everyday acts such as stories, the explanations and uses of inherited objects inside the house, concoctions inserted under the threshold, amulets and bracelets on the body, and sometimes altars outside the house. Young and old, men and women will have attended or participated in a dance competition (*mbina*) between cultivation societies which necessarily involves medicine for attracting an audience and outwitting the rival group (Gunderson 2010). The *ihane* initiation into the village association is the formal first training into medicinal knowledge. I was told in 1996, by the NGO personnel in unison and by several district policy-makers, that this initiation had been extinct since the 1970s, but half a year later when I did mine, together with six local friends all in our 20s, we were surrounded by over 50 initiated fellows from neighbouring villages. How long would this medicinal network last, which leaves a chunk of the nation uncaptured by the state? At least Africanist scholars, I hoped, would want to

take its members seriously and learn from them – about the various meanings of the political, for one.

Feierman’s (1990) study of ‘peasant intellectuals’ decolonizing and building the Tanzanian nation is a classic. He based his work on interviews with peasants who had an interest in the nation and spoke Swahili. Socio-culturally they resembled the NGO personnel, which raises the question of whether, like Cory’s aloof participants, they downplayed the medicinal network and the cultural gap it represented. I find no evidence in Feierman’s book of his key players mediating the gap, in any case. Would this not have been essential if they supported nation-building to the point of making it a grassroots phenomenon? Male and female farmers did protest against the notorious government policies on ridge cultivation (*matuta*) and cash crops, which disrupted their daily schedules, but that does not make them mediators of the nation. My experience in the northwest of Tanzania was that villagers who could qualify as peasant intellectuals because of their Swahili literacy, their meeting with district officials, or their travelling regularly to town were very few. During the initiations of various types, I observed one or two, although invariably sitting at the back of the audience. When attending the chief’s investiture and annual ceremony, they could be seen standing in front. Schooling is a simplicating machine. By separating medicine and power, it plants discomfort about healing at the same time as fascination about customary authority. A peasant intellectual is concerned with governance and the future of the ‘nation’ after having been schooled into this geographic abstraction. To be ‘learned’ in local terms, if I may adopt the defiant epithet of Tanzania’s first Sukuma president Magufuli, he or she would, however, need to build up something unacknowledged by the nation: *kum*, fame or status, which results from successfully submitting oneself to public settings of the network, for example to medicinal or dance competitions or initiations

that test the participants. Our data point in the same direction. What disturbed the colonizer, and what the postcolonial state ignored or eradicated, was *kum*. The medicinal network specializing in it had to go into hiding for its survival. Simplification went hand in hand with a cultural divide. How did this reflect on Sukuma elderhood?

Field visits to healer compounds and villages in the regions of Mwanza, Shinyanga, and Geita in May and September 2023, together with collaborator Paul Bagome (a *Buchwezi* officiant himself), confirmed the trend towards marginalizing the medicinal layer of authority, and vice versa the authority of medicine. Regular stays since 1995 permitted me to make comparisons. First of all, most families no longer build ancestral altars. Secondly, trade-oriented healers have greater visibility than initiated healers and cultic officiants. Bagome states:

Healers used to build in the middle of forests following the demand of their spirit. Nowadays healers are still there but some are not true: they build near roads or cities so that they can be seen by people and they don't stay for long. They move because do not provide the right treatment. (...) Along the road with a large centre they can get customers. So healing has become like a business.

Absent ancestral altars and the shift to trade-oriented healing are material traces of the nation's cultural divide and of the dominant reaction, which is to marginalize the medicinal network. Medicine is no longer an element contributing to authority in the sense of rendering power more socially recognizable. The parallel evolution is that its counterpart and related institution, the growth into elderhood, also recedes from the centre to the margins of the political system.

Ancestral altars at the heart of an extended family's compound used to attest to belief in and respect for the *ba-kulu*, the highest clan ancestors. Church and state, who have contested this knowledge for a long time, have had little deterring effect in this part of Tanzania. Now in 2023 we observed that a famous healer near Misungwi had removed the altars, to which Bagome reacted: "He's not serious anymore..." Unlike formerly, when Sukuma healers did not hide their ritual objects, altars, and divination paraphernalia, a new healer in a village will prefer to do the job behind a fence of thick vegetation (e.g., a *minyaa* bush with twigs for divination) so as not to be confounded with trade-oriented healers, who set up their temporary circular settlements visibly along the road (one finds many on the two main roads from Geita to Sengerema).

Why peasant intellectuals dislike chiefs

Surprisingly instrumental in the simplification of authority (its reduction to one semantic layer) and in the concomitant bifurcation of *kul* and *kum*, to the detriment of the medicinal network, have been the so-called peasant intellectuals, specifically because of their opinion about a particular figure of authority, the chief. In Feierman's (1990, 6) account of the Shambaa kingdom, the chiefs take an ambiguous position. Not only do they jeopardize the rains by contesting the king and thus weakening his power (*nguvu*), but the leadership of chiefs is erratic, driven by alliances with privileged clans and influenced by oracles. Chiefs do not display the pragmatism and wisdom of clan elders, whose leadership the peasant intellectuals prefer, according to Feierman's study.

