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Special Issue: Close Distance. Social Segregation in Trading Empires and Colonies

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Only a misunderstanding? Non-conformist rumours and petitions in late-colonial Tanzania

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Abstract
The rich and nuanced literature on African intermediaries has shed new light on the colonial encounter from the perspective of African interlocutors, but has often neglected to study failed acts of communication between colonial administrators and non-elite African intermediaries. This article fills in some gaps by focusing on non-successful communications. Analysing rumours and non-conformist modes of petitioning, the article explores misunderstandings between Tanzanians and representatives of the late-colonial state. While the British could afford to ignore idiosyncratic messages when they did not clash with their own operational interests, they had to act upon others, and their responses were not always those desired by the Tanzanian senders. Despite communicating in relative proximity, the close distance between Tanzanians who were not fluent in the bureaucratic idiom of the colonial state and British administrators could not always be bridged.

Keywords
Culture of petitioning, failed communication, intermediaries, late-colonial Tanzania, nonconformity, rumours

Intermediaries and cultural brokers in African history have received much attention from scholars. They were important figures, often trained at early colonial institutions and literally and conceptually translated between two worlds. The focus on intermediaries has shed new light on the colonial encounter and the abilities and influence that African interlocutors in fact had, and in particular those who were employed in the service of the colonial state. Studies like the important volume *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* go

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beyond the tired binary of collaboration and resistance, instead opting to explore appropriations and the sometimes unconventional ways in which intermediaries used their power to translate.[1] The body of knowledge that has emerged out of this research represents a rich contribution to African history. It has produced important insights into the social world, the intellectual trajectories, and the opportunities of intermediaries who often became the new elite—bureaucrats, lawyers, politicians, teachers, intellectuals, and non-local administrators, so-called *akidas*.[2] But it has neglected to analyse unsuccessful negotiations, in which non-elite Africans did not manage to make their voices heard. Most extant studies primarily thematise either print culture—which naturally excluded a large part of the population—or the life of mostly urban intermediaries,[3] though there are some significant exceptions to this rule in the older literature.[4]

This article presents a story from colonial rural Tanzania that does not fit this mould. It spotlights instances of miscommunication and misunderstandings between Tanzanians and the colonial administration. In doing so, it engages with two different kinds of sources: rumours on the one hand, and petitions and letters on the other. Naturally, these two genres differ. They address different audiences, and they use different styles. While rumours tell about the colonial experience of Tanzanians and are a means of making sense of this experience, they are not necessarily meant to be understood by the colonial administration. Following Luise White's seminal study, rumours indicate ambiguous feelings towards their subjects, who are often seen by rumour-mongers and rumour recipients as being controversial in one way or another. Moreover, they reveal an 'intellectual world of fears and fantasies, ideas and claims' of those who tell them.[5] In contrast, petitions were official communications that directly address representatives of the colonial state. They are crafted to be understood by British-trained African clerks and British administrative officials. Petitioning has recently attracted scholarly interest.[6] In contrast to most studies on the topic, this article examines cruder, perhaps more non-conformist forms of petitioning that ultimately

1. B. N. Lawrance / E. L. Osborn / R. L. Roberts (eds), *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa*, Madison, WI 2006.
2. A. Eckert, *Herrschen und Verwalten. Afrikanische Bürokraten, staatliche Ordnung und Politik in Tanzania, 1920–1970*, München 2007; H. Fischer-Tiné, *Pidgin-Knowledge. Wissen und Kolonialismus*, Zürich, Berlin 2013; C. Mark-Thiesen, 'The "Bargain" of Collaboration: African Intermediaries, Indirect Recruitment, and Indigenous Institutions in the Ghanaian Gold Mining Industry, 1900–1906', in: *International Review of Social History* 57 (2012) 20, 17–38; E. L. Osborn, '"Circle of Iron": African Colonial Employees and the Interpretation of Colonial Rule in French West Africa', in: *The Journal of African History* 44 (2003) 1, 29–50; D. R. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya*, Portsmouth, NH 2004.
3. J. R. Brennan, 'Politics and Business in the Indian Newspapers of Colonial Tanganyika', in: *Africa: Journal of the International Africa Institute* 81 (2011), 1, 42–67; J. Glassman, 'Sorting Out the Tribes: The Creation of Racial Identities in Colonial Zanzibar's Newspaper Wars', in: *The Journal of African History* 41 (2000), 3, 395–428; D. R. Peterson / E. Hunter / S. Newell (eds), *African Print Cultures. Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century*, Ann Arbor, MI 2016. For the most recent exception to this focus on elites, see the brilliant study by E. Callaci, *Street Archives and City Life: Popular Intellectuals in Postcolonial Tanzania*, Durham, NC, London 2017.
4. J. Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, Cambridge 1979, chapter 8; T. T. Spear, *Mountain Farmers: Moral Economies of Land & Agricultural Development in Arusha & Meru*, Dar es Salaam, Berkeley et al. 1997.
5. L. White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*, Berkeley, CA 2000, 81, 86.
6. F. Cody, *The Light of Knowledge: Literacy Activism and the Politics of Writing in South India*, Ithaca, NY 2013; B. N. Lawrance, 'Bankoe v. Dome: Traditions and Petitions in the Ho-Asogli Amalgamation, British Mandated Togoland, 1919–1939', in: *Journal of African History* 46 (2005) 2, 243–267; U. Lohrmann, *Voices from Tanganyika: Great Britain, the United Nations and the Decolonization of a Trust Territory, 1946–1961*, Berlin 2007; B. Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India*, Chicago, IL 2012; Spear, *Mountain Farmers*; M. Terretta, *Petitioning for Our Rights, Fighting for Our Nation: The History of the Democratic Union of Cameroonian Women, 1949–1960*, Bamenda 2013.

