

Rumors of Red Mercury: Histories of Materiality and Sociality in the Resources of Kitui, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The article offers a historical ethnographic analysis of a rumor of a resource in the Kitui district of Kenya that was heard during fieldwork on water development practices and technologies. This rumor dealt with a substance known as red mercury, an elusive material that was said to appear as a resource at particular historical and geographical locations. I unravel the details and complexities of this rumor in order to demonstrate how it signifies a particular reflection on the sociality of resource mobilization in the development encounter. This article elaborates how theories of materiality can help to understand the historical embeddedness and particular material qualities of red mercury. It uses the rumor of resources to differentiate the complexities of value and materiality in resources and commodities. [Keywords: Materiality, sociality, resources, rumor, Kitui, Kenya, red mercury]

Contrary to many commodities, natural resources seldom appear to us as finished objects that can be exchanged or on which meaning can be imputed. Projects that seek to extract resources often transform the physical nature of the resource, or it could even be that the attempt

of extraction fails and the substance remains absent. Most of the theory about resources engages with the becoming of resources, the moment of discovery or their post extraction economy (see Bakker and Bridge 2006 for a critique). In this article, I argue, as Ferry and Limbert (2008) have done, that a focus on the delay, absence, or nonappearance of resources can bring new insights to what a resource is; what we talk about when we describe resources; and how desire, skepticism, and uncertainties over projects of resource mobilization can be part of the histories of these materials. I call these histories of materiality and sociality, because the desire, skepticism, and uncertainty over the presence or absence of resources not only evokes the idea of that resource for a short time, it also becomes part of the landscape and entangled with the other resources: absence has effect. To address these issues, I describe a resource of which its existence as such is questionable because the substance was usually only spoken about in rumors. These rumors described a substance of fabulous value that actively resists extraction, allegedly confusing and misguiding the men who wanted to extract it. These men were said to look for a substance called red mercury, which was allegedly found (among other places) in the Kitui district of Kenya. True or not, a focus on what the rumor tells us about the history of development and extraction in the Kitui district provides a unique view on the intricacies of resource materiality and resource mobilization as a historical project.

During my fieldwork in the Kitui district, people described how red mercury oozed from cracks in the rocks around sacred groves or shrines (*mathembo*) in remote and inaccessible hills. Other accounts described how colonial officers had hidden mercury in the hills, underneath triangulation beacons or other peculiar devices that were used for the demarcation and improvement schemes in the district. In the rumor, people from Kitui described how certain men, such as development workers and similar passing and transient elites, went to these hills to “capture” (*kukwata* in the local language of Kikamba) the mercury to become fabulously rich. However, the men looking for red mercury were said to be deterred by the occult powers associated with the Akamba shrines—powers that protected the mercury from being harvested. If unprepared, you might encounter mercury once, by accident, but if you returned with a container to carry it away, it would be impossible to find again. Large, frightening snakes or sudden gale force winds would confront you, or mystical powers of a more abstract nature derived from the mercury could confuse and kill

you. Only local traditional witchdoctors knew the secrets of red mercury, but they kept the secret to themselves and warned people that its extraction might unleash destructive powers beyond their control. The few elite men (African or European, but always men) reputed to have reached and harvested the mercury had moved away from public view to live in the city in exorbitant luxury. How they managed to market their treasure remained unclear—in Kitui, no one talked about the utility of red mercury and details about its exchange value seemed fabulous.

Rumor and history make strange epistemological bedfellows; both have different finalities but rumors often liberally draw on the past to make statements about the present. As a method into the meanings and implications of the rumors of red mercury, I draw on White (2000) and Pels (1992) who worked on another rumor circulating in East Africa. This was the rumor of Mumiani, the white vampire, a colonial figure that wanted to take the blood from his African subjects. The rumor of the white vampire in East Africa shares several similarities with the rumor of red mercury; both were about (red) substances (blood and mineral) and both used these substances to express, embellish, or elucidate particular historical and social encounters. Even if the rumors of red mercury and the white vampire appeared to describe a situation that had actually occurred, the objective of these rumor was not historical. However, as Pels described, the inquiry into history as well as into rumor is anthropological: “[Anthropology] shares with rumour a rather loose connection to specific historical circumstances: its ‘truths’ are tenuous, and it draws, like rumor, upon coincidental linkages of stated facts and historical circumstances” (1992:171). Both Pels and White avoid the pitfall of looking for causalities and claims of truth: they take the details articulated in the rumor seriously even though they appear outlandish at first sight.¹ Rumors, according to White, are everyday descriptions of extraordinary occurrences, and analysis of these rumors should engage with the details described (White 2000:5; see also Taussig 1980:14-15). What I take from their analysis is the way Pels and White engage with the details of rumors and connect these details to the historical changes the rumors appear to comment on. In the case of red mercury, the historical details related to some of the locally perceived peculiarities of the sociality of resource mobilization in development and the relation of value and resources.

