To Migrate or Not to Be:
Migration as a Pattern of Kikuyu Social Practices
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Summary

To make a name for oneself, to acquire some material wealth and some respect from others, to consider life as a path that one has to follow, and to migrate physically or socially, such is the core principle of Kikuyu social practices. Hence the concept of migratory patterns to explain this irrepressible drive towards social achievement that combines a continual quest for material, social and symbolic wealth. This social realisation — together with the three regimes governing the social reproduction (kinship, age-set and generations) — was a principle of hierarchy rooted in personal virtue. Migratory pattern and social ethos were very closely linked and determined the motives of Kikuyu social practices: the desire for social achievement, as a promise of post-mortem survival symbolised by the onomastic recurrence.

In the precolonial era, fame emanated from crossing the Frontier that inscribed the pioneer’s name in the geographical space. When socio-economic and ecological conditions prevented physical migration, diplomas and employment determined a new way to fulfil the Kikuyu ethos. Today, individual faith, strengthened by millenarian expectations, is supposed to offer a means of personal realisation — salvation at the day of Last Judgement but also secular gratitude through rememberance of the founder of a new Church.

The different manifestations of migratory patterns lie at the core of Kikuyu social practices. The precolonial era presents its paradigmatic manifestation: to clear the forest conceived as a Frontier and to become a big man. When socio-economic and ecological conditions closed off the borders, religious conversion, education and jobs became the medium of individual achievement. The fulfilment of Kikuyu ethos became a process of social differentiation. The

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migratory pattern led to material and social wealth but still had to be invested in land ownership. Today, individual achievement presents the aspect of the millenarian hope. Moreover, numerous rumours of witchcraft — intimately linked to material wealth and political power — are a sign that Kikuyu ethos, land ownership and post-mortem survival are still closely connected.

As a conceptual scheme shifts from social practices to religious imagination, social relationships become increasingly confined and social immortality turns into the search for individual eternal life. When the entire family unit had to collaborate for the head to fulfil the Kikuyu ethos of the Mûramati, millenarian hope of actual Last Judgement then began to rely on individual faith. This evolution of social relationships has important consequences for Kikuyu social organisation: when material and social wealth was difficult to inherit, money became almost independent of moral control. Redistribution, which was a result of compassion, became uncertain and anti-witchcraft practices are thus powerless to restrain the sovereignty of money.

**Introduction**

The six million Kikuyus living in central Kenya form an ethnic group whose subsistence is based on crop and animal farming. They breed cattle and other small ruminants. Cattle had important significance among Kikuyus and they had a lot of business relations and intermarriages with the different Maasai sections. Having been converted to Christianity very early, the Kikuyu were seen as examples of small entrepreneurs who were supposed to spearhead economic development in Kenya. They became a major economic threat to the British settlers who were then very poor farmers. The Mau Mau civil war completely changed the Kikuyu social fabric and completed the conversion to Christianity, thereafter paving way for independence under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta. In 1978, President Daniel Arap Moi succeeded the founding father of the Nation, putting an end to the socio-economic and political supremacy of the Kikuyu.
Land migration

Until the late 19th Century, spatial migration virtually entailed the pledge for personal freedom from parental obligations. While this movement freed the future founder of *gihaka* from daily submission to his elders, it did not preserve him from the reciprocal and asymmetric demands imposed on him by the kinship system. The new status acquired by the pioneer granted him prominent prestige vis-à-vis people from his home area. Nevertheless, even in its geographical perspective, the migratory pattern implied a social aspect closely related to spatial movement, since the migrant became *ipso facto* a potential *mûramati* except, according to Neckebrouck (1983), when he would be a dependant of a landlord who had already settled. Migrating was a process aimed at increasing both the symbolic capital and the maintenance, or access to a dominant social position, which held out the prospect of social immortality throughout the constitution of a new *mbarî*.

