

On elusive resources and fabulous extraction
What do rumors of red mercury tell us about resource environments?

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The rigours of science and the market forces say that Red Mercury cannot exist but the people of Nairobi just laugh and whisper together. Griffin 1986: 36

Abstract

This paper examines an extraordinary commentary on the historical constitution of the Kitui district (Kenya) as a resource environment, the rumored presence of red mercury in its the peripheral hills. Mostly male experts subjected these hills to improvement or development projects the past 80 years and rumors of red mercury comment on the sociality of their enterprises by speculating on fabulous value located there and the occult ways of obtaining it. The materiality of red mercury appears as the elusive substance through which the fabulous in resource extraction prefigures the occult economy.

(Kitui, development, rumor, red mercury, resources, materiality, gender)

Introduction

As a project of economy and modernization, “development” appeared during the past 30 years in the arid and semi arid Kitui district of Kenya mostly through the projects of visiting male expert elites with plans and projects to mobilize the area’s potential value in resources. While few development interventions delivered development as such - often because of the problematic mobilization of materials like water, cattle and agricultural produce - for the inhabitants the proposed mobilization of resources only seems to have increased the demand for projects to this effect. The socio-economic inequality manifested during these projects seldom appeared as an issue of public debate in Kitui. This paper however deals with an extraordinary comment on the sociality of the development of resources, one that draws on images from the colonial period to signify different social roles in the area’s problematic development as a resource environment. The aim of presenting this narrative will not be to critique development organizations, or to critique the colonial administration of the Kitui area; the aim is to specify how in the development encounter in Kitui the prolonged emphasis on projects of resource development of water, cattle and agricultural produce revealed one of the specific characteristics of resources and their development. The characteristic is a (temporal) disparity between the recognition and proposed mobilization of resources in the Kitui landscape, and the wealth or prosperity that would emerge in that way. The thousands of participatory projects or resource mobilization schemes that have taken place in the Kitui area the past 30 years also become moments at which certain social economic inequalities manifest themselves prominently, if only because of the meetings between NGO extension officers and the local communities. These meetings provided a base for several social groups within the development encounter in Kitui to provide an extraordinary expression to their position through the localization of spectacular value.

The expression is a rumor, a rumor heard in the remote peripheral hills of the Kitui district that certain men, development workers and similar passing and transient elites, looked for red mercury. This red mercury was said to ooze from cracks in the rocks around sacred groves or shrines (*mathembo*); other accounts described how the colonial government hid mercury, underneath triangulation beacons or other peculiar obstacles of their making on the hills. If found and “captured” (*kukwata*) one could become fabulously rich, but people looking for it said they found themselves deterred by the occult powers associated with the Akamba shrines that protected the mercury from being harvested. When unprepared you could see the mercury maybe once, by accident, but when you returned with a container it was impossible to find again, large snakes could scare you away, or sudden gale force winds, or mystical powers of a more abstract nature that would confuse or kill you. Only local traditional witchdoctors were said to know the secrets of its extraction. The elite men (African or European but always men) who were said to have reached and harvested the mercury had moved to the city to live in exorbitant luxury. How they managed to do so remained unclear as the utility of red mercury is obscure and details about its exchange value seemed fabulous. Outside Kitui rumors of red mercury describe it as an illegal commodity, a nuclear ballistic substance used by the secret agents (Griffin 1986; Hounam and McQuillan 1995; Swiderski 1995 see below); in Kitui itself speculations on red mercury as a commodity were seldom part of the conversation. There the rumor pertained the occult methods of its extraction or “dis-embedding” (see introduction to this volume). The capitalization or commodification of red mercury appeared only as the very closing statement of the rumor’s plot, explaining why certain people had left Kitui permanently and moved to the city to live in exorbitant luxury from the profits derived from this resource. It was mainly outside Kitui that red mercury appeared as a commodity that was detached (already dis-embedded) from its source and at large in the so-called occult economy surrounding socially destructive accumulation, (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Geschiere 1997 see Bell 2006 for a similar differentiation between resources and commodities).

In resources, materiality is not the same as substance or physical presence, something physically real as opposed to society’s immateriality. Resource materiality fits in what Miller described as materiality in general, the way the presence or absence of a recognized material works in our expectations or expressions of social identity (Miller 2005:5, 20-21). Here I follow the critique of Bakker and Bridge who question assumptions about materiality as physical presence found in accounts of resource geographies: “In a subdiscipline devoted to the gritty and fleshy realities of water, soil, timber, minerals and animals, materiality is readily conflated with the actual, tangible and visceral” (Bakker and Bridge 2006: 8 see also Kearnes 2003). In this case, the ambiguity that springs from the materiality of red mercury (does it exist?) seems to be the whole point of its recognition. It made a particularly powerful material for people to comment, rumor, ridicule or speculate about the behavior and identity of themselves but also *other* social groups. For instance, the European or African elite, what are these people doing in these remote parts of the Kitui district with their vehicles and their resource projects for development? Or what are these witchdoctors that seem to have a lot of knowledge about the local resources but appear to do little to develop the area with their knowledge (See White 2000 and below)?

