

## Still a Sacred Void? Cultural Heritage, Sacred Places, and Living Spaces of the Mijikenda Kaya Forests along the Kenyan Coast in East Africa

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## Still a Sacred Void? Cultural Heritage, Sacred Places, and Living Spaces of the Mijikenda Kaya Forests along the Kenyan Coast in East Africa

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### 1. Introduction

On the evening of Thursday, January 16, 2014, “Mzee Gunga was seated at his verandah listening to the 7 pm news” at his home in Canan Village in Watamu, Kilifi County, when “two unknown men walked in and shot him in the mouth killing him on the spot.”<sup>1)</sup> Headlines carried in *Daily Nation*, one of Kenya’s major newspapers, read “Kaya elder shot dead” and “Assassins killed top Kaya elder, say detectives.” Until his death, the victim, Mr. Gunga Thoya Baya (75),<sup>2)</sup> popularly known as Mzee Katana Kalulu, had been “a committee member of the Coast Kaya elders and the chairman of the Malindi District Cultural Association.”<sup>3)</sup>

Two months after the incident, on March 5, 2014, I visited Kalulu’s home at Watamu with Emmanuel Munyaya, Kazungu wa Hawerisa, and Simone Grassi, members of the same Malindi District Cultural Association (MADCA), to perform a private *kulaza koma*, a traditional ritual ceremony to grieve Kalulu’s ill-fated death and to pray for the safety and good fortune of his family (Photo 1). The ceremony was conducted in front of a small gravestone where Kalulu’s spirit (*koma*, Photo 2) could listen to our prayers. On this occasion, Kalulu’s relatives and those who knew him told us that 1) one of the ten or so people who had sent the assassins had been Kalulu’s own son, and 2) it was rumored that Kalulu’s large family and status as a famous elder had provoked his murder as a witch (*mutsai*) due to witchcraft envy (*kidzitso*, lit. “little eye”). Even so, the members of MADCA flatly denied such rumors, noting that all Mijikenda elders were being targeted and killed as “grey-haired” witches by the younger generation. Kalulu was simply the latest victim among the elderly Mijikenda.<sup>4)</sup> From other people and media reports, I learned that 3) a “family dispute over the land might have been the cause of the killing,”<sup>5)</sup> and discovered that 4) although Kalulu’s remains should have been interred in the Kaya Fungo in honor of his status as a Kaya elder, he had instead received a common burial at his homestead.

The Katana Kalulu murder case highlights the contestability of identity and authority among the Mijikenda and Kaya elders, as well as the tenuous nature of “sacredness” of the Kayas along the Kenyan Coast. To begin with, as experts of the Mijikenda tradition,



**Photo 1** Two Kaya elders performing a private *kulaza koma*, a traditional ritual ceremony, to grieve Katana Kalulu's ill-fated death and to pray for the safety and good fortune of his family, Watamu, Kenya. (Photograph by Katsuhiko Keida 2014)



**Photo 2** Installed *koma* (small wooden memorial statutes of ancestors) near the gate of Kaya Giriama/Fungo. (Photograph by Katsuhiko Keida 2010)

Kaya elders have emerged to a certain degree as media figures at home and abroad. How does this affect local people's regard for these elders? Why was Kalulu's murder linked with witchcraft?<sup>6)</sup> Second, following discussions by Willis (2009) and McIntosh (2009) on the uncertain position of Kaya elders, Kalulu's death also provides an important case study for considering claims of authenticity among Kaya elders. Why were Kalulu's remains not interred in the Kaya? Finally, we might ask whether the Kayas remain a "sacred void" (Parkin 1991) for the Mijikenda, or whether the sacred character of the Kaya has been transformed from that of a "void" to something entirely different.

In 2008, the Mijikenda Kaya Forests were officially inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, collectively designated as "The Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests" of Coastal Kenya in East Africa (Photos 3 and 4). The following year, the "traditions and practices associated with the Kayas in the sacred forests of the Mijikenda" were also inscribed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. Arguably, these factors have led to the current generation of Kaya elders to become "expertized" as the "sacred" custodians of a globalizing Africa.

In this chapter, I situate UNESCO as a powerful global actor with the ability to define global heritage and conservation sites as "good" for humanity's cultural and ecological diversity, an issue that "from the outset [...] was placed at the core of UNESCO's doctrine" (Stoczkowski 2009: 7). The Mijikenda Kayas have also been (re)invented as unique sites benefitting twenty-first century human diversity through the imagination of global actors such as UNESCO, which has imposed its vision of ecological and cultural diversity on local actors (Stoczkowski 2009). From this viewpoint, I contextualize the Mijikenda Kayas as a very interesting case amid the emerging dynamics and tension related to the local and global cultural heritage of the twenty-first



**Photo 3** UNESCO World Heritage, Kaya Kambe, hinterland of Mombasa, Kenya. (Photograph by Katsuhiko Keida 2010)



**Photo 4** UNESCO World Heritage, Kaya Giriama/ Fungo, Kaloleni, Kenya. (Photograph by Katsuhiko Keida 2010)

century. For instance, in a book entitled *World Heritage on the Ground: Ethnographic Perspectives* (Brumann and Berliner 2016), Probst (2016) presents *Prickly Prestations: Living with (World) Heritage in Osogbo* (also known as the *Osun Grove* in Nigeria), which provides a deep insight into my paper in terms of tension and reciprocities between global and local strategies and actors.

For intangible cultural heritage, in *UNESCO on the Ground: Local Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Dylan and Gilman 2015), the case of the Malawi *Vimbuza* dance form, written by Gilman, helps compare the intangible cultural heritage of Kenya and Malawi. In addition, I will compare the case of the Mijikenda Kayas with examples of cultural heritage in Japan, such as the case of Koshikijima Island in Kagoshima Prefecture presented by Foster (2015).

However, I will not make further detailed comparisons between the Mijikenda Kayas and other cultural heritage sites. Henceforward I intend to explore the dynamics and intersections of the Mijikenda Kayas in an ethnographic manner between local and global actors in both contexts of UNESCO World Heritage and intangible cultural heritage.