On a general level, the kind of rumor (men coming from elsewhere seeking to find some fabulous wealth) as well as the substance this article

addresses (red mercury) can be found in other areas in Africa (and probably beyond).² In this more general occurrence, a distinction could be made between two descriptions. The first form portrayed red mercury as a substance on the market in some of Africa's urban centers to be sold as (among other things) a nuclear ballistic (Griffin 1986; Hounam and McQuillan 1995; Swiderski 1995, 2008; see also below). In these narratives, red mercury appeared as a commodity already extracted from its source—or perhaps chemically produced in laboratories—but always at large in an immoral economy of post-capitalist accumulation (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). The other form, the resource-form, portrayed red mercury as hidden or elusive wealth, a secret substance that was said to appear in remote places, ritual sites (such as local shrines often near natural springs), or at historically conspicuous features in the landscape (such as colonial beacons). While the main focus in this article is on this resource form of red mercury, in the final section of this article I show how contrasting the resource phase with the commodity form or phase (see Appadurai 1986) is very informative when it comes to understanding value regimes and materiality as they pertain to resources. Red mercury as a resource engages with a particular moment in the chain of value production. This is not the point when the mineral is already out of the ground or expected by large-scale economic transactions, but rather refers to the local complexities surrounding technologies of extraction and localization: the trouble of capturing a material that is not yet there or might even never be there. This ambiguous, unruly, or perhaps even elusive materiality of red mercury points to a marked distinction between resources and commodities.

The kind of substance that people talk about when discussing red mercury inflates one of the capacities of resources that is seldom taken into account: their potential absence. This leads me to analyze resources not as *materials* (real things), but in terms of *materiality*—the real or imagined physical qualities of a thing or substance in a social historical setting (as described in Miller 2005). And unlike immateriality (the absence of a thing or substance in a social historical setting, see also Miller 2005), resources' materiality informs technologies and projects of their mobilization. This resource materiality is not only limited to the substance, but links resources with the environment in which they are found (or not). Recent years have seen a growing number of scholarly accounts on materiality in which the environment is taken as an historically active agent rather than a substratum of activity (Bakker and Bridge 2006, Latour 1993, Miller 2005, Tsing

2005). Tsing (2005), for instance, uses the concept of the resource frontier to capture the dynamics of landscapes and resources. She describes the resource frontier as a place of friction between the local landscape and its global interconnections: for instance, how capitalist regimes talk of “freeing up” resources from these landscapes, but how these landscapes resist such freeing up and move and turn wild in this process. In this article, I address a similar friction between two contrasting regimes by addressing the way an elusive resource seems to facilitate the contrasting of different social and historical groups. I show here how the ambiguity in its materiality (does red mercury exist?) is crucial as it allows polyvalence. Questions and speculations on its existence as a resource both comment on and produce a particular sociality of resource development that emerged in Kenya in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the following section, I describe two historical periods in which the resource environment that the rumor of red mercury engages with took shape. The second section discusses how I got caught up in the rumor and found myself likened to a colonial officer without being able to do much about it. In the third section, I show how the particular resource materiality evoked by red mercury helped to exaggerate or parody the sociality of resource mobilization. The final section analyzes the rumor of red mercury as an expression of resource materiality in the development encounter.

The Memory of Kitui Becoming a Resource Environment

In the rumor of red mercury, images of two moments in the colonial period appear that both relate to the colonial project of creating a resource environment. The first image located the substance at colonial triangulation beacons or near local shrines described above. The second portrayed a colonial figure, a white man who climbed the hills in the colonial period and who was now followed by other men looking for red mercury. Note how this history not only describes how a white man went up the hill, but also how it situates this white man in crucial periods in the construction of the Kitui district as a resource environment.

1910s: The Kitui Native Reserve and the Beacons

The first critical moment in the Kitui district’s development into a resource environment occurred in the 1910s, when the British colonial administration

alienated large tracts of land and forced the people into the Kitui native reserve. This native reserve covered approximately one-third of the land of the Kitui district; other areas in the district were designated as a game reserve (now Tsavo National Park) and as crown land (the Yatta Plateau and the Eastern Crown Lands). To allow the actual demarcation of these different regions and to draw maps, the colonial administration used the hilltops near the boundaries of the district to install beacons for trigonometrical measurements.³ Charles Dundas, the assistant District Commissioner of Kitui, recollects in his memoirs how, during the first cartographic expeditions, he could not get the local community to assist 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 hills that feature in contemporary rumors of mercury, the cartographic expeditions and the construction of the beacons were the first encounters that the inhabitants of these areas had with the colonial administration. Officers like Dundas closed the native reserves during these expeditions, constructed the beacons, and collected hut tax. One particular problem of this newly demarcated native reserve was the perceived absence of native leadership in the form of chiefs that would help facilitate indirect rule. The colonial administration therefore gazetted all the ritual leaders

or elders of the shrines (*atumia wa mathembo*) who were subsequently assigned as headmen or chiefs.⁴

Coincidences abound: the first colonial officer arrives in the village demanding a hut tax and assistance in climbing the hills in order to put a curious cement contraption on top and then he wants to know the leader of the shrines. These shrines were also often located on the top of the large hills or 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, markers for the alienation of land previously considered communal.⁵ It is precisely these hills of the Kitui district that people now mentioned as possible locations of hidden mercury.⁶