Walsh (2010) describes a similar capacity of sapphires in North Madagascar as speculations of fetishism, meaning that the people who mine these minerals speculate on the fetishes of foreigners: “Surely foreigners are putting them to some other, more practical or nefarious, use. Perhaps sapphires are essential components in nuclear weapons or helicopter navigation systems? Or maybe they are used in the construction of the impenetrable walls of billionaires’ houses or in the production of windows for spacecraft?” (2010:98). Such speculations also pervade rumors of red mercury in Kenya and around the world, with an additional twist. If fetishes are “irreducibly material” (Pietz, quoted in Spyer 1998:5), mercury brings its ambiguous materiality to the speculation of fetishism of substances that have yet to become through projects of extraction. More precisely, red mercury appears as the elusive substance through which the spectacular in resource extraction projects prefigures the occult economy and the commodity fetish (c.f. Bell 2006; Nash 1979; Taussig 1980; Tsing 2005; Walsh 2003 and 2010).

As Griffin stated in the opening quote on top of this paper, red mercury made people laugh and whisper together; conversations seemed continuously to seek the convergence of the factual and the fantastic. The narratives provoked forms of social distinction by caricaturizing the masculine modern dare devil, the female occult traditionalist, and a variety of other locally relevant social positions. The narrators of the rumor, be they traditional witchdoctors, village elites or NGO staff themselves, enjoyed alluding to the secret of magical substances and the need for occult means for their extraction, thereby celebrating its undisciplined materiality as an indicator of socially suspicious mobilization. Red mercury allowed a variety of expressions of sociality and value and it did so particularly well since none of these expressions could be countered by physical evidence, unlike substances with less ambiguous material forms such as gold and sapphires.

Historical images and objects that were used in the rumor of red mercury, like the colonial beacons or white male official climbing the hills during improvement schemes, alluded to a connection between the contemporary development encounter and the historical constitution of Kitui as a resource environment. It was through the construction of the beacons in the 1910s and during the improvement schemes of the 1950s that land, water and cattle of the Kitui district became resources of the colonial economy, in the 1910s, the district as a labor reserve and a place to collect taxes, then in the 1950s as an area where a cattle economy was to be initiated through large-scale improvement schemes. In rumors of red mercury images and objects from these past projects of resource extraction and improvement provided the relevant analogies for the present day comments on resource development. As we will see below, the figure of the white male climbing a hill to establish a beacon to demarcate the native reserve and alienate land from the people outside it is often used in rumors of red mercury to create a precedent. A white man was the first to go to the top of this hill to find wealth and he marked the place with a beacon to find it again, now the African NGO extension officers try to find it again and keep it for themselves. Argenti (2006) showed how the importance of these images from the past as recalled in the present is not their historical factuality. He showed the evocation of these images have a capacity to allude to social economic inequalities often left unstated. The allusion of the rumor of red mercury to the colonial period comments, I propose, on one of the specificities of the development encounter in the Kitui district: the

continuing propositions of projects to mobilize resources by elite outsiders under the banner of development projects. Large scale development interventions started in the 1980s and during fieldwork in 2007 and 2009 more than 15 NGO and GO initiatives promoted development in the rural Kitui area, often through projects of resource mobilization. Unfortunately the rural Kitui areas are still among the poorest areas of Kenya.

To recognize the dismal economic situation of the Kitui area and the rumors that revolve around development interventions is not meant as a critique of development organizations projects that I voice through the rumors of red mercury (c.f. Kahn 1997). The comment is on resource development in general and specifically some of the difficulties in harnessing resources in the Kitui district. Furthermore, project participants as well as elite development workers talked about red mercury in relation to resource development. All wanted development projects, the jobs, the technologies, the projects in the rural areas. Below I show how the elusive character red mercury commented on several of the social distinction manifested in these projects but appeared not to critique resource development as such.

Is there substance to red mercury?

This section describes how my research and the capacities of an elusive material like red mercury spawned rumors in which my own person was made a subject of people's enjoyment or speculation. It introduces the occurrence of the rumor to show how its elusive materiality worked to fuel speculations, in this case about my personal intentions with regard the potential presence of spectacular value. It will also show how red mercury tells something about materiality and resources in general.

There was a particular geography to the rumor of red mercury, it features predominantly in the eastern periphery of the Kitui district, in out-of-the-way locations villages at the foot of hills or inselbergs where perennial springs emerged in an otherwise arid savannah landscape, villages like Mutito wa Ndoa. Like many of these places in the Eastern part of Kitui, Mutito wa Ndoa could not conceal that it had seen better times, many shops were abandoned, others buildings had cracked walls or were completely in ruins. Like in many other rural areas of Kitui, almost all young men had migrated to the urban centers of Kenya to find temporary work (O'Leary 1980). This in spite of the fact that there seemed to be a lot of resources, the nearby hill was thickly forested with mature cypress and pine, but for reasons no one seemed to understand it was impossible to harvest the wood. For over 10 years experts surveyed the possible coal reserves in the area it had however not come to mining. Water, once abundantly flowing from pipes connected to a springbox on the nearby hills had become a persistent problem. Pipes leaked or were tapped off way before the water would reach the town. Several NGO's frequented the area and some tried to build wells or other water projects, but yet to little avail. There was talk of witchcraft, accusations that some people turned evil forces against their fellow villagers and did not want them to progress. Mutito, like many places on the eastern periphery of the Kitui area seemed to be forever at the receiving end of propositions to mobilize resources, but the initiative and opportunity for and control over this mobilization was always in the hands of others, outsiders, governmental or non governmental officials.