The Mijikenda are made up of nine closely related but linguistically and culturally distinct tribes: the Giriama, Chonyi, Kauma, Kambe, Ribe, Jibana, Rabai, Duruma, and Digo. These groups live in the hinterland along the Kenyan Coast from the border of Tanzania in the south to the border of Somalia in the north. Katana Kalulu was a Giriama elder.

If one accepts the legends of the Mijikenda and scholarly accounts such as Spear's *Kaya Complex* (1978), the Mijikenda migrated south in the sixteenth century from an area in southern Somalia, known as *Singwaya* or *Shungwaya*, to settle in the Kenyan coastal hinterland. The Mijikenda established fortified villages surrounded by dense small-scale forests as homesteads and politico-religious centers. These centers, known as Kayas, spread across approximately 200km of the Kenyan Coast, from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. As each of the various tribes that make up the Mijikenda (which literally means “the nine villages”) has its Kaya, the Mijikenda are sometimes referred to as the Kayakenda (“nine Kayas”). The Kayas began to be abandoned as living spaces by

the 1940s, becoming uninhabited except for by a handful of “Kaya elders” (*atumia a kaya*), whose traditional culture and practices were thought to confer spiritual and magical protection on the Kayas.

In his lifetime, Katana Kalulu became widely known as a Kaya elder in the context of the rapidly changing conditions of globalizing Africa. Over the last few decades, the Mijikenda Kayas have also become an important focus for anthropological studies of East African society. David Parkin’s insightful ethnography, *Sacred Void* (1991), is one of several significant sociocultural and historical studies focusing on the “odd” sacredness of the Mijikenda Kayas, especially Kaya Fungo (e.g., Brantley 1981; Giles and Gearhart 2013; McIntosh 2009; Parkin 1972, 1991; Spear 1978; Willis 1993). Parkin characterizes the Kayas as a “void,” namely a “point at which memory is revived and recreated, but also allowed to think what was previously unthinkable. Insofar as it is kept alive against all apparent odds, I would see this as sacred space, to which people then periodically give material form, boundaries and a centre, thereafter cleansing and re-imagining it again in due course” (Parkin 1991: 229).

In this chapter, I reflect on whether the Mijikenda Kayas can still be considered as a “sacred void” in the context of a globalizing Africa. Central to Parkin’s study is Kaya Fungo near Kaloleni in the hinterland of Mombasa, which he discusses in the context of contrasting spaces between the east and the west among the Giriama. I intend to trace the transformations of the Kayas from the time of Parkin’s (1991) ethnography up to the present day with reference to my own ethnographic fieldwork in the hinterland of Malindi District.

Parkin argues that the Mijikenda’s “traditional capital or centre, called the Kaya, is a fixed, central place with inviolable boundaries and unquestionable sacredness.” For these people, “the west is ‘traditional’ and the east is ‘modern.’ The west comprises the Giriama sacred centre while the east merges and mixes boundaries and peoples and lacks a definite centre. The Kaya is a centre while the east and west are defined relationally, just as, internally, the east comprises different peoples and places standing in cross-cutting relationships to each other” (Parkin 1991: 8; see also Parkin 1991: 36).

Some historians, notably Spear (1978), have argued a historical basis for a consistent Mijikenda self-identity rooted in the Singwaya/Shungwaya origin myth. “Now, a Mijikenda historiography which bases the unified and direct Mijikenda identity in a history of shared migration from Singwaya is an accepted truth, taught in schools and widely published, its veracity confirmed by constant repletion” (Willis 1993: 202). However, Willis cautions that this “is a history, and an identity, of recent origin: a truth whose ambiguity is constantly reflected in historical presentation” (Willis 1993: 202).

Willis (1993: 201) focuses on “the meaning of identity, and the nature of history” among the Mijikenda and the Swahili, noting that the contestable identities of both groups of people have been constructed through the historical experience of Coastal Kenya. He points to “the apparent invention of the Mijikenda in the 1930s and 1940s” and argues that “in the continuing redefinition of being Swahili, and in the invention of the Mijikenda, the state was by no means the only player, nor was tribalism simply an ideology in the service of the state” (Willis 1993: 13). According to him, before the

“invention” of the Mijikenda, these people were known in the colonial era as “*Nyika*” (bush or wild peoples), a collective name for a mixed group of smaller tribes along the Kenyan Coast with their distinct origin stories, rooted variously in indigenous traditions or ex-slave narratives arising from trade along the Kenyan Coast. As Parkin noted in the previous quoted text, the Mijikenda have been represented as a distinct cultural group with links to the west and as a dynamic constructed group linked historically with Swahili groups to the east.

Kaya Fungo, located in the western area, is now an empty space (a “void,” to use Parkin’s term). Despite this emptiness, the Kaya remains nominally sacred. Even so, the daily lives of the Mijikenda do not involve prayers to the Kayas, nor do they constitute a destination for any sort of religious practice or pilgrimage. Most Mijikenda live their entire lives without ever entering the Kayas. As Parkin remarks, “the empty sacred place [...] looks very strange from the western point of view” (1991: 10–11). Before revisiting Parkin’s notion of the Kaya as a sacred void, the next section describes the contemporary context of the Kayas as natural forests and a cultural heritage.

## 2. Invention of Natural Forests and a Cultural Heritage

While “approximately 60 Kaya forest patches [...] have been identified in Kwale, Kilifi and Malindi districts” (Nyamweru et al. 2008: 62; see also Tinga 2004: 9), the Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests World Heritage Site consists of just eleven separate forest sites in a “serial” designation.<sup>7</sup> The association between the various Mijikenda groups and these approximately 60 Kayas remains unclear (e.g., whether each group has a distinct affiliation with one or more sacred Kayas). Despite this lack of clarity, as Willis has remarked, “this tension between singularity and multiplicity may seem curious, but it [is] not novel” (Willis 2009: 236).

Nevertheless, during the process of the Kayas’ nomination, the forests have been re-envisioned as a cluster of small-scale natural forests rich in biodiversity, including landscapes that are unique from a botanical and ecological point of view. In other words, the Kayas have come to be regarded as a preserved environmental heritage that should be collectively protected from the threat of modernization and development.

