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The Aravai people, the site of Rabai and its sacred forests on the Kenyan coast

Social science research on the Kenyan coast has largely emphasised Swahili culture – for which there exists a vast amount of academic literature – but has afforded little attention to the Mijikenda. The Mijikenda, linguistically related to the Bantu populations, include the following subgroups: Agiriama, Akambe, Aribe, Aravai, Achhonyi, Adigo, Aduruma, Adzihana and the Akauma. According to oral tradition, they came from a mythical territory called Singwaya (present day southern Somalia) and they settled in hilltop villages "fortified" by very dense vegetation, known as the *kayas*[1]. The Mijikenda formed an intermediary group between the coast and the interior of the country, and they were very early on included in the economic and political exchange systems conducted by the Swahili[2]. According to the historian Justin Willis[3], the name 'Mijikenda' does not represent a unified ethnic group but rather was created under British colonisation to designate the two main coastal groups on a demographic map under the guise of a land access policy based on ethno-racial differences. From an anthropological viewpoint, research carried out in the 1970s by David Parkin on the Giriama, as well as more recent research by Linda Giles and Monica Udvardy[4], have been able to show the complexity of the Giriama's

[1] Archaeological research recently conducted by the *National Museums of Kenya* showed that occupation of the *kayas* dates back even further to the beginning of the second millennium. See Kiriama Herman, "Heritage, Identity and Archaeology at *kaya* Mudzi Mwiru (Kenya)", in Ballarin Marie Pierre, Kiriama Herman, Pennacini Cecilia, *Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Heritage in East Africa*, n°53, Special Issue, *The Uganda Journal*, Kampala, Fountain Publisher, 2013, p. 187-200.

[2] Spear Thomas, *The Kaya Complex: A History of the Mijikenda Peoples of the Kenya Coast to 1900*, 1978, Nairobi, Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978; Brantley Cynthia, *The Giriama and Colonial Resistance in Kenya, 1800-1920*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981.

[3] Willis Justin, *Mombasa, the Swahili and the making of the Mijikendas*, 1993, Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1993.

[4] See in particular: Monica Udvardy, "The Fertility of the Post-Fertile. Concepts of Gender, Aging and Reproductive Health among the Giriama of Kenya", *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 7(4), 1992, p. 289-307; Monica Udvardy, Linda L. Giles and John B. Mitsanze "Cultural Property as Global Commodities. The Case of Mijikenda Memorial Statues", *Cultural Survival Quarterly* Winter, 27 (4), 2004, p. 78-82.

social and ritual organisation in the broader context of Mijikenda culture[5]. Since the 1990s and 2000s, a team from the *National Museums of Kenya* undertook archaeological and historical research on some of the primary sites formerly occupied by the Mijikenda people. This research was part of a governmental policy aimed at the valorisation and protection of sacred forests. The scope of much of the research focused on the Aravai, the site of Rabai and its sacred forests; all of which will be presented in this paper.

Origin myths begin with the establishment of the Aravai in the *kayas* and, as Thomas Spear described, the creation of the nine ethnic groups that formed the Mijikenda identity. It is also widely accepted that in the 19th century, following the territory's pacification and due to demographic pressure, the Mijikenda began to settle outside their forest lands. The original settlements were maintained as sacred places and burial grounds, reinforcing the territorialisation of the group. The elders from these lineages formed a council with the intention of preserving the land. At the same time, strict rules were put in place to guarantee the sanctity of the forests: wood cutting and vegetation was prohibited, a particular dress code was required, various taboos were to be respected, access was reserved for elders – especially in places of high magical value where the community's protective talismans (*fingos*) are buried – and finally, the creation of specific areas of circulation within the *kaya* enclosure. The boundary between general land use and sacred land was therefore reinforced. Today, the *kayas* are still central to ceremonies such as social harmony and rain rituals held under the elders' authority. The elders play a dominate role regarding social regulations and control and organise weekly meetings designed to resolve community problems. In a sense, these forests are "by the ritual acts that occur there, a place within the village where the social and territorial ties from various social groups of diverse origins are created"[6].

In Rabai, resorting to a long-term approach makes it possible to understand the evolution of Mijikenda

[5] The recent introduction of Cynthia Brantley in the collective work led by Linda Giles and Rebecca Gearhart appropriately places the Mijikenda studies in their historical and academic context since the 1970s. This book is a recent synthesis of the Mijikenda and relies on fieldwork conducted mainly with the Giriama people. Gearhart Rebecca et Giles Linda, *Contesting Identities. The Mijikenda and their Neighbours in Kenyan Coastal Society*, Trenton, Africa World Press, 2014.