1930s-1960s: Resource Improvement Schemes and Their Experts

In the 1930s, Kenya saw a huge increase in the number of agricultural experts looking for signs of soil erosion and opportunities to utilize the resources of the native reserves (Anderson 1984, MacKenzie 1998, Hodge 2007). In 1938, an Agricultural Officer named Barnes surveyed the Kitui district and reported that Kitui was among the worst of all the native reserves when it came to soil erosion. He also noted that all of the beacons constructed in the 1910s had been destroyed and suggested that the people of Kitui had associated these beacons with the land alienation that had occurred. Barnes proposed to restore the beacons and improve the soil of the Kitui native reserve through a large improvement scheme that restructured the rural economy of Kitui into a cattle-exporting district. He hoped that the educated people of Kitui would understand they were meant to help them, "and not for taking their land away."⁷

It was after World War II that the African Settlement & Land Utilisation Board, later ALDEV, started the economic advancement of agriculture and animal husbandry in Kitui. Several other districts of Kenya were also singled out for improvement schemes but after the Machakos district, Kitui would receive the largest and most onerous program. In 1948, the chairman of the ALDEV board sent a letter to the District Commissioner of Kitui in which he strongly urged 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."⁸ To achieve this, the Kitui County Council and ALDEV cleared

approximately 100,000 hectares of tsetse infested bush land, turned 100 square miles of hills and forests into a forest reserve, and initiated over 400 large water development projects in dry areas to promote an even distribution of cattle.⁹

The colonial reports portrayed interventions as beneficial for the people and for the improvement of the reserve and its resource base. Hilltop expropriation and reforestation would prevent erosion while the protection of springs and water projects would improve hygiene. The forestry department and the county council expropriated all the large hill formations, including Mutomo, Mutito, Mutha, and Endau, which people today talk about as possible locations of mercury reserves. These hills were declared “forest reserves” in the 1950s, and residents were forced to resettle from the hilltops to the slopes. During my fieldwork in 2007 and 2009, I interviewed residents who had lived there in the 1950s and 1960s. They still speculated about the reasons for the land alienation and wondered why they had to leave their homesteads. What was it the administration aimed to do on these hills? All the forest reserve hills established in the 1950s were sites of trigonometry beacons, spring water development projects, and forestry schemes. All these hills were also said to be the haunt of a large snake that protects the water sources or the local shrines located there. Finally, all these hills also feature in contemporary stories about mercury and the occult ways of foreign and local elites who try to get it.

Kitui Development in 1990 and Onward

In areas like the Kitui district, people can use materials—like water, wood, or minerals—without ever regarding them as resource. It is the kind of attention that comes with projects that include a totalizing view of the environment that single out certain materials as resources, like the ones described above. After the enduring emphasis on resources that Kitui saw in the colonial period, the contemporary development encounter also highlights the importance of a resource economy. There are currently more than ten NGOs operating in the Kitui district that try to mobilize resources for local communities, with some success, but also with severe challenges.

In the introduction, I noted how Tsing (2005) critiqued the way landscapes were assumed to be inert in this context of resource extraction. The Kitui landscape has posed its own challenges to projects of resource mobilization, partly due to recurrent torrential rains, prolonged droughts,

and fragile and unpredictable underground water flows. Silted dams, dry wells, and broken pumps: the problems surrounding resource mobilization sedimented into the landscape as continual reminders of the area's undeveloped potential value. Under these conditions, natural springs have been known to dry up after they were harnessed through a springbox, or to move elsewhere. It has led people I met during my fieldwork to conclude that water in Kitui, particularly uphill water, "does not like cement." To many, the Kitui landscape appears to have a mind of its own when it comes to mobilizing resources. It should not come as a surprise that a rumor of misguided men who seek a fabulous form of resource extraction and mobilization appeared in an area where outside organizations have been struggling with the formation of the resource environment and the mobilization of its resources.¹⁰ Water schemes in Europe for instance can often rely on exact knowledge of water quantities and flows, but when water in Kitui is still in an aquifer in the ground, who knows how much there is or if it will ever be captured? These uncertainties and expectations reflect on the people who are part of these endeavors to mobilize resources, and those who by status, gender, and skin-color are associated with them.

Elusive Resources, or How Not to Look for Red Mercury

In the years 2001, 2007, and 2009, I spent a total of 14 months in the Kitui district of Kenya, researching first the history and uses of local shrines (Mathembo) and, later, the history and contemporary practice of water development.¹¹ Being a white, male researcher of resource development, the rumor of red mercury ensnared me and made me a suspect which, to some extent, even hindered enquiry into other projects of resource development in Kitui. Outsiders, like myself, but also my assistant, Kennedy Mutati, and many of the governmental and NGO staff that frequented the Kitui district, often became part of suspicion, rumors, or whispers. We often heard or were made part of the rumor in the villages around the hills to the east of the district, the kind of places that I described above as being pivotal in the construction of Kitui as a resource environment. Our experiences at a settlement at the foot of the Mutito range (the same place as Assistant DC Dundas described above) will illustrate these encounters.