At the initial stages of the nomination process, the Kayas were proposed by the Kenyan government to UNESCO as a “complex property (a natural and cultural property)” in view of their dual natural and cultural value. While the Kayas eventually received World Heritage designation as a “cultural property,” their natural forest landscapes are regarded as being integral to their Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), as evidenced by the text of UNESCO decisions.

For example, in Decisions Adopted at the 32nd Session of the World Heritage Committee, Quebec City, 2008 (World Heritage Committee 2009), it was resolved that UNESCO would adopt “the following Statement of Outstanding Universal Value: Spread out along around 200km of the coast province of Kenya are ten separate forested sites,<sup>8</sup> mostly on low hills, ranging in size from 30 to around 300ha, in which are the remains of fortified villages, Kayas, of the Mijikenda people. They represent more than thirty

surviving Kayas.<sup>9)</sup> The Kayas began to fall out of use in the early twentieth century and are now revered as the repositories of spiritual beliefs of the Mijikenda people and are seen as the sacred abode of their ancestors. The forests around the Kayas have been nurtured by the Mijikenda community to protect the sacred graves and groves and are now almost the only remains of the once extensive coastal lowland forest” (World Heritage Committee 2009).

The Kaya’s OUV corresponds to items (iii), (v), and (vi) of the World Heritage Selection Criteria:<sup>10)</sup>

- (iii) The Kayas provide focal points for Mijikenda religious beliefs and practices, are regarded as the ancestral homes of the different Mijikenda peoples, and are held to be sacred places. As such they have metonymic significance to Mijikenda and are a fundamental source of Mijikenda’s sense of “being-in-the-world” and of place within the cultural landscape of contemporary Kenya. They are seen as a defining characteristic of Mijikenda identity.
  
- (v) Since their abandonment as preferred places of settlement, Kayas have been transferred from the domestic aspect of the Mijikenda landscape to its spiritual sphere. As part of this process, certain restrictions were placed on access and the utilisation of natural forest resources. As a direct consequence of this, the biodiversity of the Kayas and forests surrounding them has been sustained. The Kayas are under threat both externally and from within Mijikenda society through the decline of traditional knowledge and respect for practices.
  
- (vi) The Kayas are now the repositories of spiritual beliefs of the Mijikenda and are seen as the sacred abode of their ancestors. As a collection of sites spread over a large area, they are associated with beliefs of local and national significance, and possibly regional significance as the sites extend beyond the boundaries of Kenya.

(World Heritage Committee 2009; emphasis added)

The advisory bodies (International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN)), who were responsible for carrying out the evaluation, described the natural environments surrounding the Kayas as follows:

...the communal protection of these sites by the Mijikenda elders and descendants of those who used to live there, through forbidding the cutting of trees, banning grazing, and placing restrictions on the hunting of certain animals in the Kayas, has had the effect of protecting almost all that remains of the once extensive coastal lowland forest in Kenya. Within the forest, a number of critically endangered and vulnerable species have been recorded. These remnants of forests are now surrounded by intensive plantations of cashew, mango, and coconut and are near some of the fastest growing coastal development areas.

(UNESCO 2008, emphasis added)

These descriptions offer a glimpse of the aspects seen to be most salient in UNESCO's evaluation of the Mijikenda culture. Most importantly, it was seen that certain cultural restrictions or regulations on the Kayas and surrounding natural forests could sustain their inherent biodiversity. The traditional restrictions of the Mijikenda culture could preserve these valuable natural forests, which had developed, if not deliberately, then "as a direct consequence" of these restrictions. In this understanding, according to one observer, "the transition from fortified settlements to the current sacred sites, however and whenever it occurred, must have been linked to a change in the use of forest products in the surrounding areas, possibly including an increased formalization of taboos and controls on the use of certain species and certain localities" (Nyamweru et al. 2008: 83–84). However, even now, most Mijikenda may not recognize the botanical or ecological value of the Kayas. This is suggested by the concerns, voiced by one of Willis's interlocutors, that "many people possibly may not know the true value of the work" performed by local conservation groups (Willis 2008: 238).

In the context of World Heritage designation, the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) has become the main actor in managing the Mijikenda Kayas by mediating their global and local interfaces. However, the NMK was not always interested in the Kayas, and the museum's comparatively recent involvement attests to the motivating agency of globally imagined actors such as UNESCO in the invention of local heritage and conservation sites. In the case of the Kayas, the re-imagination and re-creation of the Kayas by local actors only began to be mobilized later. As a state actor, the NMK has interposed itself as an interface to mediate the Kayas to global organizations such as ICOMOS (a UNESCO World Heritage advisory body) and to local Kaya elders, now "expertized" as the guardians of Kaya tradition.

When I began my fieldwork in the hinterland of Malindi in the 1980s, the Kayas received only a vague mention as sacred centers for the local Giriama. At the time, the current Kaya exhibition at the NMK in Nairobi, featuring photos of wooden memorial statues (*vigango*, Photo 5), had yet to be curated, despite the museum's "conservation and heritage remit [to embrace] both human culture and 'natural history'" (Willis 2008: 237).

Willis describes how "in 1981, a 'university expedition' to the Kayas from Oxford made clear the association between botany and human culture in calling for conservation." It was through this expedition (the Oxford Ethnobotanical Expedition) that "the Kayas were identified as repositories not only of human culture but also of biology [...] As a UN Environment Programme document suggested in 1998, the interests of 'cultural heritage' and 'environment and conservation' came together in the Kayas" (Willis 2008: 237).<sup>11</sup> It was, therefore, only after the Kayas' re-invention as valuable natural forests that NMK first applied to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre for their recognition as a complex property.

For the Mijikenda today, the Kayas are neither objects of worship nor places for pilgrimage. Moreover, "the Kaya elders are not regarded as themselves sacred or divine but as subject like any other persons to greed, unjustifiable anger, and feelings of revenge" (Parkin 1991: 24). The fact that the Kaya elders, as traditional healers and





**Photo 5** *Vigango* at Fort Jesus Museum, Mombasa, Kenya. (Photograph by Katsuhiko Keida 2005)

politicians, possess knowledge of traditional medical and secret cultural practices does not amount to a sacred or divine status.