The name of the ‘lineage’ founder became part of the social character of his descendants without necessarily erasing other identity markers (age-class, generation, clan, etc.). Everybody received a name to which was appended his or her father’s: each person could therefore identify himself/herself as a member of Mr so-and-so’s *mbarî*, clan A and generation 1. Founding a clan or giving one’s name to a generation was not possible, since the origin of the founders of clans belonged to a mythical past (daughters of the eponymous ancestor *Gîkûyû*) whereas generations would only be named *a posteriori* without referring to its individual members. On the other hand, founding a *mbarî* was, and still is, an enticing prospect which would ensure the perpetuation of the pioneer’s name. The members of the *mbarî* would identify themselves on behalf of the founder and would give offerings to his *ngoma* (soul) during frequent sacrifice ceremonies. These offerings guaranteed “eternal” life to the *ngomas* by preventing it from being forgotten. To be forgotten would be synonymous with definite death that was the fate of the *ngomas* of common individuals (Leakey, 1977; Neckebrouck, 1978).

It is thus not only the early spatial migration that constituted the Kikuyus as an ethnic group, but the deep-rooted desire to remain immortal through remembrance. The importance of naming assumed two forms — the

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1 Land estate of a “lineage”.
2 “Lineage”.

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continuation of the family phylum (Neckebrouck, 1978) by naming many descendants, and secondly, for the more adventurous, founding a new mbarî. This was a unique way of post-mortem survival as a differentiated individual entity. It comprised the only form of individual immortality, since it guaranteed that the person’s name would be carried on to generations to come. Thus, the founder of the mbarî gave it his own name, and all his descendants and those adopted to the mbarî bore its name. It is worth noting that today, individual survival can be ensured through political success (Jomo Kenyatta), similar to the example of the prophetic success (Mûgo wa Kibirû) of the pre-colonial times (Lonsdale, 1995 & 1996), or by founding a new religious movement, following the example of Christianity which bears the name of its founder.

The perspective created by spatial migration was employed and is still employed beyond mere physical survival or social achievement. Confining the discussion of the migratory process to its spatial aspects without mentioning its social and eschatological aspects, would totally mutilate it. Every geographical movement has social and soteriological motives or expectations. We must emphasise the fact that the chronological outlook we have adopted in this paper does not imply that the other aspects of the migratory pattern were absent during that period. If we dwell on spatial migration during the pre-colonial and colonial era, it is because of the dominant role it played in former times.

Social migration
During the first quarter of this century, conversion to Christianity and schooling were the necessary conditions to get jobs and economic resources that were subsequently invested in land. Later, after Independence, another opportunity emerged for the young Kikuyu entrepreneurs — political activities. Establishing a political clientele or being part of one were two ways of accessing national wealth. Getting part of the ‘national cake’ took various forms: allocation of a development project and the corruption linked to it, positions in the civil service with their salaries and the ‘supplementary’ incomes they offer, and the misappropriation of public or parastatal funds (Kibwana et

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3 By this we mean the survival of the ‘spirit’ after the death of the physical body. Therefore, it implies neither the idea of soul redemption, their eternal survival nor any eschatological condition of the soul / spirit / ngoma among the Kikuyus.
These few examples illustrate the polymorphous aspects of a career in the civil service and the ‘benefits’ associated to it. In any case, the exploration of the national universe opens new opportunities leading to social achievement, since the money acquired in that process would be re-invested in plots or pieces of land (Haugerud, 1995), when it was not deposited in accounts abroad. Moreover, the prestige attached to civil or political positions is a sign of social success that can be measured by ownership of land acquired through these positions.

The transformation of the Kikuyu ethos of the mûramati (Droz, 2000) started with conversion to Christianity and moved on to education which was meant to generate employment and finally ending in a political career, aimed at eating a share of the ‘national cake’. These steps provided Kikuyu men with new opportunities, that enabled them to achieve a social accomplishment equivalent to the former aramati. Becoming a minister was not the fate of everyone, but the same principle motivated the practices of the migrant who attempted to settle in the Laikipia Plateau (Droz, 1999a), and the strategies of a “big man” aiming at State office. This is the expression of migratory pattern, be it in physical space or in the social world within the fields of political or civil service careers. In the last case, the land aspects still remain unchanged because an important part of resources earned — thanks to one’s political or civil service positions—were re-invested in land property and the symbolic aspects (redistributive and ‘immortality’ of the name) of the mûramati. Once more, the different expressions of the migratory pattern coexist within the social practices: they cannot be separated (unless analytically) by establishing the importance each aspect can temporarily acquire.