On several occasions during our stay at the foot of the Mutito range as my assistant Kennedy Mutati and I walked the footpaths from the town of Ndooa to the fields and compounds near the Mutito hill, schoolchildren

followed us, laughing and shouting “*Musungu, Musungu*” (whiteman, whiteman) and whispering “*melculy...melculy*” (Kikamba has no r). The whispers were just loud enough for us to hear, taunting us by chanting our alleged aim. We encountered similar associations related to red mercury when staying for a few days in the small township of Ndooa. 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 started 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 Ndooa, my association with a renowned witchdoctor (*Mundu Mue*) and prophetess of the local shrine Kwa Lala (Akong'a 1987, Kavyu 1973, Onneweer 2002) was met with considerable suspicion. Schoolchildren, traditional healers, and shopkeepers in the town all assumed that we were also after the secret of how to get to the mercury that this witchdoctor allegedly knew about. To many, my research topic was only a cover for getting to these minerals, and it enticed some of the transient elites, such as the putative employee of the Ministry of Security, to inquire about what knowledge I had.

I was, of course, not the first anthropologist to be included in a local narrative of extraction. In the work of Taussig, a similar inclusion was

mentioned: "Today, in highland Mesoamerica the supernatural lord of the mountain is commonly regarded as an evil and dangerous figure of European extraction: rich, foreign, and urban, a patron, a missionary, and even, sometimes, an anthropologist" (1980:184). Taussig describes the image of the devil as a popular response to programs of extraction, using the image to provide a critique of the global commodity system which turned the miners into a proletariat. Was my inclusion in the rumor of red mercury making me a suspect of some nefarious postcolonial scheme to extract resources from Kitui? Probably not because the rumor highlights histories in which outsiders continually look to extract or mobilize the potential value in resources of the environment but never seem to achieve this. Becoming a suspect in the rumor seemed to mean that an outsider, like myself, was considered ridiculous or misguided in his attempts to look for resources.

Clues to the implications and associations of the rumor can be found in the way it combines a material that invites skepticism with statements on the sociality of resource extraction in the history of Kitui. Among many of the people who were not looking for red mercury (like myself) or who would not claim they knew about it but needed to keep its location secret for the sake of the community, skepticism about the reality of red mercury abounded. Rather than actually removing red mercury from the range of possible resources, this skepticism seemed to enhance the possibility of its existence. That is, it helped the rumor to proliferate and thereby supported the material's possibility. For magical practices, Taussig formulated this relation as follows: "in magical practices, faith and skepticism seem to coexist such that faith may even require skepticism" (2003:272). The possibility of a presence is what makes red mercury effective as a resource. Skepticism regarding the existence of red mercury keeps the rumor alive; it orients the debate in a certain way so that, in the temporary absence of the substance (mercury remained elusive), people could comment on the sociality of the contemporary development encounter in the Kitui district.

The Sociality of Resource Development in Kitui

The poverty and marginality of many of the villages in Kitui occurred in spite of the fact that the area was ostensibly rich in resources. For example, in Ndooa, the nearby Mutito hill (mentioned several times above) 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 ten years, experts had been surveying the possible coal reserves in the area, but no mining had taken place. Water, once abundantly flowing from pipes connected to a permanent spring in the nearby hills, had become a persistent problem. Pipes leaked or were tapped off long before the water reached the town. Colonial projects aimed at its improvement had mostly collapsed and several NGOs that frequented the area attempted to build wells or initiate other water projects with limited success. In many of the peripheral villages of Kitui, the majority of young men had migrated to Kenya's urban centers to find temporary work. Their rural kin, mainly women and older men, struggled to eke out a living, often relying on urban remittances or relief food during droughts or after failed harvest seasons.¹² There was talk of witchcraft—accusations that some women turned evil forces against their fellow villagers and did not want them to progress.

In some cases, the uncertainties of resource development in Kitui society pitted so-called traditionalists against the development orientated or Christian groups in the area, often not over the need of development, but over the way this could be achieved by resource mobilization. In political ecology, resource geography, and environmental anthropology, it has become a truism that struggles over resources are also struggles over meaning and power (Peluso 1992, Escobar 1999, Robbins 2004, Peet and Watts 2004, West 2006; see Bakker and Bridge 2006 for a summary of resource geography). Kitui has definitely seen these kinds of struggles, but to paraphrase this established theory in political ecology, the absence of resources in Kitui provided quite another problem of meaning: how to account for the prolonged presence of efforts to mobilize resource value without this value actually coming into reality? This, I would argue here, is a problem shared by many of the different social groups engaged in the development encounter. The rumor of red mercury cannot only be seen as a commentary voiced by an impoverished rural underclass against oppressive powers of an abstract nature (see Kahn 1997 for a similar argument against Taussig 1980). Elite outsiders like NGO staff, but also village bourgeoisie and schoolchildren, all joined in the narration of the rumor. Their participation made it something different from a commentary on alienation and impoverishment. It reflected more general issues pertaining to local development, the difficulty of resource mobilization, and what seemed to be their amusement about the ways of outsiders in programs of resource mobilizations. As I will show, the rumor encourages social

distinction by caricaturing 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, 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 and daring extraction. Red mercury allowed for 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, for instance. 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 exclusive and rigorous. Indeed, one of the capacities of an elusive substance such as red mercury is its ability to objectify roles, sometimes to such an extent that people began to appear as caricatures of themselves (see White 2000:112 for similarities).

