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## PATRONAGE, MILLENNIALISM AND THE SERPENT GOD MUMBO IN SOUTH-WEST KENYA, 1912–34

*Brett L. Shadle*

From 1914 to 1934 the creed of Mumbo, the serpent god of Lake Victoria, extended across south-west Kenya. Mumbo condemned Christianity as rotten and vowed to cleanse the land of white people—colonial officials and missionaries—and their lackeys—chiefs and converts. It pledged to provide followers with abundant cattle and grain. Mumbo, which threatened to sever the arms of those adorned in Western clothes and transform whites and their allies into monkeys, would seem to have had little in common with European rule. It comes as some surprise, then, to learn that Africans had ‘quaintly compared [Mumbo] to serikali’, Government.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I wish to explain how a millennial movement like Mumbo could be compared to Serikali, and thus why it presented a genuine challenge to Europeans and their African allies. Patron–client relations covered south-western Kenya (home to Luo and Gusii peoples) in a series of overlapping webs. Clients offered labour, tribute, and allegiance, while patrons provided protection, food, and economic and social security. This was the environment in which, from 1908, colonial chiefs were created and missionaries set up shop. In many ways both groups acted as former patrons had, yet differed from them in certain fundamental respects. Chiefs and missionaries made extreme demands of their clients, and professed to represent higher, omnipotent powers, Serikali in the case of chiefs, God in the case of missionaries.

It was within the disturbed socio-political context of the early colonial period that Mumbo could be compared to Serikali, or, indeed, to God. All three powers—God, Serikali, and Mumbo—spoke the language of patronage. Like chiefs and missionaries, Mumbo’s adepts acted as patrons, backed by an omnipotent being. But Mumbo demanded much less of its followers than did the others. This was the key to Mumbo’s popularity: it spoke fluently the local language of patronage, while it boasted the power to silence the new would-be patrons, whose misinterpretation of that language caused them to overburden clients. This was why Mumbo faced repression: power in south-west Kenya

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<sup>1</sup> S. H. Fazan, ‘Report on Investigation made concerning the Worship of Mumbo’, 1915, Kenya National Archive (KNA): South Kavirondo Political Record Book.

was a zero sum game. The more clientele Mumbo attracted, the fewer could be integrated into the struggling patron–client networks of missionaries and chiefs.

This interpretation of Mumbo challenges the received historiography. Mumbo has been held up as an anti-colonial resistance movement *par excellence*. Mumbo promised to drive out the imperialists and condemned the white man's religion. Given the Gusii blood which had been shed in three earlier British 'punitive' expeditions, another, not overtly violent avenue had to be found to express their rejection of colonial rule. As a movement intent on awaiting, not inducing, the end of colonialism, Mumbo served just this purpose (Maxon, 1989: 67, 74, 95–8). That Mumbo was patently and primarily anti-colonial has not been questioned by scholars: what has become the main point of contention is the nature of Mumbo as 'religious' or 'political'. Several scholars have argued that Mumbo was a purely political movement (Maxon, 1989; Ochieng', 1977; Ogot and Ochieng', 1972), and that whatever spiritual or religious aura may have surrounded Mumbo was consciously adopted as a cover for its political ends (Ogot and Ochieng', 1972: 167; cf. Mwanzi, 1985: 165–6). Wipper (1970, 1977), in contrast, insists that, while people followed Mumbo for political reasons, they were attracted by its religious overtones as well.

While Mumboites certainly were dissatisfied with colonial rule, Mumboism was much more than just that. First, making distinctions between 'the religious' and 'the political' is ultimately impossible: in many African societies the two were intimately intertwined (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1963; Fields, 1997),<sup>2</sup> and trying to separate the two impedes our investigations.<sup>3</sup> In this regard the historiography of Mumbo has reached a dead end. Bypassing the 'religious or political' debate allows us to re-examine Mumbo's structure and the reasons why adherents would be attracted to it. Placing Mumbo in the context of local ideas of patronage and of power reveals it to be not simply a challenge to colonial (and missionary) rule but an alternative, and an attractive one at that. It is here that we grasp the meaning and importance of Mumbo.

#### HISTORY OF MUMBOISM<sup>4</sup>

Mumboism may have had roots in earlier spiritual beliefs, but the experiences of Onyango Dunde of Central Kavirondo District

<sup>2</sup> My thanks to one of the anonymous referees for drawing my attention to the former source.

<sup>3</sup> Decades ago Eric Hobsbawm (1959: 66) made the same point in regard to all 'primitive' societies. Nonetheless, scholars of millennial movements continue futilely to debate where lines should be drawn between the secular and the religious (Rowley, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> The following derives primarily from administrative and missionary archives, but see also Maxon (1989: 64–9, 73–8, 84–5, 95–8), Ogot and Ochieng' (1972), Ochieng' (1977: 155–63), Wipper (1970, 1977).

(inhabited mainly by Luo) set the stage for its advance into South Kavirondo.<sup>5</sup> Reclining on the shore of Lake Victoria one day in 1913, Onyango was swallowed up by a giant serpent which had arisen from the waters. The serpent, calling itself Mumbo, regurgitated Onyango and spoke:

Those whom I choose personally, and also those who acknowledge me, will live forever in plenty. Their crops will grow of themselves and there will be no more need to work. I will cause cattle to come up out of the lake in great numbers to those who believe in me . . . All Europeans are your enemies, but the time is shortly coming when they will all disappear from our country . . . Lastly, my followers must immediately slaughter all their cattle, sheep and goats. When this is done, I will provide them with as many as they want from the lake. ['Nyangweso', 1930]<sup>6</sup>

Mumbo's sermon resonated widely, and although Onyango was briefly imprisoned he was much sought after for information about Mumbo.<sup>7</sup> At least five Luo men of South Kavirondo (four of Karachuonyo location and one, Mosi, of Kabondo) made pilgrimages to Onyango, each offering tribute of a goat or an ox.<sup>8</sup>

Mosi and the others were among those I call adepts—leaders with the spiritual powers to apprehend the serpent. In a dream-like state Mosi met the serpent,<sup>9</sup> and Mochorongé, a Gusii adept in Nyaribari, had his own mystical experiences.<sup>10</sup> Adepts, the earthly representatives of Mumbo, were also the patrons around whom gathered adherents, or clients. Some adepts and perhaps adherents wore special garb—cloaks or insignia or, among Gusii Mumboites, Luo headdresses.

Mumboism soon took root in South Kavirondo District. In August 1914 the administration sentenced Mosi to one year in prison for witchcraft, presumably in connection with Mumboism. Later that year trader Richard Gethin's arrival in Kisii (the headquarters of South Kavirondo District) disturbed the administration, for 'strange Europeans were not at the time encouraged in [the district] owing to the

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<sup>5</sup> The exact origins of Mumbo remain murky. Obondo-Rambo of Sakwa (Central Kavirondo) may have been the first to be possessed by the serpent god, in the late nineteenth century. Onyango would perhaps then have been a follower of Obondo before his own experience with Mumbo. Onyango lived in Alego; Indidis *et al.* (1979) may be correct to suggest that Mumbo came to Onyango from the Yala river, the border between Sakwa and Alego. Nonetheless, Mumbo was always associated with Lake Victoria. Until interviews are conducted in these locations we cannot be sure of the details.

<sup>6</sup> 'Nyangweso' was the pseudonym of an unknown colonial administrator. He seems to have drawn his information both from colonial records and from discussions with Africans, and is a reliable summary of much of what was known of Mumboism.

<sup>7</sup> Fazan report, statement of Nyaburi Agoya.

<sup>8</sup> Fazan report, statement of Chief Ovinda; South Kavirondo Monthly Intelligence Report, November 1933, KNA: Adm 12/4/4.

<sup>9</sup> South Kavirondo Monthly Intelligence Report, November 1933; Fazan report.

<sup>10</sup> South Kavirondo Monthly Intelligence Report, November 1933. The role of dreams in prophecies in central Kenya is explored in Ambler (1995).