ICOMOS and IUCN, the advisory bodies of the World Heritage Committee, have come to regard the Kaya elders as cultural experts in their roles as spiritual guardians of the Kayas. Therefore, they feel that the Kaya elders should be empowered in their respective Mijikenda communities. UNESCO explicitly states that “there is a need for formal acknowledgment of the key role of the elders in protecting the Kayas to strengthen traditional practices and give respect to traditional knowledge.” It supports an approach whereby “NMK has adopted a collaborative approach with the Kaya elders [and feels that] continuing efforts by NMK to strengthen partnership with Kaya elders is commendable,” adding that “ICOMOS further considers that there is a need to formalize arrangements with the Kaya elders to further empower local communities” (UNESCO 2008). In addition, the 32nd session of the World Heritage Committee held in Quebec in 2008 repeated that, “management needs to respect the needs of individual Kayas and to integrate the conservation of natural and cultural resources and traditional and non-traditional management practices; the authority of the Kaya elders should be established.” The Committee requested that the representative of the Kenyan state, NMK, should “enter into agreements with Kaya elders to establish them as the guardians of the Kayas” (World Heritage Committee 2009). However, these requests on the part of UNESCO and its partner agencies are rooted in western notions of “tradition” and elder-based “authority,” and are not necessarily sensitive to the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent within the “authenticity” of the Kaya elders.

In his analysis of the reign of the recent king, Karisa wa Maitha,<sup>12)</sup> Willis (2009, see

also McIntosh 2009) refers to powerful Kaya elders as the “kings” of the Kayas. Maitha emerged as a famous politician who entered the Kaya Fungo to receive the blessings of the Kaya elders. Through this action, he was conferred with special powers from the Kaya and then installed as a Kaya elder. Unfortunately, he died of a sudden heart attack on a visit to Germany in 2004 at the peak of his political career. When I visited Malindi in 2013, an old Giriama friend of mine reported a curious story about this deceased elder. He told me that “Maitha is still alive someplace; when Maitha’s dead body arrived at Malindi, his real mother saw and touched her son’s face and body, then pronounced that the corpse was not her real son! Most Giriama believe that Maitha uses some special medicine from Kaya Fungo to hide himself away, and that he will return as the true king of the Mijikenda in Kenya in the near future.”

Despite the political power of the Kaya elders as forest kings, they have never been sacred men among the Mijikenda. This may explain why the Mijikenda people abandoned the Kayas and their biological diversity. While the traditional restrictions on the Kayas have often been transgressed by modernized and Christianized people, the forests have enjoyed a certain measure of protection by the fact that most Mijikenda have allowed their culture to remain regulated by the Kaya elders, leaving the Kayas undisturbed since they were abandoned as living spaces. This has proved to be a unique and remarkable way to protect natural forests and their rich biological diversity against the threat of modernization and development in East Africa. However, this status quo has begun to change with the recruitment of Kaya elders as holy “experts” and “guardians of the Kayas” in the context of World Heritage and Cultural Heritage as imagined by global actors such as UNESCO. Willis remarked that “the politics of heritage and conservation came to the Kaya” (Willis 2008: 237).

In the discourse that treat the Kayas as natural forests, the Mijikenda are identified with the Kayas, which are not only their former homesteads but also considered to be under the stewardship of elders now considered “experts,” in light of their status as traditional medical practitioners, guardians, and forest kings. The Mijikenda, as “sons of the Kayas,” identify themselves with the sacred forests. In other words, the Mijikenda are seen to be a part of the Kayas—their relationship is constructed metonymically. In a recent study focused on the Kaya elders’ tenuous authenticity (cf. Parkin 1991: 42–47) and “frauds” such as Simba Wanje, McIntosh highlights “the treatment of the Kaya as a synecdoche for Mijikendanness itself” (McIntosh 2009: 50).

Returning to the case mentioned at the outset of this chapter, Katana Kalulu presents us with a curious case in connection with the questionable or even fraudulent authenticity of Kaya elders. As described earlier, while Kalulu was widely known as a Kaya elder, his remains were not interred in Kaya Fungo. After his death, it was reported that “Kaya committees from Kilifi and Kwale counties were making arrangements on how the ritual for the fallen elder will be conducted during his burial.” The chairman of Coast Kaya elders, Mr. Abdalla Mnyenze, stated that “[Kalulu] was an elder and the ritual should be followed until he is buried.”<sup>13</sup> However, I was told that while MADCA had argued for Kalulu’s burial in the Kaya, some Kaya elders argued that they were not permitted to do so because he had died outside of the Kaya.

Kalulu's case raises the question of who can be considered as a "real" Kaya elder. Who decides who will be an elder? Was Katana Kalulu a Kaya elder? Narratives among the Mijikenda about Kaya elders move between "trust talk and alienable talk" (Parkin 2011).

In the semantic zone of narratives about the Kayas, however, the forests articulate the Mijikenda not only metonymically or synecdochically but also metaphorically. As mentioned earlier, recent narratives about the Kayas have shown a growing tendency to adopt metonymical or synecdochical aspects between the Mijikenda and the Kayas in terms of historical, sociocultural, and political identities combined with biodiversity.

In fact, who controls the Kayas? For his part, Willis frames this question by posing two alternatives: "Does it belong rightly with all elder men? Or is it the preserve of individuals with special knowledge?" Willis concludes that the "histories of the Kaya may express both models of authority. Although people are aware of a reality in which Kayas multiply, and esoteric knowledge is paramount, people can still talk about the Kaya in a way that evokes an ideal of a united, benevolent gerontocracy controlling all aspects of life" (Willis 2008: 245–246).

Nevertheless, in every Giriama homestead, there are elders (*atumia a mudzi*) who command respect as heads of the homestead. Although the current Kaya elders have been empowered by their re-imagination by global actors as "sacred" custodians and politicians, I believe that it is important to return to the relationship between Giriama homestead elders and the Kaya elders.

