Sacred Spaces, Political Authority, and the Dynamics of Tradition in Mijikenda History

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This thesis titled
Sacred Spaces, Political Authority, and the Dynamics of Tradition in Mijikenda History

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the social, political, and symbolic roles of the Mijikenda kayas in the Coast Province of Kenya. The kayas, which exist today as sacred grove forests, are the original homesteads of the Mijikenda and the organizational units from which the symbolic authority and esoteric knowledge of the Mijikenda elders are derived. As a result, I conceptualize kayas as the physical space of the forests, but also complex networks of political, metaphysical, and symbolic power. While the kaya forests and their associated institutions have often been framed as cultural relics, I use this lens to illustrate how the position of the kayas in Mijikenda life has influenced broader social and political developments.

Three main themes are developed: the first theme addresses how the kayas were used in different capacities to create space from the encroachment of colonial rule. Second, this thesis examines how Mijikenda elders used the symbolic role of the kayas and kaya institutions to reaffirm their special knowledge and privileged place within their own communities and within political movements. Finally, the third theme of this thesis explores the shifting image of the kayas in relation to colonialism, politics, and conservation.
These themes work to examine the variability in the strength and significance of narratives on the *kayas* in colonial discourses, Mijikenda communities, and in contemporary conservation. This exhibits tensions as well as continuities in the invocation of Mijikenda traditions up to the present day. The *kayas*, far from being solely historical relics, continue to influence social and political discourses of coastal Kenya.

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INTRODUCTION

The Mijikenda are nine closely related groups who speak mutually understandable Sabaki Bantu languages and share similar cultural traditions. They occupy parts of the coastal belt and hinterland regions of Kenya, most living on lands in between the Tana River in the central part of Kenya’s coast, and the northern sections of Tanzania’s border with Kenya. According to oral traditions, kayas are the original homesteads of the Mijikenda following their resettlement from their northern homeland of Singwaya—believed to be in contemporary Southern Somalia—in the sixteenth-century. The most established version of these accounts in both academic and popular histories comes from historian Thomas Spear’s collection of Mijikenda oral traditions which narrate the migrations of the nine Mijikenda ethnic groups—the Chonyi, Digo, Duruma, Giriama, Jibana, Kambe, Kauma, Rabai, and Ribe—and constructs a historical description of the diminishing significance of the kayas from the nineteenth-century onwards.¹ Today the kayas are considered sacred grove forests.

The Singwaya narrative of Mijikenda origins and history has been disputed by several scholars, but it is still the most widely accepted account.² Because most explanations of Mijikenda social and environmental history recount the kayas as uninhabited or “relic” spaces from the 1850s onwards, the various arenas in which...

Mijikenda traditions were invoked in the twentieth-century have been neglected. While debates about Mijikenda origins have been central to the formation of a body of historiography on the ethnic group, there is, I believe, a gap in academic knowledge which prevents scholars from more fully viewing the ways which Mijikenda institutions, spaces, and traditions were used and transformed by the British administration and the Mijikenda in colonial and later in post-colonial Kenya.

Departing from historiographies on Mijikenda history which frame the kayas as “cultural museums” and unchanged relics of the Mijikenda past abandoned for human use in the mid-nineteenth-century, this thesis will explore variability in the strength and significance of narratives on the kayas in colonial discourses, Mijikenda communities, and among conservation organizations. While sacred grove forests are “often treated as the remains of primeval forests, ethnographic curiosities, and cultural relics of a pre-colonial past,” more recent scholarship has raised questions about the “symbolic,” “socio-political,” and “power laden” aspects of these unoccupied sacred landscapes. By critically examining the invocation of Mijikenda traditions, symbols, and institutions in the twentieth-century history of the Kenya coast, the kayas can contribute to our

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3 Both Spear and Cynthia Brantley’s histories of the Mijikenda use this framing to explain the social role of the kayas after the sweeping changes of the nineteenth-century in Mijikenda society. While I largely accept the temporality of Mijikenda migration from the kayas, this thesis will explore how the symbols, authority, and physical space of the kayas were invoked in more recent discourses, thus positioning them as dynamic landscapes, traditions, and concepts. See Spear, the Kaya Complex, especially pp. 45-46 for an example of the most accepted narrative on the histories of the kayas post-1850.

understandings of the discursive elements of colonization, identity, and contemporary social and environmental issues.