To an outsider, like myself, but also my assistant, Kennedy Mutati and many of the GO and NGO staff that frequented the area, Mutito wa Ndooa was a place of whispers. Walking the footpaths from the town for instance, schoolchildren would follow us and whispered “melculy.... melculy” (Kikamba has no r), just loud enough for us to hear, teasing us by chanting our alleged aim. In the small township of Ndooa itself when in the bars or lodgings, in the company of people who visited villages like Mutito wa Ndooa for only a few days or weeks, similar accusations and speculations appeared. Consider this excerpt from my diary:

There is a man I had not seen before loitering around our lodgings, he arrives at odd hours, around noon, or sometimes late at night, stays for a bit and then disappears. I don't know if he has a room here, in fact, everything about his behavior is shifty. He said his business was a secret but he could reveal he worked in a team of people for the Ministry of Security and tracks down criminals at night. The man inquired about my business and I told him about my research on springs and shrines and water projects. Not even waiting for me to finish my story he starts to talk about red mercury at these places. He proposed that I help him to find it and stated he had already brought a goat and beer to an old traditional witchdoctor near Mutito. He gave her these presents to make her reveal the secret location of the mercury, but the old women never gave it away. I told him that I knew what mercury was, but I could not believe it existed in this area and that I was certainly not going around to find out its location. Not impressed by my statement he continued about the red mercury on the hill and also some gemstones. If he could only get some of these old people I associated with to reveal its location, then we could sell it for a lot of money.

In Mutito wa Ndooa town, my association with a local opinion maker, a woman who was known as a witchdoctor (*Mundu Mue*) and a prophetess of the local shrine Kwa Lala (Akong'a 1987; Kavyu 1973; Onneweer 2002) was greeted with considerable suspicion. Schoolchildren, traditional healers, and shopkeepers in the town, all assumed that we were also after the secret of the means to get to the mercury that, allegedly, this witchdoctor knew about. To many, my research topic was only a cover to get to these minerals and it enticed some of the transient elites, such as the putative employee of the Ministry of Security, to enquire what knowledge I had of it. Some development organization workers complained to me that they were all the time associated with it. Others claimed that they were actually very keen on finding it. The accusations and claims were fantastic and annoying at the same time. They made me wonder why so many people suspected or presupposed that development workers or white males were interested in this resource. What was the *substance* of red mercury, materially and socially? To enquire into this would, I thought, would prove to be a dead end, at best it would make me the laughing stock of the village, and worse it would compromise the rest of my research. I believed even one question from me about mercury would confirm (definitely and permanently) that I was indeed looking for it. To go and really look for it, well, that would be even worse. As a research topic *and* as a resource, mercury seemed un-researchable with common methods that could verify its physical presence or describe people's ideas about it. Red mercury had

effects on people's actions and projects, but at the same time it remained physically absent (or so I believe).

The materiality of red mercury facilitated the spectacular potentiality of resource mobilization and its geography in a particular way, akin to what Tsing described as the "economy of appearances" (2005 chapter 2). Tsing describes the economy of appearances through the Bre-X mining scam, a company that attracted massive investment by speculating about a large gold deposit in Indonesia. The deposit and its future mobilization turned out to be conjuring trick, a performance to attract foreign investment. For the suggestion of a discovery of gold and the investments it drew into Bre-X, the gold needed not (yet) be there. The environment in which this gold deposit was proposed to be, the remote and inaccessible mountains of Kalimantan, facilitated this economy of appearances and the imagining of "spectacular accumulation" included these hills in a way Tsing describes as particular to Indonesia at that time (Ibid.). Red mercury in Kitui and gold in the Bre-X saga both did their social work in absence of the physical substance, thriving on hope for capitalist accumulation, or mobilization of spectacular value. As Tsing showed, this is a capacity specific to certain resource environments, areas that she calls resource frontiers. While both the Bre-X saga and the rumors of red mercury worked because of a materiality specific to resources, allowing spectacular values to be imagined, there are differences which make red mercury a rumor relating to 80 years of resource projects and Bre-X a scam of the resource frontier. Rumors of red mercury have been around for decades, it is not a new frontier mineral was only recently discovered but a substance of ambiguous materiality commenting on the resource value men have sought to mobilize from the rural areas of Kitui for over 80 year. Furthermore, no one will question the physical existence of gold in general, rumors of red mercury however thrive on speculation about its existence, particularly because the technology of mobilization of red mercury requires the help of or is countered by occult practices.