While Parkin's ethnography (1991) highlighted the metonymical linkage between the Mijikenda and the Kayas, he also focused on the Kayas as a metaphor. In the discussion below, I emphasize the metaphorical relationship between the Giriama homesteads and the Kayas to clarify why these are important to understanding the present-day Kayas.

### 3. Cultural Heritage or Living Spaces?

As the Kayas were conferred with new values through their designation as UNESCO World Heritage (2008) and Intangible Cultural Heritage (2009), two actors may be seen to have emerged with the goal of protecting the Kayas and thereby facilitating the economic situation for the Mijikenda. One of these is the NMK, which has become the state's representative for handling issues surrounding the Kayas as a matter of cultural heritage. However, the MADCA,<sup>14</sup> a community-based organization, quickly became an influential local actor in the sphere of civil society. Most members of MADCA are Giriama, and the group includes several Kaya elders. In 2008, MADCA played an important role in the Mekatilili Cultural Festival held at the Mekatilili Cultural Centre (Photos 6 and 7), located in the Bungale hinterland along the Sabaki/Gallana River in Malindi District. Mekatilili was a famed national heroine who fought against British colonial rule in 1913–1914 in what is known as the "Giriama Rising" (Brantley 1981).

After the post-election violence that swept Kenya in 2007, the Mekatilili Cultural Centre became a site for the reconciliation between the Kikuyus and other ethnic groups due to the conflict and violence that had ensued. When I attended the Mekatilili Festival

in 2008, the “oath”—a blessing for peace and harmony—taken in front of Mektatilili’s grave was a key event at the festival, and it was clear that the ritual and political direction of the festival was being steered by MADCA and its member elders. That year, the now late Katana Kalulu was also very active, and he blessed all participants of the festival in his role as a Kaya elder. His example shows how some Kaya elders are active outside of the Kayas as messengers and creators of peace, pursuing a traditionalized political strategy through the instrumental re-imagination of the memory and spirit of Mektatilili as a culture-heroine.<sup>15)</sup>

More recently, on September 5, 2015, Joseph Karisa Mwarandu, the lawyer who now serves as MADCA’s secretary-general, commented on an emerging coalition “being propelled by Prof Chenje Mwachiru and 40 other professionals. It enjoys support from Taita Taveta, Tana River, and Kwale counties where it has sold its agenda of changing the region’s political image” and “the President (Uhuru Kenyatta) said he was ready to work with the coalition. ‘He was impressed by the newfound unity of purpose and he was ready to work with the outfit as equal partners,’ sources said.”<sup>16)</sup> In this context, Mwarandu’s comments to *Daily Nation* (September 5, 2015) are significant:

But Malindi District Cultural Association secretary-general Joseph Mwarandu said many coastal politicians were uninspired when it comes to dealing with youth employment, land issues, or security.

“As Kaya elders, we want to follow the Mektatilili strategy of working with other



**Photo 6** *Kigango* in the Mektatilili Cultural Centre, Bungale, Malindi, Kenya. (Photograph by Katsuhiko Keida 2005)



**Photo 7** Mektatilili Cultural Festival in Bungale, Malindi, Kenya. (Photograph by Mariko Kuga 2008, Copyright Katsuhiko Keida 2008)

communities to fight a common enemy—the colonists,” he said.

Mekatilili got help from other communities after she escaped from Kisii to the Coast region. Mekatilili wa Menza was a leading light in the Coast in the fight for freedom. The Kaya elders, according to Mr. Mwarandu, went to State House to meet President Kenyatta because they believed he was in a better position to resolve various issues.

“It will be foolhardy of us to wait for five years for our problems to be solved by those in the opposition when they can be solved now,” he told the Sunday Nation.

In his view, most of the elected leaders have lost direction and their “houses are dirty” because of misappropriation of public funds.

“We have decided to work with the government of the day to get *ugali* on our tables rather than wait for *ugali* that we are not sure of,” he said.

In my own view, this situation highlights the distinct differences between how the Kayas are mobilized by the state on the one hand and the Mijikenda community on the other. As the state’s representative, NMK is tasked with protecting natural forests as a cultural heritage identified by a global consciousness regarding nature conservation. For NMK, the Kayas are not a “homestead” but a “heritage” to be protected by the state in line with global perspectives. The Kaya elders are regarded as not only kings of the Kayas, but also custodial guardians imbued with a unique spiritual character.

In contrast, MADCA wants to make the Kayas a “homestead” rather than “heritage.” In a recent initiative, MADCA reorganized the relationship among Kaya elders (interview with Joseph Mwarandu in 2013). MADCA’s plan divides the Kayas into three regional zones (Galana, Godoma, and Weruni), with 14 elders selected by local representatives from each zone. This organizational concept thus limits the total number of “authorized” Kaya elders to 42, and requires that all new elders sequester themselves in the Kayas for a period of a few months. MADCA’s long term ambition is to re-establish the Kayas as the “real” homesteads of the elders and the Giriama. As Mwarandu emphasized in this comment, MADCA’s activities in connection with the Kaya elders are oriented toward the immediate benefit of the people by metaphorically providing *ugali*, the “daily bread” of maize flour, which is the staple diet for many Kenyans.

Another illustration of divergent priorities between NMK and MADCA is provided in the issue of ancestral Mijikenda memorial statues, known as *vigango*, that have been stolen from Mijikenda lands since the 1980s. In 2003, the American anthropologists Monica Udvardy and Linda Giles reported that 294 stolen *vigango* had been found among the “African arts” collections of US museums such as Hampton University Museum, Denver Museum of Nature and Science, and Illinois State Museum (formerly at Illinois State University)(Udvardy et al. 2003: 294). Since then, Udvardy and Giles have collaborated with NMK to repatriate *vigango* from the US into the hands of the Mijikenda (Udvardy et al. 2003; Udvardy and Giles 2008). Despite the ongoing return of stolen *vigango*, many cannot be easily reunited with their original owners, and since 2010, the repatriated *vigango* have been housed at Fort Jesus Museum in Mombasa, a branch of NMK.