Conceptually, I use Spear’s suggestion that traditions be viewed as discourses and that colonists’ use and appropriation of these traditions inserted them into dialogues “of which they had little knowledge or control.” This posits, as Jan Vansina suggested, that tradition cannot be framed solely as continuous or unchanging. Instead, history and tradition are continuous and changing, adaptive to the dynamic realities of social change such as religious conversion, migration, or colonization. As other scholars have addressed, the *kayas* form both a central component of Mijikenda identity and act as the symbolic historical center from which Mijikenda authority is derived, based on the *kambi* or council of elders. British policies of indirect rule worked through these customary authorities. However, as Steven Feierman illustrated in his work on the Shambaai region of Tanzania, the colonial administration “coopted preexisting intellectuals as agents, and those agents carried along their own discourse.” Similarly, Mijikenda elders used the developments of the early-colonial era to weave their own individual and community interests into the broader processes of colonization and indirect rule.

Both Spear and Cynthia Brantley examined the generational struggles which transformed Mijikenda societies in the nineteenth century with the emergence of “new men” who participated widely in trade in the commerce of the Indian Ocean World. As a

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result, the authority derived from sitting on the highest age grade of the *kambi* declined.\(^8\) However, during the early colonial era, these networks of authority were strengthened, if not revived, as part of the policies of indirect rule, where Native Tribunal Courts acted as administrative liaisons for the British by interpreting “customary law” for the administration.\(^9\) While Terrence Ranger characterized the “invention of tradition” as colonial officials’ efforts to codify what they saw as “traditional” institutions “thereby transforming flexible custom into hard prescription,”\(^10\) British attempts to bind Mijikenda groups ethnically, geographically, and conceptually were met with both internal and external struggles.

Across colonial Africa, male elders colluded with colonial officials to forge customary laws which dually benefited the consolidation of power by “customary” male authorities and the British mandate to enact indirect rule through “traditional” institutions.\(^11\) However, the process of collusion was not always immediately accepted and Mijikenda elders delayed the process of institutionalizing traditional authority in order to create space between administrative power and their own interests.\(^12\) Beyond the administrative goals of indirect rule, a secondary motive for codifying customary

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\(^11\) Martin Chanock’s seminal study on the creation of customary law in colonial Malawi and Zambia illustrated how certain authorities and customs were codified by both male elders and colonial officials see Chanock, *Law, Custom, and Social Order: the Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

\(^12\) Discussing delays in British attempts to initiate a new Duruma *kambi* for administrative use Bergman suggests that Duruma passive resistance eliminated “the possibility of colonial appropriation of legitimate traditional authority.” See Jeanne Louise Bergman, “A Willingness to Remember: the Persistence of Duruma Culture and Collective Memory” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1996), 123.
authorities was controlling interactions between coastal groups and reinforcing “tribal” identities. According to Justin Willis, the maintenance of a conceptual division between the Mijikenda and Swahili was a central administrative policy of the British regarding the hinterlands. At the same time, through religious conversion, squatting on coastal lands, or actual resistance, various Mijikenda peoples maneuvered around administrative attempts to control their mobility and identities. In these processes, traditions were used in ways that were highly flexible and authority was challenged, recontextualized, and manipulated both internally and externally.

Outline and Methodology

This thesis uses correspondence, District Reports, and Political Record Books taken from research in the Kenya National Archives in August 2009, and documents from Kenya’s colonial archives held on microfilm at Ohio University. Additionally, I use oral and observational data which were collected in July and August 2009 in Kenya’s Coast Province. The archival documents will primarily direct this study, in particular District Reports from the Kwale and Kilifi Districts and colonial reports of an ethnographic nature on the Digo, Duruma, and Giriama Mijikenda groups. While the archives provide insights into the approaches of the colonial administration to the Mijikenda and a tertiary entry into the discourses affecting Mijikenda life during the

13 Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda*, 127-134.
15 When referencing the microfilm documents in the text I will refer to the reference files given in the *Guide to the Kenyan National Archives* produced by Syracuse University’s Program of Eastern African Studies in 1968.
colonial era, this work is guided heavily by earlier scholarship on Mijikenda and Kenya coastal history.

This thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter will look at the mostly Muslim Digo—the southernmost Mijikenda group—examining their fusion of Islamic and indigenous Digo institutions in interplay with colonial power and in internal disputes concerning land, inheritance, and local religion and authority. I look at colonial perceptions of Digo Islam and subsequent attempts to sustain local authority during the gazettment of the Digo Native Reserve, disputes on matrilineal versus patrilineal inheritance, and support for the system of homestead elders. These developments will be framed in light of generational disputes manifested in changing perceptions of Digo Islam.

The second chapter will look at northern Mijikenda groups, primarily the Duruma and the Giriama and examine colonial attempts to “revive” local authorities and kaya traditions over the first half of the twentieth-century. I will explore two themes: first, the use of the complicated process of initiating a new council of elders or kambi to resist colonial influence. Second, I will examine historical constructions of the Mijikenda kayas. Beginning with the missionary J.L. Krapf’s nineteenth-century writings on the Mijikenda and concluding in examining the use of the kayas to articulate traditional authority and Pan-Mijikenda unity through rainmaking ceremonies during the early years
of the Mijikenda Union,\textsuperscript{16} I will argue that the images of the \textit{kayas} sacredness is linked to their political symbolism through these processes.

Finally, the third chapter will examine the politicization of the \textit{kayas} in several settings. First, I draw on anecdotes of the physical sites of the \textit{kayas} being used to settle land disputes in colonial land encroachments and in the present day. These will be linked to more recent ethnic tensions regarding land and the political roles and representations of Mijikenda \textit{kaya} elders in the coast’s sometimes tenuous social climate.\textsuperscript{17} I will contrast these representations of the \textit{kayas} to the most recent \textit{kaya} narratives being constructed in conservation literature, highlighting some of the unique environmentalisms of the \textit{kayas}, but also problematizing the systemization of contemporary conservation discourses and the World Heritage Site model.

In addition to being made UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2008, recently some \textit{kayas}—most notably Kinondo near the tourist beach resort of Diani—have been opened for ecotourism. Beyond their rich ecological endowments, the assertion that the \textit{kayas} are historical relics of the original Mijikenda homesteads has prevailed in explaining their significance. While this highlights the cultural attributes of the forests, the conservationist narrative is more uniform than the twentieth-century social history of the

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\textsuperscript{16} The Mijikenda Union was a political and public welfare group established in 1945 to represent the interests of the Mijikenda, mostly regarding land, and was a component of the earliest official efforts to forge a collective identity and heritage among the nine Mijikenda groups.

Mijikenda suggests. As Willis recently observed, in more current *kaya* narratives, the Mijikenda have “presented their knowledge of the *kayas* to tell stories not of singularity and cohesion but of discord and tension.” Moving with these currents, this thesis contributes to scholarship on the Mijikenda by illustrating how broader spectra of power and authority in coastal Kenya have been navigated and contested through coastal ethnicities, religions, and indigenous institutions. By illuminating ways in which the now unoccupied *kayas* have been invoked in the twentieth-century, this research departs from prevailing relic theories of the social use of *kayas* and re-centers Mijikenda traditions into the narrative of Kenya’s social and environmental history.

This thesis discusses some aspects of Mijikenda social history in the first half of the twentieth-century and often will deal with the *kayas* indirectly. Consequently, working toward the goal of illuminating the dynamic aspects of these sacred grove forests also will provide a conceptual binding to explore several broader questions. There are three main areas to which I hope to make some contribution in the historiography. First, understanding how Mijikenda groups responded to British colonialism. Second, exploring how different groups including elders, youth, Muslims responded to the internal changes occurring within their societies in the twentieth century. Finally, I hope this thesis will add some nuance to understandings of coastal traditions.