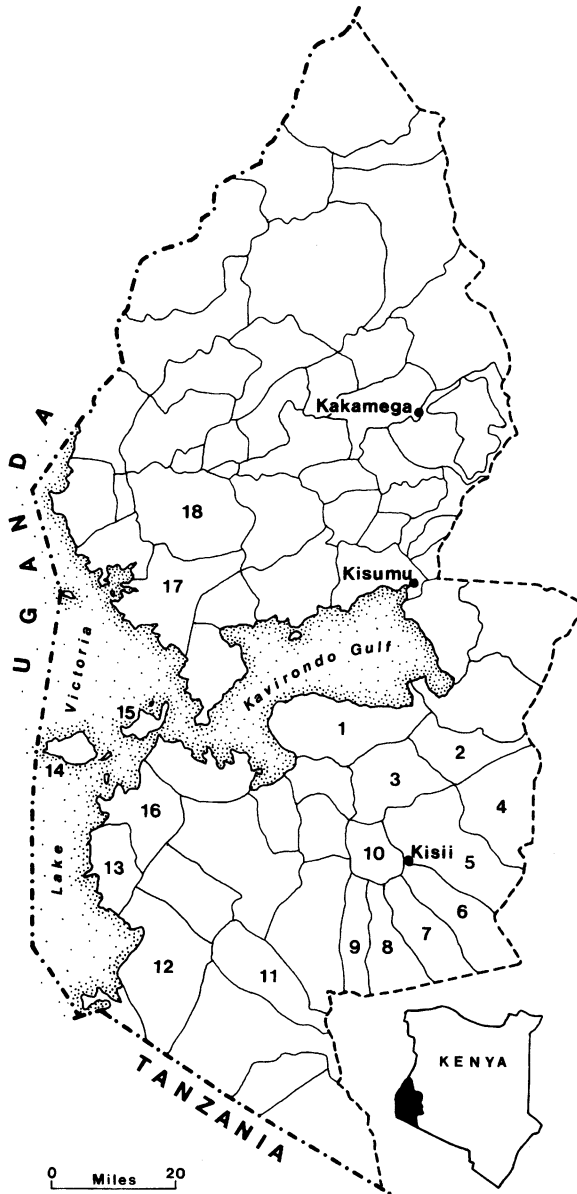


FIGURE 1 Certain locations in the south of Nyanza Province, Kenya. 1 Karachuonyo, 2 Kabondo, 3 Kasipul, 4 North Mugirango, 5 Getutu, 6 Nyaribari, 7 Bassi, 8 Majoge, 9 South Mugirango, 10 Wanjare, 11 Kanyamkago, 12 West Konyango (including Kadem), 13 Gwasssi, 14 Mfangano, 15 Rusinga, 16 East Konyango (including Kaniamwa), 17 Sakwa, 18 Alego. (Based on S. Ominde, *Land and Population Movements in Kenya*, Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968, fig. 6.3)

Mumbo trouble'.<sup>11</sup> Mumboites were kept under close surveillance, and in February 1915 the District Commissioner (DC) 'sent out many of the Mumbo Worshipers to work' in Mombasa.<sup>12</sup>

In the Luo location of Karachuonyo, Seventh-day Adventists (who, along with Catholics, were the only Christians evangelising in South Kavirondo) came to blows with Mumboites. By July 1915 the Seventh-day Adventist converts, led by Okelo Oyugi, had ingratiated themselves with a local headman. Without 'any express order' from the headman, Okelo directed a group of his followers, armed with *viboko* (whips; sing. *kiboko*), to collect Mumboites for government road work, or, as the Mumboites maintained, to repair Okelo's house and cultivate his banana plot. As one of the Christians later reported, 'I hit [one Mumboite] with a Kiboko lightly, and said: "let us go to work on the Road".' District Officer Sidney Fazan investigated the ensuing fracas, concluding that the followers of Christ were more to blame (and on the whole more disruptive) than the followers of Mumbo. Of the latter, Fazan reported that 'they do not seem to me to be intractable'. He did however, reserve final judgement: 'I should not even like to say they are not disloyal here,' Fazan wrote, 'but I have found no evidence of it.'<sup>13</sup> District Commissioner Campbell, a brutal man fully ignorant of the African world around him (Shadle, 2000: 78–9), disregarded the opinion of Fazan, one of the most perceptive officials colonial Kenya would have. Campbell stripped the adepts of their insignia and had them whipped.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the violence meted out by Campbell, the war years saw Mumboism advance across Gusii locations. By November 1918 adherents had given 155 head of cattle and nearly 100 sheep to adepts. Chief Onsongo of Getutu and his headmen, panicky that Mumboism was 'assuming the most alarming proportions', rounded up sixty-eight Mumboites and marched them off to Campbell. Onsongo and his fellows made the 'the unanimous request', Campbell wrote, 'that I would send the able-bodied men out to work and deal with the leaders under the Witchcraft Ordinance'. The District Commissioner, pleased with Onsongo's 'pluck' in making war on the 'superstition, ill-will, and mysterious "dawa" [medicine]' of his subjects, interrogated the Mumboites, burned their cloaks and despatched them to work out of the district.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Richard Gethin, 'An Old Settler Remembers', Rhodes House Library (Oxford University), MSS Afr. S. 1277, p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> District Commissioner, South Kavirondo, to Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza, 28 November 1918, South Kavirondo Political Record Book; Nyabururu Diary (Archives of the Mill Hill Missionaries, St Joseph College, London), entry of 18 February 1915.

<sup>13</sup> Fazan report. Campbell concluded that, at the least, Orinda and his headmen had 'all failed in their duty towards Government'. District Commissioner, South Kavirondo, to Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza, 21 July 1915, South Kavirondo Political Record Book.

<sup>14</sup> Nyabururu Diary, entry of 30 July 1915.

<sup>15</sup> Central Nyanza Political Record Book.

Gusii Mumboites were not to be deterred, however, and expanded their beliefs to incorporate the prophet Sakawa. In the 1890s Sakawa had prophesied the coming of Europeans, and that an empty valley would sprout into Kisii town. After a spirited beer-drink around 1902 Sakawa vanished. Neither his body nor his grave could be found, nor was a funeral celebrated, convincing many that he lived still.<sup>16</sup>

During several months over 1920 Sakawa supplanted the giant serpent in Mumboite thought, at least in Getutu location. Now Sakawa's materialisation would darken the sky and cast out the Europeans.<sup>17</sup> One Bonairiri was the chief exponent of these teachings. Chief Onsongo reported that she had requested permission to 'start a school' to propagate her beliefs, and District Commissioner Welby soon dispersed the coterie 'gathering round her'. 'Practically the whole of [Getutu] went to her school', Welby reported, and belief in Sakawa's imminent return was 'almost universally held, at least among the older men'.<sup>18</sup> It mattered little to Serikali whether Mumbo or Sakawa inspired millennial longings. The administration threw Bonairiri into an insane asylum and exiled four other leaders to the coast.<sup>19</sup> Sakawa subsequently returned neither to this world nor to Mumboites' beliefs.

Over the next decade Mumbo claimed few adherents. Some Mumboites were found out in a Luo location, but the chief apparently considered them harmless;<sup>20</sup> indeed, the District Commissioner thought that generally 'among the Luo [Mumbo] takes a more stolid form'.<sup>21</sup> Those exiled in 1920 were repatriated in 1923, sparking a 'small outbreak of Mumboism which was quickly suppressed'.<sup>22</sup> Again in 1927 Gusii adepts in Wanjare spoke out, discouraging young men from performing their compulsory government road work. In a previous confrontation the government had confiscated cattle from these adepts, and the District Commissioner, S. O. V. Hodge, believed that they now sought tribute from adherents to replenish their herds. The administration removed several adepts to easily supervised homes and instructed headmen to find them 'useful employment', instilling in

<sup>16</sup> M. R. R. Vidal, 'Kisii Customs', 1 May 1922, South Kavirondo Political Record Book; LeVine and Campbell (1972: 391); Ochieng' (1977). Sakawa still holds a place of respect in Gusii hearts: a prominent hotel/bar in Kisii town proudly bears his name.