As I was told in 2010 by Jimbi Katana, the chief curator of the Fort Jesus Museum,

“We have a plan to reinstall those *vigango* at a new Malindi Museum in the near future, to be known as the Malindi Cultural Complex.” However, MADCA insists that the stolen *vigango* should be returned to the Kayas. While viewing the *vigango* in such a museum would entail the necessity of entrance fees, their restoration to the Kayas—the “big homesteads” of the Mijikenda peoples—would mean that Mijikenda citizens could be admitted to view the *vigango* for free.

The matter of the *vigango* is still a hot potato, politically speaking,<sup>17)</sup> and it is not clear how the situation will develop. However, through the debate from both sides over how best to reinstall the *vigango*, we can see that local narratives revolve around the intertwined yet opposing interpretations of the Kayas as “homestead” and “cultural heritage.”

#### **4. Conclusion: The Kayas’ Autochthony as *Kivuri* (Living Soul/Living Shadow)**

The notion of homesteads (*mudzi*) is becoming an important notion in discussions of the Kayas. The question of whether the Kayas are still homesteads or have some characteristics of homesteads, may seem to be a relatively simple question. As UNESCO mentioned above, “since their abandonment as preferred places of settlement, Kayas have been transferred from the domestic aspect of the Mijikenda landscape to its spiritual sphere.”

This background is a good starting point for understanding the current position of the Kayas. The Kayas, in fact, might best be described as “once and future” homesteads—simultaneously no longer and not yet spaces for living. The Kayas are empty or void; nobody lives in them except a few Kaya elders, with no livestock such as cattle, goats, or sheep. One would therefore be hard pressed to argue that the Kayas still serve as homesteads for the Mijikenda. Despite this, the Mijikenda often refer to the Kayas as “our homestead” or “big homesteads.”

Even if the Kayas could still be considered homesteads to some degree, as living spaces, they are both excess to and under-equipped for the requirements of contemporary daily life. Thus, could we say that the Kayas have been shifted from the domestic to the spiritual sphere? Certainly, the spiritual sphere is recognized as an aspect of cultural heritage in terms of UNESCO’s global vision of OUV. However, what may be considered a source of spiritual character? Might we point to ancestral spirits such as those reified in the wooden memorial statues (*vigango*)? Alternatively, could we cite magical charms such as the *fingo*, considered to have been brought from the original homeland of Singwaya and buried in the earth beneath the Kayas? Alternatively, medical plants for traditional healers? The fact is that most of these exist outside the Kayas, in the real homesteads that serve as living spaces among the Mijikenda. Considering the metonymical link to Singwaya as the source of the Kayas’ power, it is perhaps best seen as a matter of degree. As Parkin has said, “the Kaya is, indeed, the Giriama homestead par excellence and embodies them all” (Parkin 1991: 225).

To my mind, the Kayas have maintained some aspects of their homestead character. They are not simply abandoned homesteads (*gandzo*) and cannot be reduced to heritage

because of the contemporary importance of their unique spirituality. In conclusion, I would therefore like to argue that despite their abandonment as *preferred* places of settlement, the Kayas have retained a sense of being a homestead that is integral to the self-identity of the Mijikenda.

In my fieldwork among the Giriama, I found that this sense of homestead attributed to the Kayas is very similar to the Mijikenda notion of *kivuri* (living soul or living shadow). Like the Kayas' relationship to the Mijikenda people, a *kivuri* and its owner are imagined not only as metonymically the same (each part representing the whole) but also imagined as metaphorically other.

When I was conducting anthropological fieldwork along the Sabaki/Gallana River in the 1990s, an elder told me, "I met you a couple of months ago. I enjoyed talking with you—you looked happy in your red jacket, talking about your girlfriends, ha-ha-ha!" This was confusing to me, as I did not have any red jacket or girlfriends, not to mention the fact that I had been in Japan at the time. I knew, however, that the Giriama sometimes discussed dreamed incidents without distinguishing them from reality. I guessed that the elder had met my "living soul" or *kivuri* in a dream. Parkin summarizes the notion of *kivuri* as follows:

*Kivuri*, living soul, is sometimes referred to also as *peho* (as when a diviner might say to a victim, "a witch has taken your soul/life force," using either the phrase *wahalwa peho ni mutsai* or *wahalwa kivuri ni mutsai*). But the "whole person" is only a condition of temporary balance and, in the course of life itself, personal vulnerabilities continue. [...] The repetitive form, *kivurivuri*, means "shadow." It can only exist as part of a visible object. Similarly, only visible, living persons can have a *kivuri*, soul. [...] By the same token, the *kivuri* does not survive a person after their death. At that point, they become, instead, a *koma*, or ancestral spirit. Thus, while *kivuri* can only exist as an aspect of a visible human being and is, for witches, also tangible and material, the ancestral spirit or soul, *koma*, is the opposite. [...] The contrast between *kivuri* and *koma* nicely summarizes that between the material transitoriness of human life and the immaterial permanency, in principle at least, of ancestral life. (Parkin 1991: 214)

The Giriama believe that the owner of *kivuri* cannot know the nature or actions of their *kivuri*-self because the *kivuri* only emerges when the owner is asleep. Thus, the *kivuri* is not only a metonymically essential part of a person but also an independent entity that is metaphorically detached from the original. It seemed that my *kivuri*-self had donned *his* favorite jacket and talked about *his* girlfriends.

Drawing on the notion of the *kivuri* as metaphor, we might consider the Kayas as the "living soul" or "living shadow" of actual Mijikenda homesteads. If the Kayas are contaminated, the Mijikenda are also endangered. The spiritual world of the Kayas parallels the real world of the Mijikenda. The two worlds are mutually influential in the same way that a person's body is interrelated with its *kivuri*, but not the same. The Kayas are void but they are alive, and in that sense are symbols of the transitoriness of Mijikenda life. Although as "heritage," the Kayas are framed as the spiritual world of the

ancestors (*koma*), it is more important to the Mijikenda that the Kayas remain in a living state. We are told that the Kayas should be restored to re-establish the real Mijikenda homestead in a moment of crisis. Is this not similar to how someone whose *kivuri* is stolen by a witch is advised to repatriate his or her *kivuri* through ritual? For a Mijikenda to enter the Kaya is akin to a person meeting his or her own *kivuri* in the shadow world. In this way, the Kayas and *kivuri* may be seen as congruent notions in terms of the semantic aspect of transitoriness.