Men and Daring Extraction

Working with some of the NGOs involved in water development in 2007 and 2009 in Kitui, I found that some of the men in these organizations told stories of their own involvement in quests for red mercury. This section will describe how and why men would be telling such tales, starting with an example of two NGO workers, E and X, who narrated their quest for mercury in Endau, one of the most eastern solitary mountains, not far from the Mutito range mentioned above.¹³ One afternoon, I agreed to meet X in a bar. When I arrived, E was also sitting at the table. E had often depended on X for employment and usually positioned himself as X's assistant. X enticed E to start talking about Endau. E had to overcome his initial reluctance, but then provided this story about their quest for red mercury:

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 were 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' knowledge or permission 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 it. 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 do this. 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 got the red mercury, 500 grams and B put it in his pocket but it was too heavy and it tore the jacket. We had to wrap it in the jacket and carry it. It took around six hours to get down the hill. We had to trick people and not let them know we had it so we could get to the motorbike. We wanted to leave. X was the driver, but the motorbike did not go. It simply would not work. We went three 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 and later he died. Then we stopped that business [meaning they never went to look for mercury again].

At Endau there was only one old woman who knew how to get there. She never ate anything. She died a long time ago. There were many people who tried to go there, even soldiers. The mercury was very red—formed of round balls. In colonial time the British had to put the mercury in the ground there. They had to put mercury there at the bearings on these hills. 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 of X and E as I managed to jot it down that afternoon, including its loose ends. Several Kenyan men who worked for development organizations provided me with similar accounts of attempts to look for mercury. X later confessed that he and E made up this particular story for their own and also my entertainment, but he said he knew there was red mercury somewhere on these hills in the east and he and E had considered going and looking for it. Like most other development workers or transients I spoke with, X always allowed for the possibility that red mercury existed.

In the accounts of red mercury, the protagonists of the story were always elite male actors, individuals, or small groups of men, usually the kind of men who visited the hills of Kitui for professional reasons such as NGO or government staff, missionaries, or whites. As in the encounter described above, these elites related to the reality of the rumor in an ambiguous fashion. They might 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 (*Andu Manthi* as they were called locally [Onneweer 2002]) instructed large snakes to guard the minerals. The people who confessed that they were looking for mercury mentioned that one had to be particularly daring and cunning to succeed, and one had to be 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 who had been able find such a witchdoctor who promised the knowledge to “get that mercury.” These men would often be the directors of NGOs who 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, now lives in Nairobi and is rarely seen in Mutomo. He is known to drive a luxury vehicle to his rural home, stay indoors most of the time, talk to no one, and return to Nairobi after a few days. Many others were said to have gone crazy or to have 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. Talking about red mercury allowed elites like E and X, who still lived

in Kitui, to depict themselves as risk takers and as masculine dare-devils trying everything to become rich, including conspiring with traditionalists and engaging in occult practices.

There are similarities here with accounts of the conspicuous or “daring” consumption of commodities described by Walsh (2003; see also De Boeck 1998), only this time the daring related not to consumption but to extraction. In their accounts, local young men spent lavishly on consumer goods to rid themselves of “hot money,” or ill-gotten wealth (Walsh 2003; see also Werthmann 2003). The reality of their newfound resource treasures seemed to be too hot to handle once transformed into commodities. As a narrative, red mercury engages with a different materiality, one of a resource that never transformed into commodities. Its elusive materiality did provide some men with an apology for their delayed social mobility, why riches would never stick to them.¹⁴

Tradition versus Development

Social distinction in the poorer factions of people in rural Kitui had fragile boundaries which required a great deal of maintenance. Rumors of red mercury did some of this maintenance, by clarifying who was elite and developed in contrast to who was traditional. The rumor opposed so-called traditional people to development or resources, or prevented development workers (elites) from transgressing these boundaries by forbidding their associating with traditional people. Local elites—the village bourgeoisie—such as the shopkeepers, butchers, and Evangelical preachers often directed their accusations against witchdoctors or traditional people who they said kept all this wealth from being made accessible to the public. The rumor of red 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. Elites complained to me that the traditional people could not cope with the fact that people might become wealthy. They also used their complaint as an explanation for the current state of affairs in their locality, an excuse for why things would not develop, or “move” as it is often called (*maendeo* in Kikamba). They drew on the story of red mercury to voice one of the available conspiracies that kept them where they were—stuck in the village.