<sup>17</sup> Bonairiri also told that ancestors would return from the dead if not properly mourned, and that Sakawa had reversed the natural order of black man over white, though on his return he would restore things to as they had been. This latter idea of a being changing and reversing relations between the chosen people and the oppressor is common in millennial cults. See, for example, Worsley (1968: 20).

<sup>18</sup> District Commissioner, South Kavirondo, to Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza, 5 December 1920, South Kavirondo Political Record Book; Nyabururu Diary, entry of 5 December 1920.

<sup>19</sup> District Commissioner, South Kavirondo, to Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza, 5 December 1920, South Kavirondo Political Record Book.

<sup>20</sup> 'Kinchonya Mumboism', South Kavirondo Political Record Book.

<sup>21</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1920/21.

<sup>22</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1923.

them some obviously badly needed work ethic and preventing them from 'loaf[ing] about causing trouble'.<sup>23</sup>

With another revival in 1931–33 Mumbo was finally bested. In 1931 massive locust invasions, over which adepts were believed to have power, chased many Gusii to Mumbo. Adherents surrendered large amounts of grain and cash. Adepts advised against paying full taxes, and took 'leading parts at illicit barazas [public meetings]'.<sup>24</sup> In Getutu and Muksero chiefs tried unsuccessfully to suppress Mumbo.<sup>25</sup> The climax came after a 28 November 1933 sports meet at Kisii. A number of Mumboites were among the 8,000 Africans enjoying the games. The administration failed to detect them, even though (according to the chiefs) they carried spears and swords. The next day a delegation of 'all the [Gusii] Chiefs and many of the Luo Chiefs' approached the District Commissioner to express their profound apprehension over Mumbo. The DC immediately despatched the chief and assistant chief of Getutu to round up the 200 Mumboites who, since the previous day, had been holding a dance. The chiefs unanimously recommended the suppression of Mumboism. In January 1934 nine adepts were put on trial: eight were deported and the ninth, who was lame, was thrown in prison for six months.<sup>26</sup>

The dispersal of the adepts finally silenced Mumbo. Chiefs found ways to mollify their subjects, and most Gusii began, if not to respect, at least to tolerate chiefs and missionaries (Shadle, 2000: 79–83). Mumbo quietly exits the archival records, aside from an administrative report on a man of Gwassii location: charged with incest, he blamed his sins on Mumboism. We know nothing else of this case, nor why he might have associated Mumboism with incestuousness.<sup>27</sup> A Christian separatist sect, *Dini ya Mariam* (displaying, an administrator wrote vaguely, a 'marked similarity' to Mumboism), emerged at the height of administrative paranoia during Mau Mau, leading to a belated order outlawing Mumbo. This was a meaningless gesture, for Mumboism had been dead for two decades.<sup>28</sup> In the early 1990s the last remaining Mumbo adept, *Mzee Angwenyi*, died, still living in Kisii town where a District Commissioner had long ago ordered him to move, and still stubbornly awaiting the advent of Mumbo.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1927; District Commissioner, South Kavirondo, to Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza, 2 December 1927, South Kavirondo Political Record Book; 'Mumboism', November 1927, loose paper in back of Nyabururu Diary.

<sup>24</sup> South Kavirondo Monthly Intelligence Report, November 1933.

<sup>25</sup> District Commissioner [Buxton], untitled report, c. April 1934, South Kavirondo Political Record Book.

<sup>26</sup> South Kavirondo Monthly Intelligence Reports, November and December 1933; Buxton report.

<sup>27</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1938; South Kavirondo Monthly Intelligence Report, July 1938. The administration had made several previous accusations linking Mumboism with incest, but the basis for their claims is unknown. See B. W. Bond, Temple report, June 1930; N. A. Kenyon-Slaney, 'Mumboism' April 1920, both in South Kavirondo Political Record Book.

<sup>28</sup> South Nyanza (formerly South Kavirondo) District Annual Report, 1954.

<sup>29</sup> Personal communication, Arani Nyaberi, July 1997.



## PRE-COLONIAL PATRONAGE NETWORKS

The history of Mumbo makes sense only in the context of Gusii and Luo social systems. One of the basic organising principles of these societies was the collection of people, by which a (male) person could become a 'big man', a successful and powerful citizen. A primary tool here was the patron–client system. By reviewing the nature of patronage in the fifteen years preceding, and subsequent to, conquest in 1908 we can understand chiefly and missionary power, and Mumboism, and the incompatibility between their styles of patron–client relations.

The following deals primarily with the Gusii, a patrilineal Bantu people of the south-west Kenya highlands. Over these three decades their economy rested on agriculture, most importantly the cultivation of *wimbi* (millet), while cattle served as the currency of social relations. Gusii traded with Luo at temporary markets, while all but a few coastal trading caravans skirted the region, preserving both peoples from the ravages of the nineteenth-century slave trade (Håkansson, 1994; Shadle, 2000: 45–7). Homesteads dotted the lush hillsides, each sheltering a man and his wife or wives, their small children and their sons' families. Numerous relationships linked homesteads: lineages, occasional work parties, women's rotating work parties, special 'joking' friendships, marriages, and the like. Lineages recognising a common (if perhaps fictitious) ancestor claimed membership in a clan, of which there were many. While clan frontiers did not encompass social relations, with two main exceptions clans were politically independent. First, clans identified with one of eight larger groupings, which anthropologists of the Gusii termed 'tribes'. The colonial state delimited these 'tribes' to create administrative locations, but few Gusii had evoked 'tribe' when cobbling together their identities (Lonsdale, 1977; Shadle, 2000: 37–41). Indeed, each 'tribe' sheltered clans or sub-clans of other 'tribes', dislocated by warfare or famine (Ochieng', 1974; P. Mayer, 1949). Second, Getutu constructed a chieftaincy, while the Muksero and Nyaribari 'tribes', though never true chieftaincies, did express more political solidarity than did clans of the other five 'tribes'.

We examine the Luo, a Nilotic people of the lower-lying areas closer to the shores of Lake Victoria, in less detail. With relatively poor soil and unpredictable rain, famine regularly stalked their land. With their abundant herds of cattle, however, they staved off hunger by trading for the bountiful crops of the Gusii (Shadle, 2000: 45). While we know a fair amount about Mumbo in Luo areas (the site of the Seventh-day Adventist–Mumbo conflict was a Luo location) our evidence about Mumbo, and about social relations in general, predominantly pertains to the Gusii. Luo society, however, in many ways paralleled the aspects of Gusii society we discuss here; the most meaningful divergences will be addressed separately.

Every Gusii man strove to become a 'big man'. Essential to status was having people whether they be wives, children, clients, or fictitious kin. The first step toward this was marriage. Women produced food for

subsistence and for trade, and reproduced and enlarged the size of the homestead. Children magnified men's status. Bridewealth from girls' marriages became bridewealth for contracting marriages for their brothers or fathers. A homestead of many sons could claim and exploit the best farmland and pasture. Young men took up arms to defend home and herd, and augmented the herds through cattle raids. When necessary they enforced the decisions of councils of elders, and in numbers could induce others to accede to their fathers' opinions (Håkansson, 1994; I. Mayer, 1973: 122; P. Mayer, 1949: 42).

To accomplish the more labour-intensive agricultural tasks homesteads called *risaga*, work parties. To quickly weed a plot, for example, a homestead called a *risaga*. On the appointed day neighbourhood women came and weeded through the morning, while later their husbands arrived to partake of beer and food provided by their host but cooked by his wife or wives.<sup>30</sup> Thus a homestead able liberally to furnish food and beer (that is, a homestead of many women) could call more work parties on a more regular basis, ensuring a more bountiful harvest (P. Mayer, 1951). Surplus could be invested in cattle or in women, creating new wealth. People begat prosperity, and prosperity begat people.

Clients also added to the retinue of 'big men'. Men poor in cattle sought out wealthy men for help with bridewealth, and people fleeing famine or warfare and women escaping unbearable marriages took shelter with 'big men'. Some evidence suggests that polygamists with very many wives 'farmed out' some to poor bachelors, tying the men in as clients while remaining the legal and social *pater* of any children born.<sup>31</sup> Like other dependants, male clients added to a homestead's defences, and women to its reproductive potential. All clients helped with agriculture, the surplus of which attracted and supported yet more clients (Håkansson, 1988: 62–4, 1994: 260–1). '[Gusii] long ago never killed a [stranger],' recalled one elder. 'If they found someone loitering they would welcome him and give him cattle to marry or if there was a widow he would take her over. [Gusii] wanted people' (quoted in LeVine and Campbell, 1972: 70).