On a methodological level, the questions of substance relates to the "question of reality" as raised by Geschiere (1997:19-22) when researching the occult. Geschiere suggests that amongst his interlocutors and his academic peers his interest in witchcraft inevitably raised questions about his own belief. Instead of taking a position (belief or denial), Geschiere proposes to "go along" with the people who talk about witchcraft and take seriously their discourses to better contextualize the field of research. He notes that anthropology might benefit from an approach that does not simply accept local descriptions of witchcraft but, similar to White (2000), considers how the discourse of witchcraft operates as a critique or a commentary on unequal power relations and accumulation in the postcolonial state. To "go along" and take rumors of red mercury at face value called for a certain methodological agnosticism; but for me, the rumor of red mercury defied this option, people in the field fitted me so readily into the rumor's structure, I often found myself denying that I was looking for it and, though less vehemently, denied that the stuff existed. This denial never seemed to deter people to share their suspicions about it. Apparently only my presence was enough to activate the rumor and my denial even enhanced the possibility that I was looking for mercury: surely I just wanted to keep it a secret. In my experience, skepticism about red mercury seemed to enhance the possibility of its existence, that is, it helped the rumor to proliferate. Taussig (2003:272) formulated it

eloquently when he stated: “in magical practices, faith and skepticism seem to coexist such that faith may even require skepticism”. Skepticism keeps the rumor alive by orienting the debate in a certain way so that, in the temporary absence of the substance (mercury remained elusive), the materiality of red mercury allowed a commentary on elitism, development, and traditional practices. To this we turn now.

Suspicious mobilization

Like its substance, the rumor of red mercury was slippery and capricious and not limited to Kitui, it could be found in other areas of Kenya and beyond. This section first situates the appearance of the rumor in Kitui vis-à-vis its occurrences elsewhere and then examine what red mercury in Kitui does.

The earliest reference to red mercury in Kenya is from Griffin (1986) who reports how he was offered prices of US\$89 per milliliter in Nairobi.ⁱ He learned that the substance offered to him would be of use as a nuclear explosive. However, his attempt to track down the seller turned out to be a fool’s errand and he never managed to see a glimpse of the substance. Walker and Shipman (1996), two paleontologists working in the North of Kenya, found themselves subject of the rumor when searching for humanoid fossils. They noticed the local community suspected them of looking for red mercury instead and their fossil search was only a cover for this. Swiderski, an American author who lived in Eldoret (Western Kenya), was offered red mercury by a Gujarati merchant in 1991 with the message that he or his country could use it against the Russians as a nuclear weapon (Swiderski 1995 and 2008). And finally, in 2007, a newspaper article appeared on the web about a Swiss botanist called Classen who had built a plant sanctuary on Mutomo hill in the Kitui district in 1964, including some decorative metal pillars intended as a tourist attraction. In the article, the caretaker of the sanctuary, Mr Mwaniki, said that the sanctuary was now in a derelict state because people had “vandalized two metallic pillars erected by Classen claiming that there were mercury reserves in them” (Shardow 2007).

References to red mercury outside Kenya claimed it to be an advanced nuclear substance. In South Africa in the 1990s the rumor turned into conspiracy theories about entities like KGB, Mossad, MI5 and the Afrikaner Weerstand Beweging (Hounam and McQuillan 1995). Outside Africa, the substance featured in Cold War conspiracy theories that similarly described it as an advanced nuclear substance. The stuff even has a wikipedia entry listing several remarkable conspiracy theories that the reader might find interesting (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_mercury). A discussion of these theories unfortunately is beyond the scope of this paper, also because the status of red mercury differed considerable. The methods of its extraction were not an issue, mostly the issue was only on how the sale took place and how red mercury would be used. The dramatis personae of the rumors in a national or urban context included secret agents, political parties etc, but not transient development workers, village bourgeoisie and traditionalists (or an anthropologist). The only reference to red mercury in the rural areas of Kenya apart from Kitui show more similarities, like with the two paleontologists in North Kenya. One NGO director of an organization working with indigenous knowledge and community ecological management however, stated he had often been accused of looking for red mercury, outside Kitui, usually around the hills and forests of the rural areas of Kenya.ⁱⁱ

In what follows I discuss three groups and the way they used red mercury to position themselves in projects of resource mobilization in Kitui, NGO workers, village bourgeoisie and traditionalists. In practice these roles were obviously not as exclusive and rigorous; and this is one of the capacities of an elusive substance such as red mercury, it allowed the roles to be objectified even more, sometimes to the extent that people began to appear as caricatures of themselves (see White 2000:112 for similarities).

Men and development work

The first group, NGO workers is illustrated through an example of the kind of narratives about red mercury that went round in NGO circles. It is a description of a quest for mercury in Endau, one of the most eastern solitary mountains (inselbergs) of the Kitui area provided by two NGO workers who often worked in these remote areas. I call them E and X to protect their identity:

We wanted to get the mercury at Endau. We went up there six times. It is not difficult to know where [to find it], when you ask in town they will tell you where, but they do not come with you because they fear the place. The first time we climbed in the morning to reach the area. At three o'clock we moved around but could not find it. We met a leopard, it pointed at us as if it was a man. That was the first day, it was not in the rainy season but it started to rain heavily, just where we were, only at that spot, and we could not find anything so we had to return.

The next time we went there we were looking but could not find it. We had to spend the night there. At around six in the morning we saw livestock and we went there because we thought there would be food. We went to a place to get some food, a place where there is no government [E implied that the people settled there without the government representatives knowing it as the hill is a forest reserve]. There we could get food, and the people gave us directions. Then we climbed again, we saw the rock, then we had to go up, we had almost reached it when something I cannot interpret happened, a strong wind, we could not withstand, we could not reach, we were with three, X, B and me. When the wind came we were thrown back into town. Then the people were laughing because they knew we were thrown back.