Another means of self-achievement emerged during the colonial era: the accumulation of financial capital through trade. However, it was hindered by a lack of freedom of movement for Kikuyu entrepreneurs during the colonial era, whose administration regulations favoured Indian traders instead. After independence, Kikuyu entrepreneurs heavily depended on political clientele networks (Musambayi, 1995). Therefore, we may consider getting rich through trade as another alternative to administration jobs.
Millenarianism: The Fantasy of Migratory Patterns

Migratory practices which enable the Kikuyus to attain social achievement have today reached a stalemate on sociological, ecological or political points of view: the pieces of land which are still available are becoming increasingly more expensive and the jobs are still rare. Attempts for social accomplishment as a pioneer — increasingly reduced to simple survival — lead to the setting up of domestic units doomed to famine or expulsion because of ‘ethnic’ clashes (Droz & Sottas, 1997; Harnischfeger, 1996; Médard, 1998). The migrants manage this situation by focusing on the imaginary aspects of religions or witchcraft — the only fields whereby they still have the possibility of carrying out ‘concrete actions’ — a hope to find a solution to the hardships they experience and a way to interpret their current condition in a ‘socially acceptable’ manner. They wait for divine intervention which will alter the course of rain patterns, or for a political saviour — or a messiah — who will give them back the national power which “belongs to them”. These migrants explain the unfavourable socio-political situations by attributing their political, economic and environmental difficulties to the Devil, which also explains the strength of the supposed *Kamatusa* political power.

The analysis of endless rumours about the existence of satanic sects linked to temporary power, shows the distress with which they face political and ecological ‘injustices’ (Droz, 1996). For some Christians, we are experiencing the signs of end of times, of the millennium. According to them, these elements depict the impasses where the Kikuyu morale got lost: the *mûramati* has progressively become an ideal that is no longer accessible to the majority of Kikuyus. Ecological and political deadlocks drive the migrant to hide in the imaginary world of millenarianism. The migrant therefore no longer has the

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5 Acronym that stands for Kalenjin, Maasaï, Turkana, Samburu supposed alliance.

4 Only a group of migrants are members of the Pentecostal movements and all of them do not wait for the millennium. However, faith in God’s power is ever present as is the expectation of rain. Moreover, this interpretation is linked to a tendency to represent the reality in a “millenium” way and does not seek to quantify the movement.

7 Let us highlight the fact that the situation we have analysed does not apply only to Laikipia Plateau or to the migrants. For the fertile — but exhausted — plots of the Central Province the drought is not to be blamed as the setback to self-achievement, but the exiguity of plots and the high population density. Furthermore, many relationships between the migrants and their family members living in their original communities do not enable us to make a clear-cut distinction.
aim of acquiring concrete land, but his/her hope lies in imaginary issues represented by the eternal salvation and the Second Coming of the Messiah. Thus, the millenarianism expectation of rain in semi-arid regions or the abandon of one’s future in God’s hands on one hand, and the conversion to new churches announcing the last judgement on the other hand makes sense if one considers that social achievement is attained through religious excellence. Indeed, only the chosen ones will be saved when the Messiah reveals himself to us very soon, because — according to some independent or pentecostal religious movements — He already lives hidden amidst us. Then the righteous ones will live on this earth or in paradise a life totally opposite to the current prevailing gloomy conditions.