Out of their many patron–client networks Getutu fashioned a chieftaincy. In the 1820s Gusii clans, routed by Maasai warriors, were scattered from their erstwhile homes on the plains east of the highlands. Getutu clans, under the leadership of Oisera, installed themselves atop Manga ridge. With Luo and Maasai raiders still molesting them, the clans deferred to Oisera as their judicial and military leader. His son Nyakundi ushered in an era of prosperity and expansion in the 1830s and 1840s. The fortunes of Getutu ebbed and flowed over the rest of the century. Some time in the 1870s or 1880s a

<sup>30</sup> For tasks deemed 'men's work', such as clearing bush, husbands contributed the bulk of the labour.

<sup>31</sup> K. L. Hunter, 'Memories of an Administrative Officer', April 1975, Rhodes House Library MSS. Afr. s. 1942.

succession dispute broke out, dividing Getutu between two competing, though still powerful, chiefly lineages (Ochieng', 1984).

Getutu constructed its chieftaincy with non-Getutu clients. After their dispersal at the hands of the Maasai, confusion reigned among all the Gusii clans. Some fled into the highlands, others became temporary clients in Luoland. Many clans sought refuge with Oisera, receiving protection in return for periodic tribute of cattle and grain. Getutu's clients, most originating from distant clans, were counted as *abasomba*, 'bought people'. As true strangers, exogamous rules were inapplicable and marriages could be contracted straight away (P. Mayer, 1949). Getutu defended its clients and diligently watched their interests, intent on rapidly integrating them into their patronage and pseudo-kinship networks. As the labour and reproduction of clients enriched Getutu, yet more dispossessed people came seeking succour, a swelling body of clients from which the chieftaincy drew its strength (Ochieng', 1984). Getutu became the most populous 'tribe' in the highlands: it was said to have the stomach of an elephant, able to swallow many clients.

Patron-client relations of one variety or another criss-crossed Gusiiland, implicating most homesteads, and even people, neither patrons nor clients, well understood the nature of such relations. Outside Getutu, however, expansive authority was rarely concentrated in the hands of one man. At neighbourhood, lineage, and clan levels sat elders in dispute resolution bodies, but only *abagambi* (sing. *omogambi*) approached anything like chiefs. Gusii members of the South Nyanza Law Panel in 1954 suggested that *abagambi* had presided over areas (anthropologists' 'tribes') that were later transformed into multi-clan administrative locations.<sup>32</sup> When they happened on the scene, however, the British found myriad 'chiefs', far more than could successfully be co-opted as 'indirect rulers'.<sup>33</sup> Given their desperation to find local power brokers, administrators would not have overlooked men wielding power over such large realms. It is unlikely that *abagambi*'s authority extended past the scrub dividing clans.

*Abagambi* exercised only limited power. Foreign affairs and ceremonial matters constituted the bulk of their duties. A man could carry his *omogambi*'s staff when sorting out a dispute in another clan; this symbol of the *omogambi*'s authority would induce the local elders to give the man a fair hearing. *Abagambi* performed the ceremonies to introduce first plantings and initiate the harvest season, and called on rain makers when their services were needed. Beyond that, *abagambi* demanded little of their subjects or, more precisely, their subjects refused to accept any more onerous demands.<sup>34</sup>

In Luo areas the basic social units mirrored those of the Gusii. Families lived in homesteads consisting of a man, his wife or wives, and

<sup>32</sup> Meeting of the Kisii section, South Nyanza Law Panel, 1 June 1954, KNA: RR 8/10.

<sup>33</sup> Untitled document, c. 1910, 389, KNA: Lib 572. KEN83-947.

<sup>34</sup> Meeting of the Kisii section, South Nyanza Law Panel, 1 June 1954, KNA: RR 8/10.

their children, and acquiring dependants (*jadak*) was one of their central goals. Homestead heads (*jopiny* or *weg lowo*, 'masters of the soil' or 'people of the land') granted *jadak* parcels of land in exchange for labour and military service (Hoehler-Fatton, 1996: 36). Patron-client relations also undergirded the authority of chiefs, *ruoth*. Unlike *abagambi*, who exercised their limited authority over interrelated homesteads, the *ruoths*' authority extended over geographical units (*pinje*, sing. *piny*)<sup>35</sup> within which resided several clans, each occupying its own distinct settlement. Subjects offered their *ruoth* tribute and 'worked his fields, built his house and his wives' houses' in exchange for protection from dangers both physical and spiritual (Ogot, 1967: 169–73; Ocholla-Ayayo 1976: 127).

#### COLONIAL RULE AND CHIEFS

Britons urgently needed African intermediaries to carry out the daily business of colonial rule, but in south-west Kenya such men were difficult to come by. As G. A. S. Northcote, an early administrator, despairingly noted in 1909, the Gusii 'chiefs are practically non-entities, except in certain ceremonial functions'.<sup>36</sup> Administrators had desperately to seek men with any kind of legitimacy; the Provincial Commissioner of Nyanza Province (of which South Kavirondo was a part) reported that they selected men 'on account of their supposed medicinal or magical powers, or as being the principal or one of the richest elders in the district or because of some personal characteristic appreciated by the local people or the administration' (quoted in Maxon, 1989: 35; cf. Fields, 1997). Some were *abagambi*. Ombati of Muksero had ventured to Kisumu in 1900 to seek British assistance in his feud with Getutu clans, and the officer who made a foray into North Mugirango in 1904 received a warm welcome from an *omogambi* named Ndubi (Maxon, 1989: 27–32, 45; Partington, 1905). The British appointed them both chiefs. Nyamosi, a non-Gusii with an obscure background, exploited his reputation as a wizard to rule Majoge (Okioma, 1979).<sup>37</sup> In Getutu the British appointed a representative of one of the chiefly lineages.

No matter whom administrators chose, Gusii chiefs—whose duty was to make excessive demands on people with whom they had little familiarity—for some time lacked any legitimacy in the eyes of their subjects. (In Luo areas administrative locations followed *pinje*, *ruoths*' domains, making the transition less troublesome than in Gusii areas.) Whereas each *omogambi* had headed a clan, colonial-era Gusii chiefs

<sup>35</sup> Orinda's location, Karachuonyo, was exceptional in that clan and geographical boundaries coincided within his *piny*.

<sup>36</sup> G. A. S. Northcote, 'The History of the District', 20 December 1909, Archives of the Cardinal Otunga Historical Society (Mosocho, Kenya): MAA/KIS/GEN/1/1.

<sup>37</sup> W. M. Logan, 'History of the Wakisii or Abagusii', 1914, South Kavirondo Political Record Book.

ruled multi-clan locations.<sup>38</sup> The colonial state devolved on chiefs a range of duties which there were far too few Britons to carry out effectively, and which far exceeded the limited impositions *abagambi* had made. It ought not to be surprising to hear reports of chiefs' impotence. Northcote was under no illusions as to chiefs' powers. 'It is useless to think [chiefs] really rule their subjects,' he wrote in 1909. 'The chief at present can only enforce power through the DC.' That anything was done toward taxation or road work depended almost entirely on the administration: 'Without the European at [the chief's] back, these functions could not be performed.'<sup>39</sup> Cognisant of their tenuous hold on power, some chiefs simply did nothing, and lost their jobs because of it (Maxon, 1989: 49). At the same time, many *abasomba* (Getutu's 'bought people') were deserting patrons and undermining chiefly authority. 'The movement is not regarded very favourably by the Chiefs,' the District Commissioner reported, 'who consider these people will dispute their authority, as indeed in some cases they do'.<sup>40</sup>