The move away from chieftaincy, both the precolonial and the colonial type, is a Tanzanian decolonial trope. Founding President Nyerere was the son of a chief. His abolition of the institution became iconic of Tanzania's victory over the challenge of

ethnicity in young African nations. In the light of this building of the nation, the historian Feierman framed chieftaincy negatively – after all, this was the institution that Nyerere overcame, which might account for the country’s peaceful reputation. At this pivotal stage of the analysis arises a simple question. Can scholars educated in Euro-American academia rid themselves of their assumptions about leadership? In the progressive frame, the ideal leader is someone with the expert knowledge to implement what was democratically decided (Paley 2002). All the better if the leader can supplement this technocratic ability with wisdom about what works in society and what not. This political model, however, has no room for peace-keeping mechanisms such as medicine, which in this part of the world comprises divination, initiatory knowledge and sacrifice to the ancestors, magical recipes, and associations providing cultic titles with spirit guidance. When peasant intellectuals say that they prefer elders and their wisdom, they simplicate away the medicinal layer in leadership. The scholar should not assume this to be adequate, as in ‘just culture evolving (rationally)’. The roots of the local model in life’s sources of production are lost on the scholar. A leadership excluding chiefs looks very much like an anticultural choice and a denial of those roots. A preference for *kul* over *kum* separates the two semantic strands and undermines their complementarity. What accommodates the farmers’ autonomy-oriented system – by all means a ‘medicinal democracy’ in the sense of providing equal access for all to magic that protects or attacks – is a council of clan elders cooperating with the chief, him/herself a kind of healer. In terms of that Sukuma chieftaincy system, kings exemplify an excess of political centralization (e.g., the autocracy able to employ massive violence). The peasant intellectuals, who, conversely, seemed to be a Swahili-speaking elite very well versed in the European worldview, made claims opposite to those of ‘the learned’ in the medicinal

network. They pulled apart chief and healer, conceiving of the latter as a (weaker) sort of king. A good leader should resemble the exceptionally wise elder rather than a ritual officiant. Inadvertently, Feierman’s peasant intellectuals thus tear apart *kul* and *kum* at the heart of the political fabric. I understand the aversion to the irrationality of magic, and the refusal to consider magic’s peacekeeping effects, but what about the advantage of decentralization proper to the locally grown traditions of chieftaincy? Does centralization in the form of kingship not amount to autocracy and to dependence rather than to the autonomy of the farmers? How reasonable has it been to assume that importing parliamentary democracy would prevent presidents from acting like autocratic kings?

To do justice to the care of Sukuma culture for (re)generative status, we should acknowledge that one of the indirect effects of medicine has been a kind of democracy. The peasant’s autonomy in organizing collective rituals, in invoking ancestral spirits and in secretly applying ‘magical’ recipes has long countervailed the autocratic desires of leaders, no less effectively than (peasant) intellectualism. Medicine is thus linked to society’s sources of production. It may be too much of a challenge for Africanists to learn from the local society so as to have spirit agency rebound on theory (see the ontological turn; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), but to reject this culturally assumed link is to impose simplication. An academic blind spot then obliquely determines the writing of contemporary African history.

As a final illustration, consider the Sukuma vigilante system of Sungusungu, protecting against cattle-raiders and witches, whose ritually backed mechanism of local peacekeeping Brandström (2021) detailed. One may appreciate this alter-state system as an outcome of the precolonial tradition of decentralization. According to the historian Brennan (2017, 19), however, Sungusungu

vigilantes are the local face of Sukuma “popular politics”, their divinatory tribunals striking “a disturbingly receptive chord”. Whether innocent people were convicted or peace was restored thanks to the presence of vigilantes does not seem to matter. The system whose medicinal layer has not been simplicated away is what bothers the author, as it did the colonial administrators before. Hence, academically too there appears to exist a cultural misunderstanding about the twofold structure of authority sustaining the medicinal network and peasant autonomy.

Conclusion

First, a three-tiered analysis of Sukuma greetings provides a cultural frame to interpret changes and continuities in elderhood. Subsequently, contemporary data allowing for comparison (and a critical analysis of western scholarly interpretations) point to changes in the sources of authority. The medicinal layer has been ‘simplicated’ away, which has affected the meaning and status of the elder in Sukuma society.

Succinctly put, Sukuma elders are respected for their membership of a higher generation, which shows in growth-oriented practices and values expressed with the

linguistic stem *-kul-*, such as leadership and ancestral greatness. Their authority increases thanks to medicinal, sacrifice-oriented practices and values expressed with the linguistic stem *-kum-*, such as healing, divination, and the fame of initiation. This medicinally augmented authority with gerontocratic importance dates from the precolonial era, and lives on in greeting procedures. However, the medicinal source of authority continues to retreat in public life; it has been marginalized and hollowed out in education, media, schooling, and at all levels of governance. A cultural divide across the Tanzanian nation reflects this retreat of medicine. As a result, elders have lost ‘half’ of their meaning in society, and chiefs whose authority is predicated on rain medicine and ritual knowledge have lost all of it. While the chief’s position was exploited and drained by the colonial administration, healers who entirely depend on medicine still function and perform, albeit at the margins of society. Institutions of medicinal knowledge and status, where initiatory knowledge and ritual are included, have irritated the centralized (colonial and postcolonial) state and have been labelled obstacles to development, which has ultimately affected the meaning of elderhood.

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