[6] Liberski-Bagnoud Danouta, Fournier Anne and Nignan Saibou, "Les « bois sacrés », faits et illusions : à propos des sanctuaires boisés des Kasena (Burkina Faso)" [The "sacred woods", facts and illusions: about the Kasena wood sanctuaries (Burkina Faso)], in Juhé-Beaulaton D. (ed), *Forêts sacrées et sanctuaires boisés. Des créations culturelles et biologiques (Burkina Faso, Togo et Bénin)* [Sacred forests and wooded shrines. Cultural and biological creations (Burkina Faso, Togo and Benin)], Karthala, Paris, 2010, p. 59-90.

groups and their guardianship over the *kayas* up to the present day. Rabai is an extremely rich site of varying facets, and its study is part of a broader reflection on history and memory in the process of valuing heritage. It raises questions about the preservation and sustainable management of heritage sites by the communities concerned, all while the sacred forests of Rabai are being threatened by reckless deforestation.

The 5 *kayas* of Rabai: Mudzimuvya, Bomu, Imboni, Mudzi Mwiru and Mzizima. These *kayas* form a block of forest composed of small wooded hills that constitute a prominent feature of the landscape bordering the large coconut plantations. Rabai has one of the highest concentrations of coconuts on the coast and their exploitation plays a significant role in the local economy (notably through the production of palm wine). These plantations are under the responsibility of the elders who are divided into two main clans: the Amwezi and the Achiza. The plantations can be accessed by following the paths leading to two or three entrances.

Just before the first entrance, depending on the *kaya*, one can see the tombs (*makaburini*) of the people who died. Individuals are buried on both sides of the path in accordance with their cause of death and/or their clan membership. Not far away is the *cherani*, or hearth where the body is exposed before a decision is made about its final burial place. The elders and the most renowned prophets are buried inside the *kayas*. For example, *kaya* elder Jindwa is buried in Mudzi Muvya. In the mid-nineteenth century, Jindwa welcomed Johannes Krapf, the Anglican missionary who founded the Rabai mission, thus making it the starting point for the expansion of Christianity in Kenya.

The last entrance leads to an historically occupied site. The elders bury their staffs (*ndata*) in the ground before entering the *kaya* and retrieve them once they have finished their activities. These staffs symbolise their authority and hierarchy within the group. In a secret location of high sacred value, one finds the buried *fingo*, a talisman brought from Singwaya which is associated with the myth of their arrival. The parliament (*moro*), originally located in the middle of the *kaya*, is now located in the village. There, the elders manage everyday life within the community and decide on ritual activities. Sessions are organised to deliberate on the various problems faced by the village's inhabitants (familial, land, societal offences, etc.).

The ceremonies and ceremonial locations are diverse, and each *kaya* has a specific role. In Rabai, there is an annual ritual cycle related to community preservation and *kaya* maintenance. It is marked by various rituals and organised according to the circumstance, such as mediating various offenses, the initiation of an elder to a higher rank or other specific requests. For example, in 2008, a ritual honouring a Mijikenda prophetess was modified with the addition of a special prayer to obtain the ancestors' consent to open the Mudzi Muvya *kaya* to ecotourism. This ritual also sought authorisation to undertake archaeological research in Mudzi Mwiru, the oldest *kaya* in terms of occupancy, and the most important in terms of rituals.

The current affirmation of Mijikenda identity through a cultural revival marked by festivals, the creation of ecomuseums and ritual effervescence, is part of a larger search for legitimisation and social recognition. This affirmation aims to cope with external pressures: solicitation by political movements, demands to access their land and resources and other requests related to tourism development. The 2009 public opening of the Mudzi Muvya *kaya*, funded by the French Embassy in Kenya, is indicative of the diversity of interests and issues involved, whether local (the elders of Rabai, villagers, elders of the surrounding *kayas*, local authorities), national (governmental authorities, *National Museums of Kenya*, political parties) or international (UNESCO, NGOs and research institutions). In 2013, this project was self-directed with real investment from the groups involved. But the tensions between its members are constant, both within the elders' councils and the women's groups who challenge the power of the elders – who are always men – and demand a more equitable share of the benefits. On the other hand, the site does not receive enough visitors, and to overcome this problem, some members of the association approach Mombasa hotels with a significant international clientele. Thus, on July 13, 2013, a delegation of tourism professionals visited Rabai where a new portion of forest was being prepared as a tourist village to promote the site. Dances and songs from different villages were abound, and ceremonial practices and daily activities were presented. However, one of the new members of the association had invited some political leaders from the opposition party, and the day ended up becoming a political meeting. In fact, questions arise concerning power politics and the scale game at play for Rabai and its situation as a heritage site. The current Mijikenda society is caught up in these contradictions and the

elders of the Aravai and Giriama *kayas* are at the heart of the socio-political issues encompassing the whole of contemporary Kenyan society.