The war did nothing to stabilise chiefly rule. The state fed its hunger for Carrier Corps porters with the forced labour of young men, 34,000 of them from South Kavirondo. DC Campbell noted with satisfaction that in rounding up men for the corps 'the chiefs and headmen have generally done all that could be desired of them' (quoted in Maxon, 1989: 70). Given the horrific conditions in the Carrier Corps (thousands died from exhaustion, malnutrition and disease: Savage and Munro, 1966) the men sent out from the district undoubtedly noticed their chiefs' efforts as well. The forced mobilisation of labour continued after the war. In 1920 the District Commissioner ordered 5,000 men out of the district to work (they were later observed bound by ropes around their necks), instructions discharged by chiefs and headmen.<sup>41</sup> Victims of chiefs' brutality could not always contain their indignation and rage: in 1917 the DC imposed a collective fine on Getutu location for 'grievous hurt' of Chief Onsongo.<sup>42</sup>

Chiefs cast about for methods to woo clients. They engaged headmen, paying them for their help in executing state directives. Chiefs extracted allegiance from certain clans by sparing their young men the horrors of forced labour. One officer reported that Chief Onchango of South Mugirango was 'stingy with food and hence . . . finds it difficult to keep anyone round him'.<sup>43</sup> That administrators

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<sup>38</sup> There were eight locations in the Gusii highlands until 1933, when Muksero location was merged with Kitutu (Maxon, 1989: 98).

<sup>39</sup> Northcote, 'History of the District'.

<sup>40</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1910/11.

<sup>41</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1919/20; Statement of Archdeacon Owen, Record of a Meeting at Government House, 22 October 1930, Public Record Office, CO 533/404/13.

<sup>42</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1916/17. In 1926 another court case was brought against a man who attempted to attack Onsongo with a *rungu* (knobkerry). Native Tribunal Cases, South Kavirondo, returns for quarter ending March 1926, KNA: PC/NZA 3/33/6.

<sup>43</sup> 'Character of Chiefs', May 1931, KNA: KSI/26.

found Onchango's failure noteworthy—his was the only 'Character of Chief' evaluation that broached the subject—suggests that other chiefs more successfully distributed foodstuffs to followers, a means by which patrons attracted clients. Nonetheless, in tallying up the final score these early chiefs alienated more people than they attracted.

#### MISSIONARIES AS PATRONS

Missionaries (Catholics and Seventh-day Adventists) and their converts had much in common with chiefs. Like chiefs, missionaries often achieved little else than antagonising the masses. Missionaries were not above bullying the common African. Gethin, the trader, recalled the practice of A. A. Carscallen, a Seventh-day Adventist missionary in the 1910s:

Cascallon [*sic*] would see an old [Luo] asleep in the shade of a tree, approaching him Cascallon would place his hand on the [Luo's] head, if he still slept gave him a kick on the backside and say . . . Son you are saved, and you can thank the Lord it is me who has saved you, if it was one of the others [i.e. Catholics] you would be condemned to terrible torture when you died[.] The convert if suitable would then be roped in to carry a load on the next safari.<sup>44</sup>

We ought not place too much faith in the details: Gethin was a raconteur and, not just for economic reasons, established the first pub in Kisii town. But the basic idea—of missionaries drawing on African labour—rings true.

Missionary justice was often administrative justice, as priests hauled off recalcitrant labourers to the District Commissioner for punishment. Missionaries also seemed in cahoots with chiefs. When women smeared the walls and floors of the new buildings at Nyabururu mission station the priest remitted their pay to their chief, in his naivety supposing the chief would equitably redistribute it to the women.<sup>45</sup> Missionaries also exchanged gifts with chiefs when paying them courtesy calls.<sup>46</sup> In Gusii eyes, one white would have been indistinguishable from the next, with chiefs close allies of them all.

Those few Gusii who associated themselves with Christianity, however, readily grasped the distinctions between types of white power and authority. Chiefs were clients of the administration, Christians were clients of the missionaries. Across Africa the first converts to Christianity were those marginal to existing social networks: slaves, lepers, junior wives. Caught on the periphery of their societies, 'belonging to' rather than 'belonging in' their communities (Kopytoff

<sup>44</sup> Gethin, 'An Old Settler', 62.

<sup>45</sup> Nyabururu Diary, entry of 21 December 1911.

<sup>46</sup> Nyabururu Diary, entries of August 1912, during priest's *safari*.

and Miers, 1977), these Africans sought out new patrons, a role missionaries happily (if not always knowingly) filled (White, 1987). In South Kavirondo missionaries offered protection and food: one priest physically assaulted men trying to remove their sister from the mission station, and after some masses priests slaughtered bulls for celebratory feasts.<sup>47</sup> In exchange, the priests demanded labour and allegiance: converts cleared grass, constructed buildings and worked in missions' fields, and those who absented themselves without permission faced corporal punishment on their return.<sup>48</sup> While missionaries relied on Serikali to discipline hired labour, they settled intra-convert disputes behind mission walls.<sup>49</sup> All this marked missionaries as 'big men'. Converts introduced Seventh-day Adventist missionary Eric Beavon as 'our bwana' (Beavon, 1930: 286). *Bwana* is a term of respect for men, and district commissioners were styled *bwana mkubwa*, literally 'big/great *bwana*'. When Africans called Beavon 'our *bwana*' they declared that he, not a chief or administrator, was their patron.

Converts comported themselves according to their new status as missionary clients. Some African Christians divorced themselves from their families. Out-schools had become, one DC wrote, 'night clubs for young men and girls, who not only escaped from tribal and parental authority but repudiated all obligations' to cultivate their families' plots.<sup>50</sup> Converts took on their own clients, extending the power of their missions and ascending their churches' hierarchies; a joyous Beavon told his American supporters that upon conversion Africans eagerly struck out into the bush to evangelise (Beavon, 1923). Catholic converts did the same.<sup>51</sup> Competition between patron-client networks often spilled over into violent struggles between 'mission boys' and chiefs and headmen.<sup>52</sup> Relations fell so low in South Mugirango that a 'particularly nasty crowd of mission boys' tried all means to depose the chief, including witchcraft and poison; they succeeded in killing a headman, for which one of the culprits was hanged.<sup>53</sup>

In the early years of British rule patron-client networks remained a primary route by which men became 'big' and the weak found protection, even as the social and political context was recast. District Commissioner Buxton noted in 1932 that Gusii society could be broken down into three estates: chiefs and headmen, mission adherents, and the masses. Both chiefs and missions offered a measure of protection and social and economic advancement to their clients, yet

<sup>47</sup> Nyabururu Diary, entries of 10 April 1914 and 25 April 1920.

<sup>48</sup> On working at mission stations see, for example, Nyabururu Diary, entry of 28 June 1914, and Beavon (1923). On corporal punishment see Nyabururu Diary, entry of 30 September 1920.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Nyabururu Diary, entries of 20 March, 3 April and 3 July 1927. The last entry reads 'Cases as usual after Mass'.

<sup>50</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1932. See also South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1926.

<sup>51</sup> Nyabururu Diary, *passim*.

<sup>52</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Reports, 1927, 1930.

<sup>53</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1934.

they also made onerous demands of them.<sup>54</sup> For those unwilling or unable to attach themselves to one of these new patrons the consequences could be dire: forced labour and seemingly arbitrary punishment. Nevertheless, in the end the 'majority of the Kisii would appear to take their opinions from elders who are not connected with Government or the missions'.<sup>55</sup> It was from this mixture of older patron-client ideas and the new colonial context that Mumbo emerged.