The vogue brought about by the millenarianism trend of Pentecostal churches that preach an imminent end of the world, the coming of apocalyptic events and the Last Judgement confirm this interpretation. Besides, in claiming to protect their flock against any form of witchcraft or possession by evil spirits, these religious movements provide them with the last resort for a hopeless situation. Therefore, they enable the migrants to live in social, political and ecological conditions which otherwise would appear unacceptable. Besides the emergence of new religious movements, the vitality of Catholic and Anglican prayer groups can also be explained in the same way. Many prophets have also succeeded in haranguing crowds in the streets, offering their services, or organising crusades by advertising in the press. This can be explained by the uncertainty related to the immediate ecological or political future. They all fight the sorcery complex which links wealth and politics, descendants and power, physical or political longevity with occult powers. They all express the current helplessness among the Kikuyu migrants and attempt to provide them with a way out in the imaginary life. The daily uncertainty, amplified by hard ecological conditions and a gloomy political environment explain the rumours of witchcraft. The future is seen through the millenarianist perspective which suggests a social achievement accessible to “good willing people”.

This is a new metamorphosis of the migratory pattern. It expressed itself first in the geographical environment and — after a process of euphemisation in the social sphere — has transformed itself to the expectation of individual redemption from God. During this century, the emphasis passed from social

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achievement based on land issues to a perspective which is mainly social and economical. Nowadays, the emphasis has shifted to religious aspects: the social realisation can be achieved by investing economic and symbolic capital in the religious field, especially in the millenarianism. This is an answer to various uncertainties haunting the Kikuyu migrants. In other words, the whole process aims at managing the anxiety dynamics streaming from the objective conditions of migration by developing the belief for a better life which will enable the migrant’s social achievement. This hope results from the encounter of the migratory pattern with the socio-economic, ecological, political and religious conditions. The migrant no longer aims at acquiring land and civil service positions, but focuses his/her hope on the imaginary scenes represented by eternal salvation (Droz, 1999a).

Geographical, social and imaginary aspects of the migratory behaviour

The migratory pattern in its various forms — spatial, social or imaginary — is thus at the core of the social practices of the Kikuyu migrants (Neckebrouck, 1978). That being the case, it was important to retrace the precolonial and colonial practices of land clearing and the ethos that sustained the invention or imagination of the Kikuyus from local distinct groups (Anderson, 1983; Brinkman, 1996; Droz, 1999b; Ranger, 1993). Thus, the migratory pattern was expressed in its own paradigmatic universe: the creation of new territories and social accomplishment as a “big man”. It is inseparable from the ethos of the mûramati which already implied a greater scale of social differentiation and acquisition of symbolic and material wealth, which led to self-achievement crowned with a peaceful death and honoured with a burial: a clear symbol of personal achievement.

When the socio-economic or ecological conditions brought to an end the clearing of virgin lands and completely stopped the process of creating new pioneer societies (Kopytoff, 1987), conversion, education and employment became the common measure of personal achievement (Lonsdale, 1992). Self-accomplishment was thus converted to social differentiation, whose seeds were already intrinsic to the social practices of forest clearance (Kershaw, 1997). It is important to note the intricacy of the various forms of the migratory pattern within the social practices, whether they take place through forest clearance, economic accumulation or mythical or religious manipulation. In all cases, the
migratory pattern leads to the acquisition of material and social wealth and to the development of property — the two essential conditions for self-achievement. Rightly put, there has been no essential transformation of migratory patterns throughout the century, but there has been a shift in social practices towards the development of land property to the emphasis on practices leading to accumulation of economic wealth and administrative, even religious positions.

This new inclination of the migratory practices towards material achievement was accompanied by an irreversible imbalance. While there was very little social and economic wealth to be inherited (which in turn limited the effects of social differentiation in the mid-term), material wealth became autonomous to the moral control under which it lay, since the means of acquiring cash were completely new to the local people. Money ruined the link unifying wealth and the ethos of the accomplished man that was at the core of Kikuyu social reproduction (Lonsdale, 1992). This relative independence of material goods from social relations stressed the exclusion tendency which was included in all processes of social differentiation. Distribution aroused out of compassion was uncertain and anti-witchcraft practices became too weak to moderate this merchant drift.

Thus the new balance of the diverse elements that constituted the migratory pattern had an impact on the social reproduction of the Kikuyu, since it has now permitted the reinforcement of an already existent social differentiation.