were not successful. The material that I present here gives insights into what Derek Peterson recently called the element of 'nonconformity in Africa's cultural history'.[7]

In my analysis, I employ the concept of close distance. Looking at unequal interactions in which colonial representatives usually had the upper hand, the concept of close distance helps us to understand more subtle forms of distance and disagreement, such as mockery or the use of pseudonyms. Sometimes, the vernacularization of colonial knowledge and discourse made such communications difficult to understand for the British. By paying close attention to the use of pseudonyms and the travelling of ideas, I seek to make sense of such idiosyncratic forms of petitioning and rumour-mongering.

1. Politics in the Usambara Mountains

In the Usambara Mountains, an area in the northeast of what is today Tanzania, Africans circulated their grievances in the late-colonial era by way of rumours and petitions. Often, these dealt with residents' perception of justice. The Usambara Mountains formed part of Tanganyika territory, a United Nations (UN) trust territory under British administration. While the institutions of colonial rule in Tanzania differed little from those of 'proper' British colonies such as Kenya, one of the important distinctions lay in the fact that Tanzanians could channel their grievances through petitions addressed to the UN, an extraterritorial power beyond Great Britain. Thus Tanzanians, like other Africans in trust territories, developed petitioning cultures.[8] What interests me in this article are not the petitions that reached the UN, but those that were written on a smaller scale. Although petitions were a legal format in Tanzania, only few of those that reached the UN were ever considered at the trusteeship council. Furthermore, the ones that I am analysing in this article were not even addressed to the UN but only to administrative officers in Tanzania. Yet Tanzania's petitioning culture also influenced how Tanzanians framed their grievances, perceived their rights, and made their claims—also on the local level. There exists a wealth of such less formal letters and petitions, but for this article, I focus only on two of them.

The Usambara Mountains, referred to as Shambaai in the local language Shambaa, were not a homogeneous place, but were home to various ethnic groups. The largest were the 'native' Shambaa with their royal clan of the Kilindi, while others included the Bondei and the Zigua; there was also a number of Nyamwezi who originated from central Tanzania but who had lived mobile lives as porters and traders with Zanzibari merchants since the mid-nineteenth century. They were thus accustomed to settling in different places, one of them being the foothills of the Usambara Mountains where work on sisal plantations attracted migrant labour.[9] Before the advent of colonial rule, the mountain area—and at times even the coastal towns of Pangani and Tanga—had been ruled by a Kilindi king. Under German colonial rule, *akidas* were introduced, and the king lost his power. After World War I, the British resurrected the royal clan and turned the king into the so-called 'paramount chief'.[10] But after the late 1930s, the paramount became perceived as a British puppet by many of his subjects, and opposition began to form. The paramount's unpopularity reached its peak during the times of the Usambara Scheme.[11]

7. D. R. Peterson, 'Nonconformity in Africa's Cultural History', in: *The Journal of African History* 58 (2017) 1, 35–50.
8. Lohrmann, *Voices from Tanganyika*; Terretta, *Petitioning for Our Rights, Fighting for Our Nation*.
9. Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, 41.
10. S. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania*, Madison, WI 1990, 122.
11. J. J. Hozza, 'The Hoza Rebellion and After: A Study in Innovation', Political Science dissertation (B.A.), University of Dar es Salaam, Dar es Salaam, 1969.

The agricultural scheme was introduced in 1946 to prevent further soil erosion in an area that was already suffering from pressure on the land.[12] The attention to soil erosion was part of the larger British commitment to developmentalist policies that dominated the British colonial agenda after World War II.[13] The scheme created a wave of protest that eventually led to the abdication of the paramount, whose position had become unsustainable due to the opposition from a large part of the population. After his abdication, a British-backed compromise candidate was installed. The colonial administration banned the Tanganyika African Association (TAA), precursor to the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), in 1949, which had cultivated opposition to chiefly rule and the Usambara Scheme.[14] Both questions as to whether the British-installed chief should be retained and whether the Usambara Scheme helped or harmed the area were hotly debated.[15] Needless to say, the official position of the so-called 'native authorities', that is, the chief and his council, differed markedly from the opinions of those hoping for political reforms and more power for commoners—or even the abolishment of chieftaincy as such—as well as from the poorest section of the population, which naturally suffered most under the Usambara Scheme.