#### CHIEFS, MISSIONARIES AND THE THREAT OF MUMBO

Whatever animosities divided them, chiefs and Christians were united in their hostility to Mumbo. In fact, chiefs and missionaries provided the administration with most of its intelligence about Mumbo activities and gave impetus to government repression of the Mumboites. The priests at Nyabururu kept a watchful eye on Mumboites' activities, composing a detailed report on Mumbo at the behest of the administration.<sup>56</sup> Chief Onsongo and his headmen lobbied for the arrests of Mumboites in 1918, and again in 1920 Onsongo's '[p]rompt information' about Bonairiri led to the repression of her 'school'. Onsongo's vital role here earned him 'a special letter of appreciation from His Excellency the Governor'.<sup>57</sup> It was chiefs who informed an oblivious administration of the presence of Mumboites at the 1933 sports meet. At the subsequent trial seven men gave evidence: two Europeans, chiefs Onsongo, Nyabaru, Magak, and Okoth, and Assistant Chief Aoga.<sup>58</sup>

Why did Mumbo so disturb missionaries and chiefs? At the most obvious level, Mumboism directly threatened them. Mumbo itself disparaged Christianity as *mbovu*, rotten. The serpent swore that chiefs would be sent packing along with the Europeans. As one District Commissioner noted, 'the chiefs are evidently afraid of [Mumbo] and realize that they are the special object of hatred and scorn'. Among the teachings common in 1933 was that 'the great snake is coming to destroy all the chiefs and particularly Aoga', assistant chief of Getutu and brother of Chief Onsongo.<sup>59</sup>

But Mumbo menaced chiefs and missionaries in a more insidious way. It was not so much that Mumbo stood in stark opposition to them as that it too closely replicated their powers. Mumbo, like government-sponsored chiefs and missionaries, was an amalgam of a supernatural

<sup>54</sup> An interesting comparison can be made with the Solomon Islands, where British officers and missionaries resembled, but were more oppressive than, previous 'big men' (Cochrane, 1970: 76–8).

<sup>55</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1932.

<sup>56</sup> 'Mumboism', Nyabururu Diary.

<sup>57</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1920/21.

<sup>58</sup> Similarly, it was a headman of Wanjare who drew administrative attention to Mumbo activities there in 1927, and Orero of Muksero did so in the early 1930s. See District Commissioner, South Kavirondo, to Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza, 2 December 1927, South Kavirondo Political Record Book; Buxton report.

<sup>59</sup> South Kavirondo Monthly Intelligence Report, November 1933.



and omnipotent being and patron–client networks. The more followers Mumbo attracted, the fewer could be claimed by chiefs and missionaries. Mumbo’s continued growth would leave chiefs ruling no one, and missionaries sitting alone in their churches.

*Mumbo the patron*

Mumboism’s mutability was part of its allure. Mumboism was never a centralised movement: adepts occasionally met with one another, but swore allegiance only to Mumbo. Adepts innovated new practices and cast off others to fit the situation at hand. In Central Kavirondo adherents choreographed the ‘Mumbo dance’ in which one ‘squatted down and jumped like a frog’ (Indidis *et al.*, 1979); this seems never to have been performed, or even known, in South Kavirondo. Uniquely to Karachuonyo location, adherents fastened special grasses around their wrists or necks to ward off illness, and drank foul liquids which could induce possession by Mumbo.<sup>60</sup> Elsewhere, no evidence suggests possession by Mumbo, although the serpent itself (always unseen) sometimes spoke to adherents.<sup>61</sup> Gusii Mumboites ran along paths singing new songs, some nonsensical to the uninitiated, others clearly predicting the imminent disappearance of Europeans and their lackeys (Ogot and Ochieng’, 1972). In 1930 administrators broke apart (what they claimed to be) a Mumbo temple in Kadem. What relation this temple, with its ‘unpleasant animal relics’ and ‘phallic altar post bearing traces of bloodstain’, had to do with Mumboism is far from clear.<sup>62</sup> In the end this report may tell us more about administrators’ ability to see a phallus in every altar post than about Mumboism.

Despite local differences, all Mumboites shared two experiences. First, each adept and his adherents periodically gathered for celebration and feasting. Second, they held that Mumbo would purge the land of Europeans and chiefs. This prophecy took various forms—all those in Western clothes would have their arms severed or be turned into monkeys, or a mysterious tribe known as Abachi would swarm down with sharp knives and each kill twenty Europeans<sup>63</sup>—but it was central to Mumboism. Together these two points explain why Mumbo attracted adherents, and why it made sense to them.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Fazan report, evidence of Oyugi, and Fazan’s information from his previous *safari*.

<sup>61</sup> South Kavirondo Monthly Intelligence Report, November 1933.

<sup>62</sup> Bond, ‘Temple Report’.

<sup>63</sup> These Abachi are most certainly Germans. In Swahili Germans are called Wadachi, *dachi* from *Deutsche*, *wa* the third person plural prefix. ‘Abachi’ would be a local variant of this. That an unknown people called Abachi would be cast as saviours makes sense: the real Wadachi caused some panic among local Europeans on the eve of the war, and attacked and briefly occupied Kisii town in September 1914. One of Fazan’s informants in fact stated that Mumboites considered ‘Germans’ their friends. It is common in millennial movements for believers to stake their hopes on mysterious powerful outsiders. See, for example, Bradford (1988: chapter 7); Cohn (1970); Gershoni (1997: chapter 2); Peires (1989: 72–3, 137).

<sup>64</sup> Missionaries and administrators asserted that marijuana smoking was another practice central to, even explanatory of, Mumboism. If Mumboites did in fact indulge in marijuana, it tells us little about them. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries smoking the plant was common among young men herding cattle and older men in their leisure time.

Nearly all our sources assert that Mumbo commanded its followers to cease or limit their planting and to slaughter all their cattle. Were these truly aspects of Mumboism? First, the question of non-cultivation. As missionaries and colonial reports explained it, since Mumbo promised that grain would fall from the heavens or grow of its own accord cultivation was redundant.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, cultivation could signal unbelief. But did Mumboites refuse to plant? The evidence is inconclusive. Fazan had been told that Mumboites did not plant, but his investigation suggested otherwise. Chief Orinda for one insisted that 'They cultivate like other people' and Fazan apparently saw their fields under crop.<sup>66</sup> In 1922 the District Commissioner reported that Luo stood poised to reap another large groundnut harvest, 'but unfortunately there is, as usual, a vague preaching, which has its origin in the Mumbo cult, to the effect that a scourge on the people will eventuate if they cultivate too extensively'.<sup>67</sup> If this was 'usual' previous reports omitted it, and there is no evidence that this 'vague preaching' had any ill effect on that year's crop. Maigo (1979; see also Nyaundi, 1997: 42) argues that a great famine (presumably that of 1918–19) resulted from Mumboites failing to plant and slaughtering cattle.<sup>68</sup> Agricultural specialists and peasants might blame the famine on that year's drought; perhaps some Gusii might also have pointed to a few irreverent Mumboites. The evidence cannot support the contention, however, that widespread non-cultivation induced the famine.

What of cattle killing? Orinda denied that Mumboites slaughtered cattle, and Fazan observed Mumboites' herds. Nonetheless, in very certain circumstances Mumboites did slaughter cattle, though not wantonly. Rather, they slaughtered cattle in the context of feasts. Mumboites were 'most prodigal in the matter of killing livestock, even female stock'<sup>69</sup> but, as an informant in 1921 explained, Mumboites 'do not kill all their cattle, but kill when they have a feast'.<sup>70</sup> These feasts, one priest spluttered, were 'riotous meetings where sheep or goat or cow is killed according to the wish of the representative of Mumb[o], beer [drunk] and hemp smoked, foul dances, etc'.<sup>71</sup>

The provisions for feasts came ultimately from adherents. Adherents rendered unto adepts large amounts of food and cattle. Adepts in 1927

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Nyabururu Diary, entry of 5 December 1920.

<sup>66</sup> Fazan report.

<sup>67</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1922.

<sup>68</sup> Maigo (1979). Ogot and Ocheing' (1972: 169) make a similar claim, but cite no evidence.

<sup>69</sup> Kenyon-Slaney, 'Mumboism'.

<sup>70</sup> Statement of Ambrose Ajuang, *baraza* clerk, c. August 1921, South Kavirondo Political Record Book.