On the occasions that I interviewed women who practiced as witchdoctors or were prophets of local shrines, the rumor of mercury appeared

in yet another way. Below is an extract from an interview with an elderly woman, a witchdoctor who lived at the foot of a hill in the south west of Kitui who responded to questions about springs and water development:

There is a shrine on the hill but you cannot go there with your shoes or pants on. Only the old people go there barefoot and dressed with only a blanket. I'm also old now, like an old man, so I can go. At the shrine there is a permanent spring. A white man once went there during the colonial period; he went to that place but after some time he died. A black man who had directed the white man later lost his mind. There is another story 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 to the village and my brother and sister acted as guides to take them to the spring. After they had gone up the hill, they came here [to the compound] to ask for directions home. They were so confused that they couldn't even see they were already at their home. The one who was working for Action Aid had to be admitted to a mental hospital, the other one had to undergo a cleansing ritual. There is mercury there. If you go to the hill without knowing about the shrine you find a liquid, green and shiny. When you come down and realize what you have seen and go back with more people you will not see anything anymore.

This was one of the more elaborate descriptions about mercury on the hills and a white man who she claimed went up there during the colonial period. Many so called traditional people (Andu Manthi) I spoke with would just mention that hidden on the mountains there is a shrine with a water source that never dries, only it could not be approached because of the powers that stayed in these areas. Large snakes or pythons, animals regularly associated with shrines, often embodied these powers. For Western Kenya, Smith described how a sighting of a large python initiated or accelerated the way different social groups managed to appropriate or contest development because: "the python embodies the concept of simultaneous multiplicities [...] the act of mutation, and the uncertain co-existence of multiple, ambiguous realities" (2006:431-432). The connotation of the python shares with red mercury an inherent ambiguity of the possibility of its capacities. In the case of red mercury this ambiguity provided different social groups with opportunities to make it part of the

explanation for certain historical contingencies, i.e., why development in Kitui went this way and not another. As such, these objects both stand not as a symbol for one particular identity that was under threat from another, but as a symbol or marker of the differentiation of identities occurring under rapidly changing conditions that Smith (2006) attributes to neoliberalism (see also Smith 2005, Geschiere 1997). Rumors of red mercury—like the fugitive treasures in Kalimantan described by Tsing (2005) and the diabolic gold and silver in highland Latin America described by Taussig (1980)—conveyed a particular sociality of resource extraction. Masculinity reinforced itself through the materiality of these resources, their elusiveness or fugitiveness inspired men to go after these treasures. They did so in landscapes that thereby started to appear as the edge of civilization. At the same time, the uncaptured or elusive value strongly attached itself to the sacred or ritual sites of the cultural “others” of modernity, the traditional people or the local witchdoctors. These people then became the personification of the antagonism of the landscape to local development. For the elders and witchdoctors, the elusive materiality of red mercury and its association with the shrines placed them squarely in a narrative of local cultural knowledge that has only recently entered Kitui. They took on the role of “guardians of the land,” protecting its materials from being hijacked by passers-by (see Schoffeleers 1978). It turned them into gatekeepers for the locality’s fabulous resources. Should they reveal too much about how to access it, the material would unleash its destructive powers on the people mobilizing its wealth (and probably the rest of the community). In these narratives, the capacities of red mercury and the effects on suspicious outsiders often spilled over to different kinds of engagements with other resources such as spring water.

Resource Materiality

We have seen above how the rumor of red mercury conveyed a particular sociality of resource development. In this section, I discuss the way the rumor can also help us consider the specificities of resources, what kind of materials they are (or are not), and how we can think about their role in processes of value creation. The first issue that I would like to raise in this respect is the distinction between rumors of red mercury as a resource and as a commodity. Both “occurrences” of red mercury are historical in that there is no inherent quality in the substance to enforce this distinction.

One of the earliest references to red mercury appearing in a *commodity* form in Kenya is from Griffin (1986) who was offered a substance that was claimed to serve as a nuclear explosive for \$89 USD per milliliter in Nairobi. However, his attempt to track down the seller turned out to be a fool's errand and he never managed to glimpse the substance. Swiderski (1995) also described how he was offered red mercury in Nakuru, another large Kenyan town, to help his country (the US) against the Soviet Union. Outside Kenya, red mercury has also appeared as a secret nuclear substance. In South Africa in the 1990s, for instance, the rumor of red mercury became an important element in conspiracy theories about agencies such as the KGB, Mossad, MI5, and the Afrikaner Weerstand Beweging (Hounam and McQuillan 1995). One of the first references to red mercury as a *resource* in Kenya that I could find is by Walker and Shipman (1996), two paleontologists working in the north of Kenya in the 1990s. While Walker and Shipman went out to find the missing link between humanoids and apes, they reported that local people suspected that they were looking for red mercury. Another reference was found in 2007, when an online news article appeared about a Swiss botanist named 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). Finally, in 2009, in the Great Rift Valley, a rumor broke out that Ugandan soldiers were removing border beacons. Instead, the local MP claimed people searching for red mercury had destroyed these beacons (Chapman 2009). Outside Kenya—in Tanzania, Uganda, Congo, São Tomé and Príncipe, and probably many other places as well—red mercury or comparable substances have been reported as a hidden mineral wealth, a wealth that both ritual experts and government officials do not want you to harvest (see endnote 2). Rumors of such restricted and elusive forms of wealth invoked the wildness, marginality, and remoteness of the areas, casting them as sites of only extraction. Sometimes these "resource frontiers" (Tsing 2005) were very literally on the border because of the colonial beacons that red mercury was suspected to be in, or on the top of the hills in lightning arresters placed during the colonial era (RoU 2011). The rumors of red mercury as resource differed amongst each other and often left ambiguous the nature and origin of red mercury. Did outsiders hide it there, or