The 1950s turned out to be even worse for the British because much of the agitation was now centrally organized under the nationalist party TANU, thus transcending local mountain politics.[16] The British ultimately had to abandon the Usambara Scheme in 1957.[17] Yet, when protests hit Shambaai once again in the early 1950s, the colonial administration appeared to have been unprepared, as a quote from a Member for Local Government, Mr. de Z. Hall demonstrates in a report addressed to all provincial commissioners (PC) in the territory in 1950: 'The normal peasant wants justice and rain rather than a say in running his own affairs'.[18] But Shambaai's local history, as well as the history of many other parts of the territory, show that the early 1950s were in fact a period of political imagination and activism not only in urban but also in rural parts of colonial Tanzania.[19]

Moreover, Mr. Hall's statement reflects an attitude towards 'the peasant' as apolitical and detached from anything beyond his or her small world of subsistence farming and familial networks. For all his 'peasant essentialism',[20] the quotation demonstrates that Hall managed to link two questions that were certainly intertwined in the thought of Usambara's residents: justice and rain. The connection between rain and justice, between the fertility of the land and the fertility of the political structure, is emphasized in many eastern and central African societies. Furthermore, the connection lies at the heart of a Shambaa conception of political thought.[21] Hall and many of his

12. C. A. Conte, *Highland Sanctuary. Environmental History in Tanzania's Usambara Mountains*, Athens 2004, 110.
13. R. Schuknecht, *British Colonial Development Policy after the Second World War. The Case of Sukumaland, Tanganyika*, Berlin 2010.
14. Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, 526.
15. Hozza, 'The Hoza Rebellion and After'.
16. For a very brief summary, see Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, 497. More details can be found in Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*, chapter 6; see also Hozza, 'The Hoza Rebellion and After'.
17. In the monthly report of November, the 'ridging' section was omitted; see 171, 3/8/III: Usambara Scheme, monthly and annual reports, Report of November 1957, 84.
18. TNA\DSM, 72/45/1, Vol.III, Native Affairs Legal, Native Affairs General, 24.6.1950, Report of Development of African local Government in Tanganyika Report, 8.
19. Spear, *Mountain Farmers*, 209–235; G. Hydén, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania. Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry*, London 1980, 50–60; P. Pels, 'Creolisation in Secret: The Birth of Nationalism in Late Colonial Uluguru, Tanzania', in: *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 72 (2002) 1, 1–28.
20. H. Bernstein / T. J. Byres, 'From Peasant Studies to Agrarian Change', in: *Journal of Agrarian Change* 1 (2001) 1, 1–56, 6–7.
21. S. Feierman, 'Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories', in: V. Bonnell (ed.), *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, Berkeley, CA 1999, 182–216; N. Kodesh, 'Networks of Knowledge: Clanship and Collective Well-Being in Buganda', in: *Journal of African History* 49 (2008) 2, 197–216.

British contemporaries were aware of the local importance of rain and the special function of rain-makers in many African societies, but they believed that their importance was confined to the realm of agriculture. The point was not that the colonial administration did not know about the inherent link between justice and rain and the power of well-respected rain-makers, but rather that it did not fit their ideas of rationality.

The rumours and petitions, which serve as my source material for this article, must be read against this backdrop. They are mostly concerned with agriculture and politics, with having enough productive land to put enough food on one's table, and with possible ways of participating in a political system that was undergoing rapid transformation. The language of the rumours and petitions was distinct from the documents produced by the Tanzanian and the Shambaa elite of the time. This is not to say that they are remnants of a 'traditional past' that elites had left in the dust, but rather that the elites were aware that certain things would not help them make their cases before audiences such as the chief secretary in Dar es Salaam or the trusteeship council of the UN. TANU activists and other elites had enough experience to be able to choose their language according to their audience, a fact that also resonates in the emerging culture of petitioning to the trusteeship council. In contrast, I am studying the accounts of individuals who were less acquainted with the language of bureaucracy and its many varieties, an idiom that the colonial state cultivated and which elites quickly appropriated, but who were eager to use the emerging petitioning culture to their own ends. Contrary to the elite petitioning culture, I aim to show that other expressions of dissent existed in close distance, even though they were sometimes unsuccessful. However, the rumours or petitions nonetheless carried a message about the colonial experience, even if the addressed problem often remained unresolved—sometimes because colonial officers did not understand, sometimes because they deliberately chose to ignore them as they were either unimportant to the colonial agenda or clashing with colonial interests.

2. On colonial knowledge and the bearded baby

There is considerable evidence that the British dismissed much of the rain talk as 'superstition'. For example, in early 1934, when people were waiting on the return of the long rainy season after a year of harsh drought, the PC reported that a rumour was circulating

> of uncertain origin, but suspected as emanating from Moshi—to the effect that a bearded native child had been born [. . .] [who] spoke at birth. It was said to have warned the people that the rains would come, that they should not plant at the first or second rain but at the third; and having spoken it died.[22]

The PC referred to the incidence in his report as—in his own words—'native superstitions' and continued as follows:

> Some old men murmur against new customs 'which were not known in *my* father's days' and attribute any misfortune to lack of reverence for tradition, a wrong name adopted for a chief's headquarters, the extraordinary attitude of the Government in objecting to indiscriminate destruction of forests, or in fact to anything except their own laziness and jealous conservatism. It is perhaps fortunate for his reputation, though distinctly troublesome for his travelling, that the advent of the PC to some outlying sector invariably appears to be heralded by a downpour of rain.[23]

22. The National Archives (TNA) of the United Kingdom, CO 736/14, Tanganyika Territory Administration Reports 1934, PC Report Tanga Region, 58.
23. Ibid., 58.

The PC's statement that the rumour about the bearded baby was 'native superstition' demonstrates his belief that it was unnecessary for him and his team to understand the context in which the rumour was produced since there was no immediate danger emanating from it. Other British officials took a keen interest in questions of 'superstition'.[24] But since the story about the bearded baby was not a threat and did not clash with his interests in the relatively quiet 1930s, the PC and his staff could afford to dismiss the story out of hand. Still, the figure of the bearded baby carried meaning, even though it is difficult to unravel what the image of a bearded baby might have signified at the time.