But we had courage and went again, X. did not go all the way because we all would have to go naked and he did not want to, then the other guy, he said that he would die and he did in the end.

E. then looked at me and confessed, "I'm still waiting to die", smiling smugly. He continued:

We fetched the red mercury, 500 grams, B put it in his pocket, but it was too heavy, it tore the jacket. We had to wind it in the jacket and carry it. It took around 6 hours to get down the hill. We had to trick people, to not let them know we had it and get to the motorbike. We wanted to leave. X was the driver, but the motorbike did not go, it just did not go, we went 3 kilometers with it and then it stopped. Then we had to walk for 20 kilometers, we had no money. The third man then took the mercury with him,

later he died. Then we stopped that business [meaning they never went to look for mercury again].

There was at Endau only one old woman that knew how to go there, she never ate anything. She died a long time ago. There were many people that tried to go there, even soldiers. The mercury was very red with round balls. In colonial time they had to put the mercury in the ground there, the British. It was at the bearings on these hills, they had to put mercury there. The richest man in Mutomo (a town in the south of Kitui) now he was the man that knew how to get the mercury.

This was the whole account, with all its loose ends. X told me later that they made up the story. Like most of the other development workers or transients I spoke with, X kept open the possibility that red mercury existed. He said they never went to Endau to get the mercury, but the rest of the story could be true.

Like in all the accounts of red mercury, the protagonists were always elites, individuals or small groups of men, usually the kind of people who visited the hills of Kitui for professional reasons. They could be NGO or government staff, missionaries and whites, but particularly male development organization staff. As with the encounter described above, these elites ambiguously related to the reality of the rumor. They could voice their skepticism, or say it was nonsense that mercury could be found on this particular hill because everyone knew it was only found on another hill, often even more remote and sparsely populated. They claimed that the places of mercury were bewitched, that traditional people or *Andu Manthi* as they were called locally (Onneweer 2002) instructed large snakes to guard the minerals. The people who confessed to be looking for mercury mentioned that one had to be particularly daring and cunning to succeed, and able to identify and gain the trust of the right *mundu mue* (literally special person, usually translated as witchdoctor or traditional healer). Most of the people I spoke with could name men that had been able to find such a witchdoctor who promised the knowledge to “get that mercury”. The people suspected to have achieved this were often the directors of NGOs that used to work on projects in remote places but who were no longer seen in the area. The richest man in Mutomo, as X and E claimed, lives in Nairobi and is rarely seen in Mutomo, he drives a luxury vehicle to his rural home, stays in most of the time, talks to no one and after a few days, returns to Nairobi. Many others went crazy or died from the powers released by the minerals, such as B in the example, who had actually died while working for an NGO that X had also worked for. Rumors described how these men had to humble themselves to witchdoctors and perform various rituals that only served to ridicule them. Walking up the hill naked, for instance, or sacrificing a chicken at a place up on the hill and then suddenly finding oneself back in the village centre still holding the chicken, and everyone could see how they had associated themselves with witchdoctoring. For those people who claimed to be looking for mercury, the risk and magic of its mobilization from the peripheral locations of Kitui seemed to give them an excuse for their presence and their association with local villagers. It also made them appear as cunning and daring men on their way to infinite riches.

This appearance of the elite man and the resource of spectacular value that he found or lost in quests to mobilize resources has also been typified in relation to the Kalimantan landscape by Tsing: “Natural treasures themselves become fugitive in this landscape of

movement and flight, just as once, people said, a man stumbled over a nugget of gold as big as a rice mortar and marked the place oh so carefully to come back later with help – but when he did, nothing was there. Masculine magic and charisma are required, for even save in one’s possession, treasures disappear.” (2005: 38). And as said, while gold can be found in conditions less magical and fugitive, in red mercury, this seems to be the only way it occurs, elusive, a material without substance to speak of masculine magic and charisma on the verge of turning into a caricature, or already past it. For elites that are still in Kitui, talking about red mercury allowed them to depict themselves as risk takers and as masculine dare devils trying everything to become rich, even conspiring with traditionalists and engaging in occult practices. Similarities can here be seen with accounts on suspicious or “daring” consumption as described by Walsh (2003, see also De Boeck 1998). Here, the suspicious and daring related to the endeavor to reach and mobilize the fabled resources that would have made these elites so rich they would never have to spend time in the rural areas again. The rumor not only enforced the distinction between them and the local inhabitants, it also provided an alibi, why development workers (like X and E) spend their time in the rural areas. In rural Kenya, and Kitui in particular, the expectations of elite to redistribute their urban wealth among local kin, and the anxiety about rural witchcraft often prevented them to return to their upcountry homes. This anxiety even had its own lemma in the Kitui District Development plan: “*Cultural practices: witchcraft is widespread and deeply entrenched in some parts of the district. As a result, residents working in urban centers and outside the district fear going to their rural homes, or even investing there* (G.O.K n.d.; see Geschiere 1997 for similarities).