<sup>71</sup> Nyabururu Diary, entry of 13 July 1915. See Munro (1975: 115) on the slaughtering of cattle for feasts in the 1911 Kathambi–Ngai millennial movement among the Kamba of central Kenya. The absence of widespread cattle killing marks a fundamental difference between Mumbo and the Xhosa cattle killings of the 1850s (Peires, 1989). Cf. Worsley (1968: 11) and Iliffe (1979: 173).

demanding of adherents either a goat or heifer.<sup>72</sup> In the 1931–33 manifestation of Mumbo, adherents offered adepts ‘large quantities of money and *wimbi*’ as well as sheep and goats.<sup>73</sup> Two of the major leaders, Mochoronge and Mosi, collected stockpiles of *wimbi* and ‘property’.<sup>74</sup> While adepts reserved some of these goods, much of the grain and cattle was dedicated to the ‘riotous feasts’. One adept ignored warnings that he should cease making ‘arrangements for the feeding of the large gatherings of Nyamumboites, collecting *wimbi* and 75 making tembo [beer]’.<sup>75</sup> The import of the offering and redistribution of cattle and grain should by now be clear: they were a typical expression of the patron–client relationship.<sup>76</sup>

Mumbo’s patron–client networks threatened chiefs in fundamental ways. As DC Buxton noted in 1933, Mumbo adepts ‘have all intrigued against the authority of the chiefs and headman and deliberately hindered them in carrying out their duties by insults and threats, and claiming greater powers’. How did Mumbo adepts challenge chiefly power? By acting as patrons. ‘As an indication of [Mumbo’s] powers, there was evidence of 4 stores for the collection of *wimbi* from adherents in one location and other stores elsewhere’.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, adepts held *barazas*, public meetings, rituals closely associated with chiefly rule.<sup>78</sup>

#### *Mumbo the omnipotent*

Mumbo’s patron–client relations were of a peculiar type. By themselves adepts could not necessarily prove successful patrons. Only with Mumbo the omnipotent at their backs could adepts offer adherents anything. Adepts were both patrons *and* terrestrial representatives of a supernatural being, and adherents were both clients of adepts *and* followers of Mumbo. These aspects of Mumboism cannot be separated. Thus adherents, in delivering cattle and grain to their adepts produced not only tribute to a human patron but—*at the same time*—offerings to the serpent god. Adepts, as earthly representatives of Mumbo, sacrificed the cattle and—*at the same time*—as patrons they redistributed the food to their followers. Yet we must still wonder why Mumboites would put faith in Mumbo, the serpent god.

Ideas of powerful serpents like Mumbo have wide currency in Africa (Mbiti, 1990: 51, 70; Wrigley, 1988, 1996: 96) and indeed in many cultures around the world (Cochrane, 1970: 63; Worsley, 1968: 252; Wrigley, 1988: 317 n. 28). Snakes are often associated with immortality: in shedding their skins they are reborn. In kingdoms in

<sup>72</sup> South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1927.

<sup>73</sup> South Kavirondo Monthly Intelligence Reports, November and December 1933.

<sup>74</sup> South Kavirondo Monthly Intelligence Report, November 1933.

<sup>75</sup> Buxton report.

<sup>76</sup> Compare this with millennial movements elsewhere such as, for example, New Guinea (Cochrane, 1970: 89) and Brazil (Diacon, 1991: 136).

<sup>77</sup> Buxton report.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

what is now Uganda (Roscoe, 1966: 92, 179; Wrigley, 1996: 105–10), in intra-lacustrine states (Schoenbrun, 1998: 197–9, 204–6), in Kenya (Ambler, 1995: 229; Lonsdale, 1992: 345, 371, 373–4)<sup>79</sup>, Tanzania (La Fontaine and Richards, 1959: 179; Wright, 1995: 132) and as far away as southern Africa (de Huesch, 1985: 40–8), serpents have been associated with exceptional powers. In many Bantu cultures snakes or pythons were favourite beings for ancestors to inhabit, and territorial nature spirits often manifested themselves as pythons. These pythons could shape the human world in profound ways, most importantly in terms of the fecundity of the land and of women. According to anthropologist Philip Mayer (1953) Gusii associated snakes with spirits, although he does not elaborate.

Among the Abasuba (who live along Lake Victoria, in the north-west corner of South Kavirondo) resided a python of similar powers. The Abasuba were composed of migrants from many different homes, including a dissatisfied Buganda prince and his followers who emigrated to the area around the 1760s (Ayot, 1979).<sup>80</sup> At least in the twentieth century, and probably before, the Abasuba put great faith in a 'gigantic python' said to be the abode of their princely ancestor. During the course of his 1943 investigation of local courts Arthur Phillips was told 'that the royal reptile, who resides in a mountain fastness . . . is provided by his devoted subjects with a house, water pots and other necessities, including an occasional tribute of heifers'. After several years of hibernation the python (if it had a name, Phillips did not report it) 'reappeared and manifested his good humour by abundance of rain and other portents' (Phillips, 1944: 32). Rumours of this python would likely have been in wide circulation, lending credence to tales of Mumbo's powers.<sup>81</sup>

Yet Mumbo's power transcended those of its fellow serpents. Mumbo was an omnipotent being, the ultimate patron. Europeans had introduced into local cosmologies invincible deities active in human affairs. Missionaries preached in the name of a being called God, a vengeful spirit which preserved its followers and slew unbelievers. Seventh-day Adventists in particular gave these ideas a more millennial turn. Adventist faith was borne of the millennial expectations of the

<sup>79</sup> See also District Commissioner, Mumias, to Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza, 5 July 1909, KNA: PC/NZA 3/31/1/1.

<sup>80</sup> Ayot (1979: 52–5) briefly discusses a snake, not associated with the Buganda prince, which lives in a shrine on Rusinga Island in Lake Victoria, and to which animals are sacrificed after the rains. Ocholla-Ayayo (1976: 174) makes reference to a Luo snake god of the lake called Nyangidi, which would periodically come ashore to accept sacrifice and usher in a period of plenty; unfortunately, we are not told when such ideas were in circulation. See also Hoehler-Fatton (1996: 25).

<sup>81</sup> In the 1970s Senior Chief Simeon Wasonga of Mfangano Island reported that 'the Gusii are said to have had a snake god called Kiboye', a name associated with a mythical Abasuba ancestor, one endowed with supernatural power. I have seen no other reference to 'Kiboye' in Gusii thought, nor does Kenney tell us anything more about Wasonga's story. Nonetheless, it offers an intriguing suggestion of possible links between Abasuba serpent gods and the ready acceptance of Mumbo elsewhere in the district (Kenney, 1977: 280, 286 n. 6).

American Millerites in the 1840s (Dick, 1986), and expectations of the imminent return of Christ remains central to Adventist belief. Seventh-day Adventists warned Africans that the end had drawn nigh, when Christians would enjoy their heavenly reward and pagans would be cast out from the world, ideas that directly influenced at least one Mumboite. Ayuka Achieng had been taught for two months by African Seventh-day Adventist converts. 'They told me that one day the World would finish,' Achieng told an administrator. 'They said it was good to remember God.'<sup>82</sup>

Similarly, colonial officials spoke of Government, Serikali, another omnipotent but unseen being that crushed those who dared disobey it. Africans under British rule often envisioned King George as more than the titular head of the empire, as 'almost divine; omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent' (Ranger, 1983: 230–1). At a *baraza* in Nyaribari in 1927 the Chief Native Commissioner 'explained the delegation of authority from King George on down',<sup>83</sup> and in one Mumbo song it was 'George' who would be sent packing (Ogot and Ochieng', 1972). In the 1940s, a Gusii man recalled, the power of the King infused every mundane state activity. 'In our village,' he wrote, 'the King of England was immortal: an arrest could be made in the name of the King . . . the displeasure of His Majesty could raze a whole village to the ground . . . The King was next only to God . . . with the King everything was possible' (Nyarang'o, 1994: 3). As late as the 1940s elders knew little of government bureaucracy; to them, Serikali made laws (P. Mayer, 1951: 26).

God, Serikali, Mumbo: the similarities are striking. Fazan reported that 'Nobody has ever seen Mumbo' and 'In this it is quaintly compared to Serikali.'<sup>84</sup> The comparison went much deeper. Mumbo, an omnipotent and omniscient being, whose local representatives created patron–client links, was very much like Serikali, and very much like God.