It is clear, however, that the image was not unique to the Pare and Usambara Mountains. For example, in a popular Xhosa riddle from South Africa, the image of a woman who carries a bearded baby on her back is associated with a maize-cob.[25] The link between maize, the basic starch that accompanies almost every meal in southern and eastern Africa, and a bearded baby signifies issues around harvesting, and anxieties about food security and famine. If a maize harvest is destroyed, there will always be famine. Another example is the case of French West Africa where in the 1930s, the few African teachers who had been educated in French schools complained that their countrymen and women thought them to be 'a bearded baby'[26]—a person too young to be in a position to impart knowledge and wisdom onto others, particularly when the new (colonial) knowledge was eyed with suspicion. In this case, the bearded baby signified the contestation of social hierarchies as it played on the tensions between new knowledge and new ways of learning on one hand and old age, tradition, and experience on the other. Apart from representing the tensions between young and old generations, the bearded baby was also an image of changing power structures under colonial rule.

Coming back to the Usambara Mountains, the bearded baby appeared in a year following a drought. When the rains did come that year, they came too late and then did not stop until July, destroying a good part of the crops, including the important maize crop.[27] According to the rumour, the baby suggests planting during the third bout of rain, which usually comes late in the year in November and December. While the climate in the Usambara Mountains allows permanent cultivation throughout the year, maize is only planted and harvested once a year, as it takes between six and seven months to mature. It is usually planted during the long rains in March and harvested in September.[28] What could such a delay of planting the main crop on which food security depended signify, particularly in a year following the drought year of 1933, a drought that also coincided with the globally discussed American dust bowl of the 1930s?[29]

Might the advice of the bearded baby to delay planting thus allude to the burdensome task of leaving one's home in order to find a way of procuring cash for tax collection? Paying one's taxes had become very difficult in the early 1930s due to the global economic depression. The high rate of male absenteeism in late-colonial Shambaai village life indicates that many peasants were also wage workers at the time.[30] Local residents associated the increased difficulty to procure cash for

24. White, *Speaking with Vampires*, 25–27.
25. A. C. Jordan, *Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary in Xhosa*, Berkeley, CA 1973, 30.
26. J.-H. Jézéquel, '"Collecting Customary Law": Educated Africans, Ethnographical Writings, and Colonial Justice in French West Africa', in: B. N. Lawrance / E. L. Osborn / R. L. Roberts (eds), *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*, Madison, WI 2006, 139–158, 152.
27. TNA, CO 736/14, Tanganyika Territory Administration Reports 1934, Department of Agriculture Report, Annexure 1: annual review of the northeastern circle, 32.
28. M. Attems, *Bauernbetriebe in tropischen Höhenlagen Ostafrikas. Die Usambara-Berge im Übergang von der Subsistenz- zur Marktwirtschaft*, München 1967, 60–61.
29. D. Anderson, 'Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography, and Drought: The Colonial State and Soil Conservation in East Africa during the 1930s', in: *African Affairs* 83 (1984) 332, 321–343, 326–328.
30. Tanzania National Archives in Dar es Salaam (TNA\DSM), 4, 269/6: Mlalo Basin Rehabilitation Scheme, 1947–49, no title, 130.

tax payments with the internal succession quarrels among the chiefly lineage. According to an angry petition of 1933 signed by the 'citizens of Usambara', the letter-writers found the chiefs, involved as they were in internal power struggles, guilty of causing the famine that ruined peasants' lives by holding back the rains.[31] The chiefs' internal struggles occupied them to such an extent that they did not realize the burden taxation imposed on the ordinary man. Read from this perspective, the bearded baby appears as a critical commentary on the succession politics that diverted the rulers' attention away from the common good. Moreover, it was an ironic commentary on the forced labour masked as communal labour that had recently been introduced to combat soil erosion in the area. This new labour regime prevented people from cultivating their own fields, which was felt as a particular encumbrance after the drought year.[32]

The perhaps more obvious message that the rumour carried was, as in the case of French West Africa, that the bearded baby was a metaphor for a person perceived as an intrusive know-it-all while lacking the wisdom that usually comes with age and experience. In Shambaai, the rumour about the bearded baby was a way to mock both the British and local staff of the agricultural office. Acting as experts and bringing new knowledge with them, British agricultural officers and so-called native agricultural instructors who had come to tackle the problem of soil erosion could have been seen as 'bearded babies', people who relied on new and perhaps faulty knowledge at a time when old wisdom about the cultivation cycle was still popular. This interpretation does not seem to be too far-fetched. After all, the bearded baby of the rumour selects the wrong time for planting in the local cultivation cycle. Agricultural officers might have been perceived as immature and lacking in knowledge or as disrupting traditional forms of knowledge-based cultivation. Given that the agricultural sector had received more attention from the colonial government than any other from the 1930s onwards, such an interpretation is likely.[33] In a similar vein, the rumour also had to do with the way in which development politics were communicated and how people felt about them. It is clear that many British and Tanzanian agricultural officers had a negative attitude towards what they perceived as the 'lazy peasant'. The rumour has it that the baby died right after passing on its wisdom. This might suggest that the new knowledge itself might not have a long life either.