Here, it is worth remembering Parkin's ethnographic observation that after their abandonment as real homesteads, the Kayas continued to be imagined as homesteads both metonymically and metaphorically. While I accept that protecting natural forests in a globalizing world is important not only for the Mijikenda but for all of humanity, I believe that what is most critically vulnerable in this situation, as much as if not more than the forests as natural environments, is the very sociocultural imagination of the Mijikenda. How this imagination can best be preserved for future generations remains an open question.

Finally, I would like to return to the case of Katana Kalulu's death (Photos 8 and 9). In January 2015, a year after his death, MADCA held a small celebration in honor of the murdered man's memory. At this ceremony, a member of the semi-secret society to which Kalulu had belonged (the *Gohu* or the *Vaya*)<sup>18</sup>) humorously and sorrowfully imitated the appearance and voice of the deceased man. Kalulu had already become a *koma*, an ancestral spirit, after his death, but this young follower performed as a "living" Katana Kalulu in front of the other participants. He made all participants laugh and cry, and recalled Kalulu's memory as a warm and humorous grandfather (*tsawe*) and elder (*mutumia*) for the homestead and wider Giriama community, as well as a Kaya elder (*mutumia wa Kaya*). The young Kalulu follower imitated Kalulu as though he was Kalulu's *kivuru*. This was a metaphorical expression, as imitation or mimesis are based not on a metonymical but a metaphorical relationship between the imitator and imitated. This metaphorical sense of the Giriama homestead may thus be seen as rooted not only in the daily meal as *ugali* but also philosophical notions such as *kivuri*.

Are the Kayas still a sacred void under the conditions of a globalizing Africa? To answer this question, I would like to refer to Parkin's phrase, "But in so cleansing the Kaya, its imagined void becomes filled again with content, including many old metonyms, contrasts, and associations, but also some new ones ... The void is, then, that point at which memory is revived and recreated, but also allowed to think what was previously unthinkable" (Parkin 1991: 229). It seems that the more that the Kayas are leveraged as resources for eco-tourism, biodiversity, nature conservation, and the exhibition of cultural heritage, the more the Kayas will be repatriated and reclaimed as homesteads for the Kaya elders and the Mijikenda. The Kayas remain a sacred void that simultaneously articulates "previously unthinkable" notions such as UNESCO's global vision of cultural heritage, while retaining their autochthonic sense as a living shadow, *kivuri*, of the traditional homestead.





**Photo 8** Katana Kalulu blessing people in front of Mekatilili's tombstone at the Mekatilili Cultural Festival in Bungale, Malindi, Kenya. (Photograph by Mariko Kuga 2008, Copyright Katsuhiko Keida 2008)



**Photo 9** Katana Kalulu (left) dancing in front of Mekatilili's tombstone at the Mekatilili Cultural Festival in Bungale, Malindi, Kenya. (Photograph by Mariko Kuga 2008, Copyright Katsuhiko Keida 2008)

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## Notes

- 1) "Kaya elder shot dead," *Daily Nation*, January 17, 2014. <http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/Kilifi/Kaya-elder-shot-dead/-/1183282/2149828/-/view/printVersion/-/12oh56i/-/index.html> (accessed September 12, 2015)
- 2) His age is reported variously from 75 to 95 in different sources.
- 3) "Assassins killed top kaya elder, say detectives," *Daily Nation*, January 19, 2014. <http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/Assassins-killed-top-Kaya-elder-say-detectives/-/1107872/2152080/-/view/printVersion/-/2uutie/-/index.html> (accessed September 12, 2015)
- 4) According to the *Daily Nation*, "Kaya elders in collaboration with a human rights group have launched a campaign against the killing of elderly people on suspicion that they practised

witchcraft. The ‘Mvi si uchawi; Uzee ni hekima’ (grey hair is not witchcraft; old age is wisdom) initiative is aimed at creating awareness on the rights of old people in society. The campaign, through the MADCA, targets the youth said to be behind the attacks on old, grey-haired men” (in “Kaya elders, rights group work to end lynchings,” *Daily Nation*, May 29, 2014. <http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/Kilifi/-Elders-step-in-to-stop-lynchings/-/1183282/2330990/-/view/printVersion/-/yew4w/-/index.html> (accessed September 21, 2015))

- 5) “Assassins killed top kaya elder, say detectives,” *Daily Nation*, January 19, 2014. <http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/Assassins-killed-top-Kaya-elder-say-detectives/-/1107872/2152080/-/view/printVersion/-/2uutie/-/index.html> (accessed September 12, 2015). Additionally, Joseph Mwarandu, Secretary-general of MADCA, commented in 2014 that “We are working closely with the police. In the event an elder is lynched, family members would be the first suspects since they are the ones who perpetrate it just because of greed for land and property and not witchcraft as claimed” (In “Kaya elders, rights group work to end lynchings” *Daily Nation*, May 29, 2014. <http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/Kilifi/-Elders-step-in-to-stop-lynchings/-/1183282/2330990/-/view/printVersion/-/yew4w/-/index.html> (accessed September 21, 2015)).
- 6) As there is no space to focus on this question in depth here, I limit my discussion in this article to an outline of the incident. I intend to explore the question in more detail elsewhere.
- 7) According to Barbara Engels, “The concept of serial World Heritage properties has gained much popularity during recent years. This is reflected in the increasing number of nominations and inscriptions of serial properties on the UNESCO World Heritage List. [...] The contribution of serial properties to the Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage List, with its aim of ensuring that the List reflects the world’s cultural and natural diversity of outstanding universal value, could be one of these benefits” (Engels 2010: 79).
- 8) The reference to ten rather than eleven forests suggest that Kaya Kinondo is not included as a designated cultural property due to its somewhat exceptional status among “the Mijikenda Sacred Kaya Forests” (World Heritage Committee 2009).
- 9) As noted above, over 60 Kayas are generally thought to remain in existence.
- 10) The Selection Criteria (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>) for a property to be included on the World Heritage List are as follows (underlined Criteria are those that relate specifically to the Mijikenda Kayas);
  - (i) to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius.
  - (ii) to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning, or landscape design.
  - (iii) to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared.
  - (iv) to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.
  - (v) to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use, which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment, especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change.
  - (vi) to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with

beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria)

