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## New Book Fills Major Gap in Kenyan History

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— A new book edited by Illinois Wesleyan University anthropologists with contributions from scholars on three continents fills a major gap in the history of Kenya's coastal history by including the voices of the Mijikenda, a people whose experiences and perspectives have received less attention than the better known Swahili people.

The book is *Contesting Identities: The Mijikenda and Their Neighbors in Kenyan Coastal Society* (Africa World Press, 2013). It is co-edited by Rebecca Gearhart, associate professor of anthropology at Illinois Wesleyan, and Linda Giles, retired member of the anthropology department at Illinois State University and an adjunct faculty instructor at Illinois Wesleyan.

Gearhart first visited East Africa in 1987 as an undergraduate student. She returned to coastal Kenya almost every subsequent summer to conduct research as she pursued a master's degree in African history and a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Florida. Since then she has traveled to Kenya every few years to continue her research on Swahili expressive arts. Gearhart joined the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan in 1999.

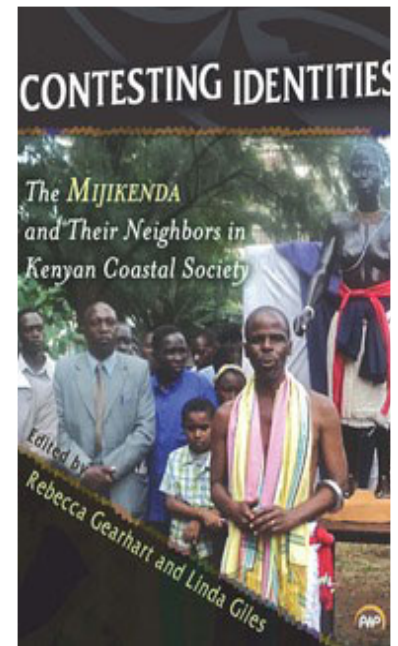
Giles holds a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin. Her research interests focus on the East African coast, where she has conducted extensive research on spirit possession and, more recently, collaborative research on the theft, global trade and reparation of Mijikenda ancestor memorial posts.

The project has been nearly a decade in the making. In 2004, Gearhart and a panel of other scholars sought to de-

center the Swahili in Kenyan coastal history and highlight the contributions and interactions of other coastal Kenyan peoples, particularly the Mijikenda. A confederation of nine culturally, linguistically and historically related peoples, the Mijikenda make up the largest ethnic group in the region though relatively little has been written about them.

In contrast, the Swahili people have long enjoyed scholarly interest, due to their history as middlemen in long-distance trade, their urban settlements, their adoption of Islam and other Middle Eastern influences, and their cosmopolitan

culture and artistic expressions, according to Gearhart and Giles.



Rebecca Gearhart



Gearhart and other colleagues invited several Mijikenda scholar-activists working at the National Museums of Kenya to submit chapters to the volume. The project embraced engaged research rather than insisting on the detached stance often favored by older traditions of academic research, Gearhart said.

“By inviting Mijikenda to contribute to the volume, we initiated the first collaborative production of Mijikenda history that places Mijikenda at the center of action rather than on the periphery,” said Gearhart. “We were resolute about including Mijikenda scholars currently documenting Mijikenda history and culture, and working to revitalize Mijikenda identity.”

The resulting 13-chapter volume, with contributions from American, British and Kenyan scholars, is divided into four sections. The first presents groundbreaking archaeological and linguistic evidence that sheds light on the kinds of interactions coastal populations had with hinterland and interior peoples, and the degree to which these interactions influenced and shaped the Mijikenda and their neighbors, according to Gearhart. Later sections of the book examine social identity and the symbols and activities that represent ethnicity in various Kenyan coastal communities, and structures of inequality among coastal peoples.

The final section calls attention to ways in which contemporary campaigns for cultural preservation and environmental protection are interlinked on the Kenyan coast, according to Gearhart. She noted the book’s initial impact has been to invigorate the work of the Mijikenda contributors.

“These scholar-activists have been galvanized by the larger academic community’s acknowledgement that Mijikenda perspectives are valid, and have a place in intellectual discourse on Kenyan coastal history as well as on contemporary coastal society,” said Gearhart.

The editors believe wide readership of the book among Kenyan scholars will lead to enhanced understanding of the Mijikenda and how their identity has been shaped by a unique set of social, economic, cultural and political pressures over time.

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