It is clear that the figure of the bearded baby is ambiguous. There is the contradictory association between wisdom and young age, as well as the unclarified question as to whether the bearded baby transmits helpful or destructive advice. This ambiguity resonates with Swahili writer Euphrase Kezilahabi's 1991 novel *Mzingile*, which opens with the birth of a bearded baby that already spoke to its mother during pregnancy and then again at birth. In the novel, the mother is frightened and runs away, never to return. The bearded baby is given the name Kakulu.[34] The name underscores the character's ambiguity, as Kakulu can be translated as both old man and young child. As a whole, the novel takes a critical perspective on religion, positing Kakulu as god but endowing him with human eccentricities and earthly pettiness.[35] Clearly, the image of the bearded baby has its own ambiguous baggage in eastern Africa, as well as in other parts of the continent. The different examples of the figure of the bearded baby are a demonstration of how ideas and concepts travel, while being adapted and reworked according to local circumstances. Finally, as Luise White

31. TNA\DSM, 4/6/2, Vol.I: Administration native, Usambara District, no date (probably between April and June 1933), all subjects of Usambara to the DO Lushoto, 70.
32. Although the Usambara Scheme itself was only implemented in 1946, measures against soil erosion had already been in place since the early 1930s; see TNA, CO 736/14, Tanganyika Territory Administration Reports 1934, Department of Agriculture Report, Annexure 1: annual review of the northeastern circle, 34.
33. Anderson, 'Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography, and Drought'.
34. E. Kezilahabi, *Mzingile*, Nairobi 1991, 1–7.
35. R. A. Tchokothe, *Transgression in Swahili Narrative Fiction and Its Reception*, Zugl.: Bayreuth University dissertation, 2012, Berlin 2014, 94.

argues, those about whom rumours are told are ambiguous and controversial. In the context of the Usambara Scheme and the protest that it sparked, it was the agricultural officers who were controversial. Even though they were either perceived as dangerous or ridiculed on account of their ill-fitting advice, the colonial administration could afford not to investigate the rumour during the quiet 1930s. However, when political opposition stirred up Shambaai in the 1950s, similar idiosyncratic expressions had to be policed.

3. On pseudonyms and subtle critique

In contrast to the 1930s, when rumours of dissent were not understood as a threat, the political agitation of the 1950s changed the picture for the British. After the publicly forced abdication of the unpopular paramount chief in 1947 and the ban of TAA in 1949, the 1950s brought on another wave of protest.

The agricultural department and the Lushoto district office had spared no expenses in employing scholars to produce various reports on Shambaa culture, agriculture, and customs; to have experts conduct scientific soil evaluations; and to cultivate demonstration plots in the neighbourhood of Shita.[36] However, they had not realized that Shambaa protest was not only concerned with the scheme against soil erosion, but also with the sharply growing inequalities within Shambaa society, as represented by wealthy but unpopular chiefs. They had witnessed open resistance towards Chief Ali Mashina in Mlalo, where they were forced to concede and reinstate the popular Chief Hassani.[37] The administration had also seen a dramatic rise of pending cases in native courts due to offences against scheme work.[38] It had experienced passive resistance and open defiance from the mountain dwellers. Yet they still believed in the possibility of implementing the Usambara Scheme, which was closely tied to the personalities of the chiefs who oversaw its implementation. The legitimacy of the system of chiefly rule was in danger. Naturally, many peasants grew more and more impatient, and the pressure on the native authorities grew steadily.

In August 1952, a group of radical nationalists and anti-chief activists were prosecuted by the British in a conspiracy trial as the 'ring leaders' of the most recent upheavals in the Usambara Mountains.[39] They were accused of 'undermining the lawful power and authority of the Chief [. . .] in an attempt to cause dissatisfaction against the Usambaa Land Usage Rules'.[40] In a letter from the district commissioner (DC) to the PC, DC Shelton explained that the accused individuals were members of the *chama cha raia*, the party of citizens who were clearly associated with TANU,[41] and that they held conspiratorial organizational meetings in various villages, in which they distributed small handwritten notes in order to mobilize the people for a march on the capital city of Vugha and called for the beating of war drums. The main reason for the unrest was the extension of the Usambara Scheme to the whole of Shambaai. Since the chief had passed these rules, they demanded his removal from office and planned a mass march to his headquarters. The march never materialized, however, as the chief's henchmen managed to break up the meetings in time.

36. Conte, *Highland Sanctuary*, 111–114.
37. TNA\DSM, 31207 Tanganyika Secretariat. Local Government. Native Chiefs: Usambara District, Tanga Province, Report: The Agitation against Zumbe Ali of Mlalo, 19.6.1946, 4 and 9.
38. S. Lämmert, 'Finding the Right Words: Languages of Litigation in Shambaa Native Courts in Tanganyika, c.1925–60', unpublished PhD thesis, European University Institute, Florence, 2017, 83–97.
39. TNA\KEW, CO 736/36, Tanganyika Territory Administration Reports 1952, Annual Report of the Tanga Province for the Year 1952, 158.
40. TNA\DSM, 72/44/16, Native Affairs General Usambara Native Associations (chama undermining the Native Authorities including anonymous letters), unnumbered envelope, 1.
41. TNA\KEW, CO 736/36, Tanganyika Territory Administration Reports 1952, Annual Report of the Tanga Province for the Year 1952, 158. With respect to the party being founded in Mlalo, see Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, 497.