Comments from the rural areas

Local elites, the village bourgeoisie if you like, the shopkeepers, butchers, Evangelical preachers, also often spoke about red mercury in locations around the eastern peripheral hills like Mutito wa Ndooa, Nuu, Endau, Mutha. They often directed their accusations against witchdoctors or traditional people who they said kept all this wealth from public utility. The ambiguous materiality of mercury allowed them to amplify the distinction between themselves, as the development oriented local elites, and “those traditional people” who were said to be opposed to development. It offered an excuse for the state of affairs in their location, why things would not develop, or “move” as it is often called (*maendeo* in Kikamba). Want-to-be elites or the people who had not managed to leave the remote areas of Kitui drew on the story of red mercury to voice one of the available conspiracies that kept them where they were, stuck in the village. It also explained why some did get away from the village, and the ridiculous things they had to do to manage this.

On the occasions that I visited women who practiced witchdoctoring or were prophets of local shrines the rumor of mercury appeared in yet another way. Below an extract from an interview with an elderly woman, a witchdoctor who lived at the foot of a particular hill of Kitui and whom we asked about springs:

There is a shrine on the hill but you cannot go there with shoes or pants on. Only the old people they go there barefoot and dressed with only a blanket. I’m also old now, like an old man, and I can go. At the shrine there is a permanent spring. A white man once came there and went to that place but he died. Also the black man that directed

the white man lost his mind. Another story is about someone from Action Aid (an NGO that worked on water development in the south of Kitui in the 1980s). They came with two people, and my brother and sister acted as guides to take them to the spring. After they went up the hill they came here to ask for directions home. They were so confused that they couldn't even see they were already at their home. The one that was working for Action Aid had to be admitted to a mental hospital, the other one was cleansed. There is mercury there, if you go to the hill without knowing about the shrine then you find a liquid, green and shiny. Then when you come down and realize and go back with more people you will not see anything anymore.

This was one of the more elaborate descriptions by a witchdoctor about wealth on the hills and a white man that she said went up there during the colonial period. Many so called traditional people (*Andu Manthi*) would just mention red (or only on this occasion, green) mercury or other materials purported to be of extreme value during a conversation, often with a warning not to go look for them. To them, red mercury in Kitui was of a character akin to what is often described as "ill-gotten wealth", a wealth released by its spiritual owners only through mediation by corrupted ritual experts (Luning 2009; Werthmann 2003, see also De Boeck 1998; Shipton 1989; Walsh 2003). For the elders and witchdoctors the rumor placed them squarely in a narrative of local cultural knowledge about resource mobilization and the powers that needed to be overcome. They took on the role of "guardians of the land", protecting its materials from being hijacked by passers-by (see Schoffeleers 1978). Or reversely, they selflessly protected passers-by (like myself) from the dangerous capacities of the material. It turned them into key holders for the locality's fabulous resources, should they reveal too much about access to it, the material would release its powers and things would go bad for the people mobilizing its wealth, and probably the rest of the community.

Material histories of resource environments

As a spatial category, "environments" in resource environments allows a broader recognition of historical processes in relation to materials subjected to extraction. This section describes the relation of red mercury to its historical resource environment, the Kitui area in which colonial attempts to prevent erosion and promote animal husbandry led to large-scale improvement schemes. Before we go there I have three points about resource environments that help to make sense of resources, and rumors of spectacular value.

First, a resource environment can be a place or territory of the material's origin but it can also be that projects and technologies adapted to the materiality of resources constitute their own environments. This environment can be territorial, for instance when the resource is land and the technology a cartographic beacon, but also underground reserves or network shaped or fluid (see Corsin Jimenez 2003; Mol and Law 1994 Knudsen this volume). When for instance in the 1950s, the African Land Development Board aimed to create a cattle economy in Kitui and set up routes to the new slaughterhouses of Nairobi, this entailed a particular geography of cattle tracks, and availability watering places in dry areas based on what the resource was supposed to do: drink, eat, grow and walk from Kitui to Nairobi.

Secondly, particularly with the kind of ambiguities in a resource's materiality like water, gold, oil and red mercury, there is need to see how some value and material transformations are permanent, others never happen, some return to a previous state or are attributed with different values by different people. For instance water sources, once subjected to improvement schemes, calculations and technological interventions, could be considered resources, but what if the structure collapses or the well dries, or the well is locked and the water is used only by the owners, or sold as a commodity. There is no reason to assume a linear progression from recognized presence to accessible resource, red mercury being the ultimate example of a resource impossible to mobilize.

Thirdly, as several contributors to this issue show, resources seldom come alone, they relate to other materials or commodities or have to be purified from cruder forms (Davidov; Knudsen; Luning). Likewise, in Kitui the attempts to create a cattle economy entailed a rationalization of available water in the savannah areas. When this was problematic, large pipelines were proposed to bring water from the springs on from the top of the surrounding hills deep into the savannah area by gravity (like the one mentioned above for Mutito). One resource required projects on other materials thereby also turning them into resources. To bring this to Kitui and the case of red mercury as a resource, the rumors or red mercury showed particular geographical and historical links worked on analogies between the present day development encounter and colonial projects of creating the Kitui district as a resource environment. Admittedly, the analogies I recognize rely on coincidences, but only because I think it tells us something about the work of materiality and history in resource environments from an anthropological perspective. As Pels (1992:171) suggests: "[Anthropology] shares with rumour a rather loose connection to specific historical circumstances: its 'truths' are tenuous, and it draws, like rumour, upon coincidental linkages of stated facts and historical circumstances." An anthropology of resources, and the rumors of resources even more, should cater for these coincidental linkages.