- (vii) to contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.
  - (viii) to be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features.
  - (ix) to be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal, and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals.
  - (x) to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.
- 11) David Parkin has also remarked on the alarm among members of this expedition at their discovery of a tendency for "Giriama knowledge as a commodity to be sold at negotiable and therefore ever-increasing monetary value." However, he also notes that this trend "may or may not have been arrested by the purificatory action of the Kaya elders in 1988" (Parkin 1991: 46).
  - 12) According to the *Daily Nation* (June 20, 2005, "Long line of visionaries", <http://www.nation.co.ke/magazines/-/1190/66018/-/view/printVersion/-/yag0jtz/-/index.html> (accessed January 10, 2004); see also Willis 2008: 235), "Maitha was the fourth leader since independence in 1963. The first was Ronald Ngala, who was installed during the freedom struggle [...] He died in 1972 and was succeeded by Matano. Later, trade unionist Juma Boy took the mantle. When Boy died, Matano held the post again, until Maitha's installation (April 20, 2003). However, Kahindi Jogolo (who claims to be spokesman of Kaya elders) says the first leader was Bambaulo, who was crowned in 1857. In 1913, Mekatilili wa Menza took the mantle. The leadership was handed over to Ronald Ngala in 1960, and to Maitha in 1993 [...] Due to poor land ownership at the Coast, some kayas have been grabbed by private developers, causing tension in the community. Lately, many leaders have been initiated as elders. They include Tourism and Wildlife minister Morris Dzero, Likoni MP Suleiman Shakombo, former Kisauni District Officer Ngumbao Nyule, and Kisauni politician Mohammed Mwandugu."
  - 13) "Assassins killed top kaya elder, say detectives," *Daily Nation*, January 19, 2014. <http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/Assassins-killed-top-Kaya-elder-say-detectives/-/1107872/2152080/-/view/printVersion/-/2uutic/-/index.html> (accessed September 12, 2015)
  - 14) Although usually written "MADCA," the group's members pronounce the name "madica" (mædɪkə). For a detailed discussion of MADCA and Mekatilili, see Nymweru and Carrier (2011).
  - 15) MADCA's organization of the 2008 Mekatilili Festival was a success, which has led to its continuing coverage in the mass media. See, for example, "Malindi honours Kenya freedom heroine," *Daily Nation*, August 18, 2009. <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/regional/-/1070/641820/-/view/printVersion/-/ih0snlz/-/index.html> (accessed September 20, 2015); "Home of cultural diversity," *Daily Nation*, June 27, 2012. <http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/Kilifi/Home-of->

- cultural-diversity/-/1183282/1437492/-/view/printVersion/-/lp072m/-/index.html (accessed September 20, 2015); and “‘Mad Woman’ who rattled the British,” *Daily Nation*, June 6, 2013. <http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/DN2/Mad-woman-who-rattled-the-British/-/957860/1873784/-/view/printVersion/-/91326z/-/index.html> (accessed September 20, 2015)
- 16) “Uhuru seeks new ties in ODM region,” *Daily Nation*, September 5, 2015. <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Uhuru-seeks-new-ties-in-ODM-region/-/1064/2859936/-/view/printVersion/-/dy38e4/-/index.html> (accessed September 21, 2015)
- 17) For example, “A colourful ceremony marked the return of two memorial statues to a village in Kaloleni District on Wednesday. Known locally as *vigango*, the statues had been stolen from a family in Chelani village and taken to two separate American museums” (in “Pomp as two statues are returned,” *Daily Nation*, June 22, 2007. <http://www.nation.co.ke/News/-/1056/192934/-/view/printVersion/-/116fbrbz/-/index.html> (accessed September 21, 2015)); “The principal curator of the museum, Phillip Jimbi Katana, travelled to the remote village in the coastal region to hand over the two statues. ‘We are handing over two *vigango*, which were stolen here in 1985 and they found their way all the way to America,’ Mr Katana said” (in “Kenyan fete repatriated relics,” *Story from BBC NEWS*, June 6, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/ft/-/1/hi/world/africa/6231134.stm> (accessed January 10, 2012)); “the elders, who were drawn from the three Giriama zones of Galana, Weruni and Godoma, unanimously agreed that the artefacts should be preserved at Kaya Fungo, which is the community’s biggest sacred forest and also a World Heritage Site” (in “Artefacts sold abroad recovered,” *Daily Nation*, accessed March 2, 2010. <http://www.nation.co.ke/News/-/1056/872004/-/view/printVersion/-/vwr713/-/index.html>, March 5, 2010); “Some Kilifi leaders have opposed the Nairobi County Assembly officials’ planned trip to the US to repatriate 30 Mijikenda artefacts to Kenya. The leaders argue that the artefacts, *vigango* (wooden burial poles), are of cultural value and attachment to the Mijikenda alone” (in “Nairobi accused of hijacking return of Mijikenda artefacts,” *Daily Nation*, February 18, 2014. <http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/Nairobi-accused-of-hijacking-return-of-Mijikenda-artefacts/-/1107872/2211966/-/view/printVersion/-/xoqbkaz/-/index.html> (accessed September 13, 2015)).
- 18) McIntosh (2009: 40) provides a concise explanation of the *Gohu* and the *Vaya*, “the Gohu society, for instance, have special roles and privileges associated with conspicuous consumption, redistribution and fertility. [...] The society considered the ultimate ruling group is the exclusive Vaya, who have a judicial and policing function in the community, and are seen as custodians of especially potent herbal medicine and incantation, including the fearsome *fisi* hyena oath which is often used in trials of witchcraft.”

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