Shelton wanted that the 16 people taken into custody to be prosecuted, and at the same time that the maximum punishment for their offence be sought, which still seemed too small to him in relation to the offence. He argued that the case ought to serve as a precedent to deter others. After all, he complained, 'these persons have caused the administration of the N[ative] A[uthorities] to come to a virtual stand-still in certain areas'.[42] Shelton added that the discrediting of the Usambara Scheme had had very unsettling effects on the people. Furthermore, he pointed out the existence of a procedure for the chiefs' removal from office,

> but this procedure is not vested in a collection of persons who take such action upon themselves. If there is a body for people who wish him to be removed from office the correct procedure would be to approach those who appointed him, i.e. the Government.

This procedure in itself ultimately implied that the chances of the chief's removal before a government body would be very low. Shelton argued that 'using unconstitutional means to depose the Chief is tantamount to conspiring against him, and that a conspiracy against him is tantamount to undermining his lawful power and authority'.[43]

In this context, a handwritten letter signed with the pseudonym 'Mahanyu Kibanga' reached the PC in September 1952. Mahanyu Kibanga's letter had been preceded by a number of other letters he wrote in late August and early September 1952. All of them addressed the PC, with copies sent to the DC in Lushoto and the Governor in Dar es Salaam. In them, Mahanyu referred much more concretely to the ringleader case of 1952. I have chosen to analyse this more cryptic letter in order to show Mahanyu Kibanga's creativity on one hand, and, on the other, the difficulties the British had in understanding its vernacularized message. The letter shows the complicated twists in Tanzanian interpretations of originally European messages, which eventually rendered them difficult to understand for the British. In the letter, the author threatened to serve Paramount Chief Kimweri Mputa Magogo's head on a silver plate to the PC.[44]

Many individuals either chose to use knowledge from mission and governmental schools or drew from rights talk when they addressed British officials. The peculiar mix of the language of Christianity, slavery, and the civilizing mission was frequently used in such letters. It appears that the individual hiding behind the pseudonym Mahanyu Kibanga, too, was well versed in the Scripture and in English history. His letter to the PC of Tanga reads,

> We are asking only one thing for advice: What has been done to King Charles by the English citizens? I am speaking very openly about this letter, namely that you will receive a phone call from Lushoto from the DC when we bring the head of King Kimweri of Vugha the way you wish it and we do not wish it, but we will do what you did to your king in England. The promise will be fulfilled by the red wine as a symbol of Kimweri's blood that will flow then. Reply to me before we have fulfilled this promise. Amen. Thank you, Mahanyu Kibanga.[45]

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42. TNA\DSM, 72/44/16, Native Affairs General Usambara Native Associations (chama undermining the Native Authorities including anonymous letters), unnumbered envelope, 2.
43. Ibid., unnumbered envelope, 3.
44. Ibid., 10.9.1952, Pseudonym to PC, 6B.
45. TNA\DSM, 72/44/16, Native Affairs General Usambara Native Associations (chama undermining the Native Authorities including anonymous letters), 10.9.1952, Pseudonym to PC, 6B. All translations from Swahili into English are mine. The Swahili original is reproduced in the following: 'Tunauliza shauri moja tu: King Chales alifanywa nini? Na raia wa Kiingereza nasema juu ya barua hii waziwazi. Kwamba utapata simu kutoka Lushoto. Kwa Bwana Dc tukipeleka kichwa cha kimweri mfalme wa Vuga mlivyotaka na sisi hatuvitaki lakini tutafanya kama mlivyomfanya king wenu Uingereza. Ahadi lazima utatimia wino huo wekundu ni alama ya damu ya Kimweri ambayo itatoka wakati huo nipata jibu kabla hatujatimiza ahadi hio Amini. Asante Mahanyu Kibanga'.

There are two fascinating tropes in this very short letter, which I have cited in full. First, Mahanyu Kibanga compared the famous seventeenth-century struggle against Stuart absolutism by English Puritans and Parliament Republicans with the discontent of the Shambaa. The reference not only sheds light on the history curricula of colonial schools in Tanganyika territory, but also gives insight into creative writing strategies employed by Africans under colonial rule, a phenomenon explored by Derek Peterson in Gikuyu writings.[46]

Second, the 'red wine' as 'a sign of Kimweri's blood' is an obvious, yet interestingly altered reference to the Eucharist as the central sacrament of Christianity. The image of Kimweri's royal blood here is equated with Christ's own sacrifice, ritually re-enacted during the Lord's supper, the Eucharist.

It is curious that in Mahanyu Kibanga's account, Chief Kimweri is equated with Jesus Christ. Kimweri was certainly not seen as the saviour by his subjects, but the language of Christian altruism and sacrifice lent itself to Mahanyu Kibanga's creative, if unorthodox, appropriation. His amalgamation of worldly and Christian doctrine is striking. It was certainly not what missionaries had hoped for, nor was it what history teachers in colonial schools had wanted to impart. Both the references to the Stuart king and to Jesus Christ should be understood as invitations by Mahanyu Kibanga to his readers to ponder the role of Chief Kimweri Mputa Magogo, not as a real warning that the chief was to suffer the same fate as the English king or Jesus Christ, both of whom paid with their lives. Nonetheless, the letter suggests that there were commonalities between the way Kimweri's subjects felt towards him and the discontent that English commoners had felt about their king. Just like the English commoners of the seventeenth-century, the Shambaa felt betrayed by their leader. Both comparisons might lack substance, but they are elaborate proof of the ability of letter-writers to draw from discourses that they had encountered through the British and missionary presence and to creatively make them serve their own purposes.