The effects of geography

Consider again the "stated fact" of the origin of red mercury in the account of E and X their search for red mercury:

"In colonial times they had to put the mercury in the ground there, the British. It was at the bearings on the hills, they had to put mercury there."

And the story of the shrine on the hill and the white man that went up there during colonial times that was told by the witchdoctor:

"At the shrine there is a permanent spring. A white man once came there and went to that place but he died. Also the black man that directed the white man lost his mind."

Through these statements, and many more like it, the narrators related the presence of red mercury to the colonial encounter. To be more precise, the rumor used images from a number of critical moments in the colonial project of creating a resource environment in Kitui that would serve the colonial economy. The first critical moments was in the 1910s, when the administration alienated large tracks of land and forced the people of Kitui into a native reserve. In the 1930s and 50s the Kitui district was subjected to a number of improvement and reconditioning schemes aimed at turning its perceived wastelands into a profitable cattle economy. Besides the physical reorganization of the area's resource

economy, these schemes also brought a great number of experts to the district. The distribution of red mercury appears partly as an effect of colonial geographical projects (the beacons on the hills) and the presence of experts working on large-scale landscape improvement schemes in the Kitui district of the 1930s and 50s.

Particularly the eastern side of the Kitui area is characterized by isolated hills in an undulating dry savannah landscape. In the 1910s the colonial government used the hilltops to draw up the first maps of the district by means of beacons for trigonometrical measurements. Assistant District Commissioner Champion constructed these beacons.ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Dundas, his then fellow Assistant District Commissioner recalls in his memoirs how, during the first cartographic expeditions with Champion in the 1910s, he could not get the local community to assist them. Much like the description above by X and E, people did not dare to climb the hills, as they feared that large monsters or big snakes would kill them:

“[The cartographic expeditions] involved much climbing of steep trackless mountains and often this was rendered more arduous by reluctance on the part of local inhabitants to act as guides. This was because they believed that almost every mountain-top was the haunt of some spirit or monster that resented intrusion on its privacy. Such beliefs were, incidentally, strengthened when a half-witted lad, who led me up one mountain, shortly after died. A specimen of this kind of terror was at home on a mountain called Mutito, (...). This creature was reputed to reach down into the valley some two thousand feet below and to gobble up a whole herd of cattle. Trekking one day across the shoulder of Mutito, the headman of my porters came running and yelling that the monster had darted out of the bush and grabbed a bunch of fowls he was carrying. I told him not to be silly; if the monster were famished it might make do with an elephant, but that it should descend to hens was unthinkable. But going back with the man I saw that his story was not entirely without substance, for there in soft sand was the unmistakable trail of a very large python. (Dundas 1955:22)

In places some distance away from the district station of Kitui, including Mutito and Endau, the cartographic expeditions and the construction of the beacons were the first encounters with the colonial administration. During the very same expeditions the native reserves were closed, the beacons were constructed, hut tax was collected and the elders of the shrines (*atumia wa mathembo*) were gazetted, to later become headmen or chiefs for indirect rule.^{iv}

Coincidences abound. One can almost see the ingredients of the rumor come together here, the first colonial officer arrives in the village demanding hut tax and help to climb the hills to put a curious cement contraption on top, then he wants to know the leader of the shrines. These shrines were also often on the top of the large hills, near springs or other prominent features of the landscape (Akong’a 1987; Onneweer 2002). Subsequently, the cement contraptions came to function as markers for a native reserve, that is, as markers for the alienation of land previously considered communal.^v Especially the localities on the eastern fringes of the district lost much grazing land during this period and these hills of the Kitui district are now mentioned as possible locations of hidden

mercury. An NGO manager even informed me that the last remaining deposit of mercury was at a colonial beacon in Tsavo National Park, an area not only outside of the former native reserve but, to this day, an area with limited access.

The persona of the colonial experts reappears in rumors of present day elites looking for red mercury, usually as the person first to climb the hills of Kitui to look for resources and to construct a beacon to mark the spot. The rumor and the magic of red mercury link the colonial encounter with the present day development encounter by analogy. In a Don Quixote type plot, male elite outsiders lost their minds in the remote hills of Kitui, looking for a material of incredible value that was just not there or refused to be mobilized.