### *Chiefs as Mumboites*

Not all chiefs found Mumbo so menacing. Chief Orinda eliminated Mumbo's threat by co-opting it into his array of political tools. Orinda was a political genius, juggling God, Serikali and Mumbo, drawing from each whatever legitimacy he could. In July 1913 he assured a Catholic priest that he despised Adventism, but within two years the calculus had changed. Now one of his assistant headmen was a

<sup>82</sup> Fazan report, statement of Ayuka Achieng. Adventist imagery of darkness attending the end of the world may also have inspired similar Mumboite ideas, leading some followers to in fact buy lamps. On Seventh-day Adventists see Nichols (1930); on Mumbo/Sakawa discussion of darkening of the skies see District Commissioner, South Kavirondo, to Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza, 5 December 1920, South Kavirondo Political Record Book; on the purchase of lamps see Fazan report.

<sup>83</sup> Provincial Diary, Nyanza, June 1927, KNA: PC/NZA 3/26/4/3.

<sup>84</sup> In New Guinea in the 1920s millennialists equated their spirit ('the big chief of food and a strong spirit') with Government and 'Jesu Kerisu' (Worsley, 1968: 70–1).

Seventh-day Adventist, and Orinda refused Catholic catechists permission to evangelise in his headmen's camps.<sup>85</sup> Evidence gathered by Fazan reveals how deeply Orinda had enmeshed himself in Mumboism. The chief had relatively good things to say about the Mumboites. 'They give no trouble at all when they are wanted for work,' he reassured Fazan, and their 'teaching is good'. Orinda's own brother was fingered as a Mumboite. Orinda's lack of enmity toward Mumbo, and Mumboites' willingness to perform labour at his command, are indicative of an affiliation with Mumbo. Fazan wondered if this might not have been the case. He concluded that either Orinda had truthfully represented Mumbo's innocuousness 'or else the Sympathies of Chief Ovinda [*sic*] and all his Headmen have been enlisted in the movement to such an extent that they have conspired together to hide the real state of affairs'.<sup>86</sup>

Only a very few chiefs duplicated Orinda's feat. Like Orinda, the others commanded Luo locations, where chiefly rule caused less discord than in Gusiiland. In Kabondo in the 1920s Mosi (who had gone to meet Onyango Dunde in Central Kavirondo) served as Chief Nyanjong's headman, all the while fulfilling his duties as a Mumbo adept. Nyanjong even tried to prevent Mosi's deportation after the 1933 trial.<sup>87</sup> Chief Ogutu of Kaniamwa was said to wear a Mumbo cloak under his regular clothes.<sup>88</sup> But these chiefs were exceptional. To retain their positions chiefs had to comply with Serikali's directives, yet in doing so they risked alienating their subjects, even losing them to Mumbo. Most chiefs sided with Serikali and worked to eliminate their rival patrons.

#### CONCLUSION

Mumbo was unlike most resistance movements in colonial Kenya. Mumboites did not organise Western-style political parties like the Kikuyu Central Association, nor did they engage in violence like the women protesting the arrest of their champion Harry Thuku. But Mumbo threatened the stability of the colonial state no less. The state and the missionary enterprise, in South Kavirondo and elsewhere, were founded on a mixture of local patron-client relations and omnipotent powers. Mumbo challenged Europeans at this very basic level. If Mumbo attracted more adherents, European rule would collapse and their supernatural patrons, Serikali and God, would be shown impotent. But chiefs acted swiftly enough to head off such an

<sup>85</sup> Nyabururu Diary, entries of 9 July 1913 and January 1916; Fazan report.

<sup>86</sup> Fazan report.

<sup>87</sup> District Commissioner, South Kavirondo, to Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza, 2 December 1927, South Kavirondo Political Record Book; 'Character of Chiefs', July 1934, KNA: KSI/26. Similarly, in 1931 Headman Ngome, of a Luo location, enquired whether Mumboites who had been forced to live in Kisii town could be allowed to return to their homes. South Kavirondo Local Native Council (Luo section), 2 May 1931, KNA: Adm 7/1/7/3.

<sup>88</sup> 'Kinchonya Mumboism'.

eventuality. At the 1933 trial, unbelievers mocked the Mumboites and demanded their deportation. The adepts were crucified; Mumbo forsook them. With Mumbo proven to be no match for Serikali and God, Mumboites slowly returned to their homes to contemplate how best to make their way in this new world.

What can Mumbo tell us about religious and social movements elsewhere in Africa? Across Africa, chiefs struggled desperately to retain control over mission converts. Mission 'boys' no longer considered themselves in need of chiefly patrons, for they had found others, in the shape of white missionaries and God. This was a competing form of indirect rule (Maddox, 1999: 27). Likely wherever in Africa missionaries found converts, evidence can be found of competing mission and chiefly patron-client networks. Yet missionaries regularly discovered, much to their dismay, that their converts/clients had cast off missionary patronage to establish their own out-schools or churches.

It would be surprising if, in these many arenas of competing patron-client networks, no patron such as Mumbo arose. Scholars of African Christianity have recently criticised earlier works that posited only instrumentalist reasons for conversion: the older scholarship held that Africans looked to missionaries for the physical protection and education that they could provide—in short, for patronage—but not for religious or existential reasons (Spear, 1999: 9–10). If Mumboites sought both patrons of this world and omnipotent patrons of the supernatural type, however, it is not inconceivable that Africans sought the same when converting to Christianity. The motivations of those who followed (and those who rejected) Christianity may have been more complex yet.

We need not go far afield to find that similar ideas were afoot. In Kitui in central Kenya a group of young men had begun an organisation called Serikali; three men were appointed to each location as headmen, and were given rings as a sign of office.<sup>89</sup> In Central Kavirondo in 1925 a priest complained of 'a gang of young men under a person who styles himself "King"'. Their actions that offended the priest included holding 'lewd dances', 'trying to dissuade people from reading the Sacred book' and causing 'several Mission boys to revert to Paganism'.<sup>90</sup> A dozen years later, elsewhere in Central Kavirondo, a 'society' had formed around a 'King', who stood atop a hierarchy of a Governor, Provincial Commissioners, District Commissioners, District Officers, and police. Revealingly, funds were collected and given over to the King, 'who organizes feasts and dances'.<sup>91</sup> Had they known of the King, Mumboites would have seen in him a patron, one not unlike their own.

<sup>89</sup> Kitui District Annual Report, 1926.

<sup>90</sup> Provincial Diary, July 1925, and District Commissioner, Central Kavirondo, Administrative Diary, 28 July 1925, both in KNA: PC/NZA 3/26/2.

<sup>91</sup> Sub-committee of Central Kavirondo Local Native Council, 2 July 1937, KNA: Leg 28/1.

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## ABSTRACT

This article traces the history of Mumboism, a millennial cult of south-west Kenya, 1912–34. Mumbo, the serpent god of Lake Victoria, promised to eject whites and chiefs from the region and usher in a period of prosperity. Mumboism gained followers, it is argued, because it mixed older ideas of patron–client relations with newer ideas of omnipotent, unseen beings,

introduced by Europeans as Government and God. Mumbo challenged chiefs and missionaries, struggling to create patronage networks, by attracting clients, and threatened to unmask Government and God as impotent. Chiefs and, to a lesser extent, missionaries directed state power to the repression of Mumbo, eliminating it before it could undermine the very basis of European power.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article fait l'historique du mumboïsme, culte millénaire du Sud-Ouest du Kenya, 1912–1934. Mumbo, le dieu serpent du Lac Victoria, promettait d'expulser les Blancs et les chefs de la région et d'instaurer une période de prospérité. On prétend que le mumboïsme aurait fait des adeptes parce qu'il mêlait des idées anciennes de rapports patron-client avec des idées nouvelles d'êtres invisibles omnipotents, introduites par les Européens sous la forme de Gouvernement et Dieu. Mumbo s'élevait contre les chefs et les missionnaires, s'employant à créer des réseaux de patronage en attirant des clients, et menaçait de démasquer l'impotence du Gouvernement et de Dieu. Les chefs et, dans une moindre mesure, les missionnaires ont orienté le pouvoir étatique vers une répression de Mumbo, l'éliminant avant qu'il ne puisse ébranler la base même de la puissance européenne.