This amoral process of accumulation was accompanied by an intense individualisation of social practices relating to personal achievement, for the prospect of salvation can only be strictly personal. This ‘heavenly’ expectation does not even involve the entire family since the ‘saved brethren’ can free themselves from the deeds of their family by maintaining that God’s judgement is based on ‘true’ faith, and not on the reputation of men. This personal achievement is thus free from constraints emanating from the foundation of the mbarî, which sees post-mortem survival of the founder as being only possible through transmission of the name, which in turn is essentially mediated by the survival and the fame of the descendants.

Following the contraction of the extended family to the patrimonial family, and with the narrowing of the extension of the social relations, growing

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9 See Kershaw (1997).
individualism of self-achievement has assumed the form of a decline of exchanges and of social control among members of the family. Thus, displacement of a conceptual pattern of social practices towards the imaginary is accompanied by a reduction in the number of people involved in the social relations and the substitution of social immortality with individual eternal life. While before, to obtain a miriamati status, one needed the collaboration of the entire family, today, the expectation of the millennium and the Final Judgement depends essentially on individual faith. However, among the migrant communities of the Laikipia plateau where we undertook our study, we did not come across autonomous individuals isolated from the social network. The power exercised by the patrimonial family over the members is an example of the dependence on the family; groups of mutual aid, emerging from religious movements, bear witness of a real socio-economic efficiency and of a strong social control, based on ethical puritanism (Droz, 1999a).

The argument we have adopted in this paper to distinguish between different aspects of the migratory patterns may tend to see the sequence of distinct social practices where there is only one dominant principle but under a slightly modified form. Social practices certainly mutate into one another. The crossing of the Frontier for instance (Kopytoff, 1987), becomes a successful career in the Colonial versus Kenyan administration, or the creation of a political clientele in Kenya, and finally a religious accomplishment. Thus, if clearing the forests cannot be separated from acquiring a higher social status, currently economic wealth cannot also be dissociated from its land investment role. Moreover, the imaginary forms of migration, seen more in their religious than witchcraft perspective, are deeply related to the acquisition of economic wealth, especially land. In fact, founding a new religious movement implies possession — in the name of the Church — of a territory on which to construct a house of worship and collection of material wealth for religious celebrations (Neckebrouck, 1983).

Finally, rumours of witchcraft, linked to the sudden acquisition of wealth and to temporary power, even to survival beyond the foreseen term of one’s life, is an indication of the persistent relationship between self-accomplishment, land and post-mortem survival. The expectation of the millennium often assumes very material forms: the ‘righteous’ shall see their land produce a rich harvest and will be showered with kindness and recognition from God. In other words, they will enjoy a symbolic capital established on the religious fields, but whose symbolic efficiency will be limited to individuals who belong to the same religious movement. To a certain extent, this image corresponds with the pre-
colonial *mûramati*, which saw its work materialise into a flourishing family and a reputation that would extend far away, and attract dependants (*abua*).

In conclusion, we have not encountered three consecutive patterns of migration (geographical, social and imaginary) but three different expressions (often related) of the same pattern that differently informs the social practices depending on the environment in which they can be developed. The three aspects of the migratory pattern have existed in social practices throughout the century, but the different degrees of one or the other aspect has enabled us to distinguish the expression of each pattern. As has been already expressed, one would fear today that, basing on what occurs with family circulation (reduction of familial exchanges and of the extent of kinship), the current conditions will soon restrict the migratory pattern to informal social practices. Two factors have reinforced this feeling. First, the growing individualisation of social practices, evidenced by the continuous reduction of kinship ties, has strangled the objective possibilities of migration. Secondly, the dissociation of material wealth from social capital (given the new independent means of obtaining material wealth) and the vanishing attachment to land that originally defined self-achievement (finances originally invested in land may now be invested abroad). These may lead to the dissociation of the migratory pattern from the ethos of the *mûramati*, which until recently looked inseparable.

**Bibliographie**


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