did it occur “naturally”? Were the traditionalists protecting its source or had they conspired to hide it? Why was everyone so convinced of its fabulous value, while the exchange value was unknown by all?

The rumors of red mercury as resource differed amongst each other and often left ambiguous the nature and origin of red mercury. Did outsiders hide it there, or did it occur “naturally”? Were the traditionalists protecting its source or had they conspired to hide it? Why was everyone so convinced of its fabulous value, while the exchange value was unknown by all? These are questions about the nature of the resource, the kind of material it is, and the way people value it. To help understand the particularities of this resource materiality, I draw on a critical account by geographers Bakker and Bridge (2006) who argued that scholars in geography have too often taken the material presence of resources for granted. Materiality in resources, they show, has been evoked as the same thing as a natural substance or physical presence, something physically real as opposed to society’s immateriality (Bakker and Bridge 2006:8; see also Miller 2005, Bridge 2009). The rumor of red mercury allowed no such dualisms; there was nothing natural about its occurrence and the substance was so tied up with the history and sociality of resources in Kitui that society was automatically associated with the way the landscape behaved.¹⁵ Taking these disclaimers into account, resource materiality can provide a broader perspective than the basic dualisms of the physical versus the social. Resource materiality fits best what Miller described as materiality: the way the *presence or absence* of a recognized material works in our expectations or expressions of social identity (Miller 2005:5, 20-21).¹⁶ The rumor of red mercury illustrates this point particularly well: it is in the play of skepticism, expectations, and methods to harness it that red mercury’s elusive and unruly materiality is most effective.

There is another distinction that red mercury alludes to that I would like to highlight: how resource materiality and commodity materiality differ when it comes to value. In the literature on processes of value production relating to mining or mineral extraction, there has been a (rewarding) tendency to explain the attachment of value to an extracted material through the framework of the commodity fetish (Taussig 1980; Walsh 2004, 2010; Tsing 2005:51). Yet, if fetishes are “irreducibly material” (Pietz as quoted in Spyer 1998:5), mercury as a resource remained somewhat devoid of the fetishism of commodities that have already become material through projects of extraction (cf. Bell 2006). Resource materiality then contradicts

the irreducible materiality attributed to the commodity fetish. Value production and attribution also differ from commodities when things such as water, minerals, fish, and red mercury are still embedded as a substance or thing somewhere in the ground or the water. Particularly, in marginalized areas like Kitui, uncertainty or intangibility appears to be the defining principle in the local economy in contrast to the value attribution when these things are dis-embedded from their source. In a now much-cited text regarding this issue, De Gregori notes “The material or physical aspects of resources exist before they become resources” (1987:1241). Yet, he argues, the making of resources depends more on socio-economic projects that make them relevant. Demand requires certain materials to “become” resources. While it is correct from an economic perspective that resources “become,” the explanation again starts from the marketing of commodities, like the attribution of excessive value to a commodity fetish. With hindsight, it could be argued that the substances disembedded from rocks, soil, or water already existed in a physical form; however, this inadequately explains how some substances anticipated in many resource projects never actually become. It also cannot help us understand how these projects inform the historical environment in a place like Kitui, particularly if the anticipated resources do not become. When judged by their local material history, resources as tangible substances never seem to “have been” part of the commodity economy. Their value existed in another economy, in another history, for other people. Resource materiality entrenches itself in the history of landscapes and for the people who live and work there. Its attributed value can be a cause for territorialization. Commodities carry value and history with them, but may just as easily shed these (see Appadurai 1986).

Conclusion

One might be tempted to dismiss red mercury as a fantasy, a figment of the imagination that has no bearing on more pressing issues of poverty and development of the peripheral areas in Kitui because, really, there is no proof that red mercury exists. I argue that the reverse is true. A focus on the materiality of red mercury points to one of the central characteristics of resources: the fact that their presence cannot be assumed, but always exists in expectation and is dependent on localization and technologies that anticipate its extraction from a particular environment. Taking the rumor

seriously revealed the intricate ways in which it commented on the history of the Kitui district and different projects of resource extraction that took place there. Red mercury not only commented on the sociality of resource mobilization, it forced the sociality of resource mobilization back into the debate on local development by giving substance to speculations about the mobilization of value. There was no escape from red mercury—the rumor snuck up on the development workers and also nagged me as a continuing reminder of my whiteness, gender, and class; it seemed to do the same for others, amplifying social distinction.