Jesus Christ sacrificed himself for the common good, or what the Shambaa would call 'public health'. Mahanyu Kibanga's letter suggests that he invoked the image of Christ's sufferings for humankind not simply because he wanted to use another stark example from British culture that showed off his knowledge and threatened the chief. He also used the Christ analogy because, unlike Kimweri, Jesus Christ accepted his fate and thus, from a Shambaa perspective, acted upon the principle of reciprocity. The basis of the old contract between the Shambaa and their king was reciprocity. The people gave tribute in the form of labour or military service, and in turn, the chief offered protection. The superiority of the king was understood by everyone. He might even be referred to as the saviour—against wild animals, droughts, famine, locust plagues, wars, and slave raids. As conceptualized in Shambaa thought, public health meant plentiful rainfall, a general peaceful and healthy relationship between the paramount chief and his people, fair tribute collections, and the right to appeal court decisions.[47] But the paramount had departed significantly from the old ideal. The former practice of *ghunda*, tribute labour, had been replaced with tax payments, but cultivators had the additional burden of having to perform scheme work to keep soil erosion in check. On top of the double burden, the chief also neglected his responsibility for the conducting of fair appeal trials, as the wave of complaints demonstrate.[48] Apparently, the letter-writer and many others felt that he was no longer protecting his people. The chief had lost his credibility, and it was no longer viable to conceive of him as a just king or saviour in the same way as his ancestor Mbegha, the founder of the Shambaa kingdom, had been seen. The motif of an

46. Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 245.
47. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*, 7–8.
48. Lämmert, 'Finding the Right Words', chapter 3.

unjust king who breaks the contract with his people, thus inviting protest, resonates with the idea of legitimate resistance against tyranny that was prevalent in early seventeenth-century England.[49]

While Mahanyu Kibanga's letter does not replicate the specific Swahili wording of the catechism—he uses the word *ahadi* (promise), not *agano*, which is the Swahili translation for 'covenant'—a looser thematic loan from the language of Christianity is obvious. It was never Mahanyu Kibanga's vision to replicate the precise wording of the Scripture or the exact history of the fight against Stuart absolutism, but rather to use images, associations, and scripts acquired in a different context, such as in the church or in history lessons, to underline his grievances in a way that would resonate with the colonial administration.

Hence, this telling letter can be read not only as him showing off his unconventional knowledge but also as an attempt to turn British and colonial repertoires on their heads. His letter was an open challenge to Kimweri, the native authorities, and ultimately the British. Although the subject matter of the letter was concerned with Chief Kimweri, Mahanyu Kibanga did not address him directly, but sent his letter to the highest British representative in the whole of Tanga Province. By enlarging his audience—a strategic tool very frequently used by Shambaa letter-writers and petitioners—Mahanyu Kibanga went beyond displaying his dissatisfaction with the paramount by seeking to hold the British accountable for the unrest in Shambaai, as his letter implied that he expected the colonial administration to remove Kimweri from office. Through the mentioned references, Mahanyu Kibanga turned the lessons of history and Christianity back on the British. If their long and glorious history was so concerned with justice and participation of the people, he seemed to suggest, how could they then justify defiling their reputation by supporting a corrupt and unfair chief? It was an extremely popular strategy of the Shambaa and other African petitioners to draw from lessons they had learned from the British. These appropriations were taken from different sources, be it war propaganda, catechism lessons, or the history curricula of colonial higher education. They transformed the previous meaning and sent the new message back to the British in a vernacular that was adapted to local circumstances and needs.

Mahanyu Kibanga chose his words well. Most likely, he wrote the letters himself instead of employing a scribe. His letters were all handwritten. Due to the secretive nature of the letters, he could not easily trust scribes to do the writing for him. I suggest that because he chose to write the letter himself, it is likely that he also chose his pseudonym with care. The use of pseudonyms and onomastic symbols is a common Swahili way of conveying meaning.[50] The Shambaa meaning of the name Mahanyu can be translated as 'the one who has ordered meat'.[51] It is a central aspect of the Shambaa founding myth that Mbegha, the chosen king, was a famous hunter, and it was precisely because his hunting skills had impressed the Shambaa so thoroughly that they made him king. While in Shambaa myth, Mbegha is portrayed as the 'provider of meat', the Shambaa are the ones who were introduced to meat by him. In other words, the provider of meat is powerful; the receivers of meat welcome and accommodate him, but are less powerful and rely on his protection.[52]

49. H. Höpfl / M. P. Thomson, 'The History of Contract as a Motif in Political Thought', in: *The American Historical Review* 84 (1979) 4, 919–944.

50. K. W. Wamitila, 'What's in a Name: Towards Literary Onomastics in Kiswahili Literature', in: *Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere* 60 (1999), 35–44.

51. Informal conversation with Bakari Ally Saidi, Moa, Mlalo, November 10, 2014. Mahanyu is also the name of a clan that migrated from Pare to Shambaai. Their ancestor was given the land on top of a mountain and the name Mahanyu. In this story, Mahanyu was given his name because both activities, hunting game and climbing the high mountain to reach the land he was given, involved effort. The Shambaa verb "hanyahanya" means to make an effort, to fight. See informal conversation with Ramadhani Mahanyu, Lushoto, 5 November 2014.