Suspicious development and its experts

The 1930s in Kenya saw a huge increase of agricultural experts looking for the signs of soil erosion and opportunities to utilize the resources of the native reserves. (Anderson 1984, MacKenzie 1998, Hodge 2007). In 1938 Agricultural Officer Barnes came to the Kitui district and reported that Kitui was among the worse of all the native reserves when it came to soil erosion. Barnes proposed to improve the soil of the Kitui native reserve through an incredibly large improvement schemes that restructured the rural economy of Kitui into a cattle-exporting district. It was after the Second World War that the African Settlement & Land Utilisation Board, later ALDEV really pushed the agenda for the economic advancement of agriculture and animal husbandry in Kitui. The chairman of the ALDEV board sent a letter to the District Commissioner of Kitui in which he nearly forced him to think of a means to make the useless wilderness (*nyika*) in the Kitui district productive:

“These areas have hitherto been regarded as entirely useless, but as time goes on it becomes increasingly obvious that a method of utilising such areas simply must be found.”^{vi}

The communication between the board and the DC of Kitui resulted in one of the largest improvement schemes ever seen in colonial Kenya. In Kitui approximately 100.000 hectares of tsetse infested land was cleared of bush and 100 square miles of hills and forests became a forest reserve, over 400 large water development projects were initiated in dry areas to promote even distribution of cattle.^{vii} In the aforementioned report, Barnes also noted that all of Champion’s beacons had been destroyed and suggested that the people of Kitui had associated these beacons with the land alienation that had taken place. He hoped that the educated people of Kitui would understand they were meant to help them “and not for taking their land away.”^{viii}

Most of the colonial resource projects stopped after independence, the large scale cattle economy projected for the district never took the shape it was supposed to have taken and large parts of alienated land were opened up again. The reports of the colonial resource schemes provide descriptions of projects that portrayed interventions as beneficial for the people and for the improvement of the reserve: hilltop expropriation and reforestation as a measure to prevent erosion; the protection of springs and water projects to improve hygiene and so on. The forestry department and the county council expropriated all the areas discussed in the above examples, Mutomo, Mutito, Mutha and Endau, locations that were referred to above, as well as many others. They declared these hills forest reserves in the 1950s and forced the inhabitants off the hill to live down slope. For most of the people I interviewed on the issue who lived during these days, the land

alienation caused considerable speculation on why they had to leave their homesteads and what it was the administration wanted to do on these hills.

All these hills also saw trigonometry beacons, spring water development projects and forestry schemes; all these hills are also said to be the haunt of a large snake that protects the water sources or the local shrines on these hills; finally, all these hills also feature in stories about mercury and the occult ways of certain elites why try to get it

Conclusion

If materiality in resources does not require the substance of interest to be already physically present then the role for the anticipated process of its mobilization in shaping its substance becomes all the more important. Resources, then, are materials of an anticipated physical presence, waiting to be utilized, mobilized or extracted. The anticipation finds faith in the character of the technology that is proposed to control, harness or mobilize it in the particular environment from which it is to be extracted. Even though “resources become” (see introduction to this volume) they are all too often assumed or imagined to be there even though they are not. The faith in the means of their extraction facilitates these imaginings. For instance, with water development in Kitui, technologies in the environment as basins, dams, wells etc that act as reservoirs anticipate the presence of water as a resource, but work only if water wants to go or stay there. For minerals like gold and oil, one can think of the technologies that try to establish a presence, like drilling, or seismic exploration or what have you, but this only facilitates the anticipation of the resource’s substance by negating the process through which it has to be brought out (see also Luning, this volume). In these cases, value and utility are recognized in a material that is yet to come into existence. Like in the Bre-X scam described by Tsing (2005, see above) people can play tricks on this recognition and thereby indirectly provide a comment on the global capitalist accumulation. For red mercury, the comment is on the development encounter in Kitui, on how, throughout history, the proposed mobilization of value ran aground in the limitations of the resource environment, but the social economic inequalities manifested in the encounter remained pertinent. Red mercury, when considered as a commentary on the contemporary development of resources, has some powerful things to say about the sociality in projects of value mobilization and extraction. In the first part of this paper I explained how some of this power derived from the elusiveness of its substance, its unruly materiality that allowed different groups to ridicule or express tensions and suspicions about other people’s engagement with the material values of their surroundings. The last part of the paper described the coincidence of some of powerful images of the rumor with the colonial projects of creating a resource environment. I proposed that red mercury appears as the elusive substance through which the fabulous in resource extraction projects prefigured the occult economy. It highlighted the way a historical approach to resource environments sets resource extraction apart from a commodity economy: through their situation in history and space rumors of red mercury in Kitui engaged with the problem of resource extraction. The rumor of red mercury started to appear as a symbol of suspicious mobilization, a means to comment on the sociality of resource environments.

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ⁱ The digital database of Googlebooks facilitated search for the sparse references to red mercury, bringing references that would otherwise never have been found (key: “red mercury” Kenya).

ⁱⁱ Personal communication Kariuki Thuku

ⁱⁱⁱ See Kenya National Archive (KNA) DC/KTI 7/4. References to archival material will from hereon be in the footnotes instead of the text to maintain the readability of the text

^{iv} KNA DCMSK 1 3 3 Kitui district Quarterly report 1910; Mutiso 1977

^v KNA DCMSK 10A 12 1 (20/7/1911) iron and cement for demarcation; KNA CO 533 58 Native reserves memorandum by A.C. Hollis, secretary of native affairs 1909

^{vi} KNA SOIL 5 2 4 1. 19 November 1948 emphasis in original.

^{vii} Ministry of Agriculture, Animal husbandry, and Water resources (MOA) 1956; KNA Agr 4 3 2 1955; KNA PC EST 2 5 7 forest 1961.

^{viii} (KNA CO 533 496 1: 13) “Report on soil erosion in the Ukamba reserve” 1938