This article provided an analysis of resources that did not start from a commodity perspective and argued that there is need to take seriously the uncertainty inherent in extracting mineral resources. If materiality of resources does not require the substance of interest to be already physically present, then the anticipated process of its mobilization—the process that shapes its substance—becomes all the more important. In Kitui, this anticipation was burdened by 80 years of projects of resource mobilization, and the rumor of red mercury tied this history to the present day encounter. Resources, then, exist as materiality in which a physical presence of the material is often the demise of the resource phase. This materiality of resources is fundamentally historical; there is nothing natural about it because only projects make the materiality of resources and through these projects resources become a historical part of the landscape. ■

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Endnotes:

¹See also Geschiere (1997) for the complexities of the reality of witchcraft and fieldwork.

²See for its occurrence as commodity, Griffin (1986 [Nairobi]), Hounam and McQuillan (1995 [South Africa]) and Swiderski (1995, 2008 [Eldoret, Kenya]). For its occurrence as resource outside Kitui, see Walker and Shipman (1996 [North Kenya]); Chapman (2009 [Western Kenya]); Lim (n.d. [Tanzania]); Francisco and Agostinho (2011:130-131 [São Tomé and Príncipe]) and personal communication with Jesper Jønsson (2011 [Tanzania]), the late Kariuki Thuku (2007 [Kenya]), Lotje de Vries (2012 [Congo]), and an anonymous reviewer of this article.

³See "Kitui District by G.H. Osborne," 1911, DC/KTI 7/4, Kenya National Archive (KNA). References to archival material will from here on be in the endnotes to maintain the readability of the text.

⁴"Kitui District Quarterly Report," 1910, DCMSK 1 3 3, KNA; Mutiso (1977).

⁵"Iron and Cement for Demarcation," July 20, 1911, DCMSK 10A 12 1, KNA; Native reserves memorandum by A.C. Hollis, secretary of native affairs, 1909, CO 533 58, KNA.

⁶An NGO manager informed me that the last remaining deposit of mercury could be found at a colonial beacon in Tsavo National Park, that is, at a location situated not only outside of the former native reserve but also, to this day, difficult to access.

⁷"Report on Soil Erosion in the Ukamba Reserve," 1938, CO 533 496 1:13, KNA.

⁸"SOIL," November 19, 1948, 5 2 4 1, KNA; emphasis in original.

⁹"Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, and Water Resources" (MOA) 1956; "Schemes Kitui," 1955, KNA Agr 4 3 2, KNA; "Kitui District en Kitui Forest," 1961, PC EST 2 5 7 forest, KNA.

¹⁰The idea of a resource environment need not be restricted to territory; it can also be underground reserves, network shaped, or fluid (see Corsin Jimenez 2003, Mol and Law 1994, Knudsen this issue). However, rumors of red mercury reflected on the territorialization of a resource environment, sometimes quite directly by commenting on the historical border beacons. It contextualized the images and objects from past projects of resource extraction and improvement that turned the area into a territory on the assumptions of potential value

¹¹The research for this article is part of a Ph.D. project entitled "The Social Life of Springs, Encountering Landscapes of Spirits and Development in the Kitui District Kenya," CNWS grant, Leiden University, The Netherlands.

¹²O'Leary (1980) already noted the impact of large-scale out-migration by young men. During the period of my fieldwork, I often noted the near absence of these men in the rural areas.

¹³Initials used to protect their identities.

¹⁴Tsing typified the relation of materiality and sociality in relation to the Kalimantan landscape as follows:

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 safe in one's possession, treasures disappear. (2005:38; see 1993:19 for a similar example)

¹⁵To paraphrase Latour (1993), there is nothing modern about Kitui.

¹⁶This distinction might shed new light on what Polanyi (1944) called the "fictitious commodities," items like land and labor that, by their nature, are not already reified into objects of consumption and marketing, but remain closer to "nature" or "life" itself.

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Foreign Language Translations:

Rumors of Red Mercury: Histories of Materiality and Sociality in the Resources of Kitui, Kenya

[**Keywords:** Materiality, sociality, resources, rumor, Kitui, Kenya, red mercury]

Rumores de Mercúrio Vermelho: Histórias de Materialidade e Socialidade nos Recursos de Kitui, Quênia

[**Palavras-chave:** Materialidade, socialidade, recursos, rumor, Kitui, Quênia, mercúrio vermelho]

关于红汞的谣言：肯尼亚基图伊自然资源的物质史与社会史

关键词：物质性，社会性，资源，谣言，基图伊，肯尼亚，红汞

Слухи о красной ртути: Истории материальности и социальности относительно природных
ресурсах Кити (Кения)

[**Ключевые слова:** материальность, социальность, природный ресурс, Кити, Кения, красная ртуть]

شائعات عن الزئبق الأحمر: تواريخ المواد واجتماعيات في موارد كيتوي بكينيا
كلمات البحث: المواد، الاجتماعيات، الموارد، الشائعات، كيتوي، كينيا، الزئبق الأحمر

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