52. S. Feierman, *The Shambaa Kingdom. A History*, Madison, WI 1974, 54.

In this context, the chosen pseudonym could have been meant as a challenge to the one who hunts game and provides meat. Instead of waiting until the hunter-king chooses to offer the gift of meat, the meat is being ordered, instead of being passively waited for and humbly accepted. The name Mahanyu thus signifies an inversion of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled.

In the end, the man behind Mahanyu Kibanga was found. He happened to have been employed as a clerk by the Vugha mission. The DC reported his relief after having found the man who had been using a 'fictitious' name. He was prosecuted as a criminal and eventually 'admits that his letters are groundless'.[53]

This and the strong British reaction to the ringleader case show the alarm that they had felt. DC Shelton had even hoped the Governor himself would intervene. Against the backdrop of the never-ending protest against the Usambara scheme and the troubles of 1947 when Chief Shebughe Magogo had to abdicate in the face of popular pressure, Shelton's worry was certainly justified. However, neither did British officials anticipate that the scheme would soon have to be abandoned—which took place only five years later—nor was it likely that the district office understood the full implications of Mahanyu Kibanga's references. By phrasing his protest in a language riddled with references to English history and Christian values, Mahanyu Kibanga showed his partial fluency in English culture and colonial discourse. By appropriating the historical English fight against the Stuart tyranny as well as the language of Christian brotherly love and compassion, he tried to claim equal rights in the name of democracy and Christianity by implicitly criticizing colonial double standards.

In general, petitioners did not simply borrow colonial discourse; rather, they vernacularized certain ideas and symbols to make them fit the local circumstances. In addition, they made use of specific Shambaa images or employed fictitious names that were imbued with local meanings. Shambaa writers of letters and petitions appropriated historical figures, contemporary politicians, and metaphors from religious texts to creatively underline their claims and make them meaningful not only to the people whom they wished to represent but also to British officials. They certainly did not worry about whether they blurred the line between fact and fiction. Much like in Derek Peterson's work, the rhetoric in the Usambara petitions shows that the writers used plots, characters, and ideas described in texts that they knew, and made them act in their own world. As Peterson put it, characters did not stay on the page.[54]

However, the responses that Mahanyu Kibanga's letters drew make clear that the British colonial administration did not really engage with this playful dimension and the political imagination inherent in it. Unlike in the case of the rumour about the bearded baby, they did try to understand the letter, but naturally they did so from their own operational interest, which viewed Mahanyu Kibanga and the ringleaders as a threat to the colonial administration. The British did in fact address the threat by locking up the ringleaders and prosecuting Mahanyu Kibanga; however, they did not realize that they could have understood more about the uneasy relationship between the chief and his opponents through this letter. Moreover, the African and Shambaa faction of the colonial administration, unsurprisingly, did not alert the British to the deeper understanding of these localized versions of criticizing chiefly abuse of power.

4. Conclusion

This article highlighted misunderstandings between the colonial administration and Tanzanians during late-colonial rule. The examples were drawn from different genres of sources: rumours and

53. TNA\DSM, 72/44/16, Native Affairs General Usambara Native Associations (chama undermining the Native Authorities including anonymous letters), DC to PC, 16.9.52, 126.

54. Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 245.

petitions. The British dealt with them in different ways—depending on the genre, the level of threat implied, and the political context of the time.

They did not feel the need to investigate the rumour about the bearded baby, because the rumour circulated during a relatively peaceful time, and did not present an open threat to colonial rule. Nevertheless, it carried a message about the colonial experience of Tanzanians. This message did not necessarily address the British in the first place; the audience of the rumour were the mountain dwellers. Nevertheless, the rumour *was* about the British and their intervention into local cultivation practices, and the controversial role of agricultural experts. In this case, the colonial administration could 'afford' to misunderstand or not to investigate the rumour further because, even though the British were the subject of the rumour, the rumour-mongers did not intend to have a direct communication with the British. The image of the bearded baby also appeared in other parts of the continent. It is an example of how ideas and concepts travelled in the wider region.

The Mahanyu Kibanga petition, on the contrary, was intended for a British audience. Even though the British tried, they nonetheless failed to fully understand it. When it was important for their operational interests, as was the case with Mahanyu's petition, they did follow up on such communications and tried to make sense of them. However, sometimes it was not possible to understand the vernacularization of originally European discourse or concepts. Such misunderstandings happened when appropriations and inversions, such as Mahanyu Kibanga's pseudonym or the allusions to unjust rule through the Christ analogy, were so complete that, aside from some vague relation to the original message of the appropriated source, a concise 'retranslation' was almost impossible. Communications like this were misunderstood because they were so hard to read and not because the British did not try. That the most complete instances of vernacularization were not fully comprehended by the colonial administration did not mean that they were not addressed by the British. They investigated the Mahanyu case, kept records, and neatly filed such communications. This indicates that the British wanted to 'wiretap' these non-governable forms of communication, which created colonial anxiety precisely because of their unconventional, non-conformist, and elusive style.

The person using the pseudonym of Mahanyu Kibanga tried to address the British in scripts and images acquired through colonial institutions, but the recipients and somehow the writer too became lost in these transfers. Particularly in the practice of translating into local contexts, images and persons that were thought of as unique personae in history or Christianity could produce messages that were ultimately ambiguous at best and 'untranslatable' at worst. Contrary to the ideas formulated by intermediaries who were more fluent in the bureaucratic idiom of the colonial state, the political imagination that comes to light in the material presented did not receive the desired response from the British. Despite communicating in relative proximity, the close distance could not always be bridged.

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