**Early Mijikenda History and Some Reflections on Mijikenda Historiography**

To date, the most ubiquitous theme in Mijikenda historiography has been the debate on Mijikenda origins. The legend of Mijikenda origins recounts the migration of the Mijikenda from the region known as Singwaya in southern Somalia to the Kenya

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18 Willis, “The King of the Mijikenda and Other Stories about the Kaya,” 239.
coast where they established their kayas as homesteads. At times other groups—including the Swahili—have used the Singwaya myth to explain their historical origin, however it is now most commonly attributed to the Mijikenda. Thus, the story of these migrations and the subsequent establishment and residence in the kayas are central to Mijikenda identity.19

The name Mijikenda, also written as Midzichenda in the local languages, is taken from the term Makayachenda. This is a descriptive term which translates as “nine homesteads” referring to the nine original homesteads or kayas (also written as makaya in local languages), of the Mijikenda origin narratives. According to Spear, their oral traditions suggest that the Digo were the first to begin the migration southward, finally settling in the Shimba Hills to the southwest of Mombasa following conflicts in the north with Galla pastoralists. Here they established the first kaya, named Kaya Kwale, marking their new homestead with the burial of a fingo or protective magic charm. Other groups followed in similar fashion, establishing their kayas on the forested ridges inland from the Indian Ocean.20 The migration from Singwaya was followed by what Spear calls the “middle period of Mijikenda history.” In the oral traditions this is presented as a period of stability following the migrations of the sixteenth-century which lasted until the upheavals and dramatic economic changes of the late nineteenth-century. During this

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19 See Spear, The Kaya Complex, 4-6, 16-27; Parkin, Sacred Void, 38.
20 Parkin, Sacred Void, 27-35; Both the Duruma and the Rabai are believed to have adopted the origins myth along with the language and customs of other Mijikenda groups from their close interactions in the hinterland regions, eventually adopting the core components of Mijikenda identity including the Singwaya legend and establishing their own kayas. The forging of these identities occurred in a pre-colonial context where local conceptions of ethnicity were often defined through a shared ecological environment and similar cultural practices. See Feierman, The Shambaa Kingdom: A History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974) 17-22.
era, Mijikenda society experienced a breakdown of the major institutions which had flourished in the preceding centuries.\textsuperscript{21}

In addition to being important institutional centers, the \textit{kayas} are distinct physical spaces that typically consisted of a cleared circular glade in the middle of a forest ridge, which could be entered from the forest through two cleared passageways. Clan meeting houses formed the outside of the circle, which were surrounded by individual homesteads. The \textit{fingo} was buried at the center of the \textit{kaya} where the elders met beneath two trees, a fig and a baobab.\textsuperscript{22} The \textit{kayas} are believed to have been central to Mijikenda life until populations began dispersing from what are now forested groves in the middle of the nineteenth-century. Brantley explained that Mijikenda institutions flourished prior to this period fostering a social order built on gerontocracy. However, the prevailing geographic and social conditions including integration into coastal trade networks and the beginning of colonialism set the stage for future generational conflicts.\textsuperscript{23} Prior to the nineteenth-century, the communities were unified through membership to a common \textit{kaya} and to specific \textit{rikas} or age-sets in which men of a common age were brought together to serve specific functions within the \textit{kaya} with their peers. Membership was further divided into clan, sub-clan, and lineage, while men were initiated into thirteen \textit{sub-rikas} every four years with the four highest \textit{rikas} assuming the role of the \textit{kambi}, which constituted the leadership of the \textit{kaya}.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{21} Spear, \textit{The Kaya Complex}, 44-45.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 46-48.
\textsuperscript{23} Brantley, \textit{The Giriama and Colonial Resistance in Kenya}, 8-10.
\textsuperscript{24} Spear, \textit{The Kaya Complex}, 58-59.
While seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Mijikenda life was centered in their *kaya* homesteads, the Mijikenda were not isolated. They participated widely in coastal commerce with Swahili traders from ports such as Mombasa, Vanga, and Wassini, supplying ivory, timber, and agricultural produce. According to Spear, the Digo’s southern geographic location put them in a favorable market position with south coast traders. Thus, in the eighteenth-century the Digo founded several sub-*kayas* closer to the coast. Other Mijikenda groups followed similar patterns establishing sub-*kayas*, although very few had their own *fingo*. In general, these lacked “the essential ritual attributes of the main *kaya*.“  

The rapid expansion of the East and Central African caravan trade in the nineteenth-century created a range of opportunities for Mijikenda peoples to amass wealth and establish themselves socially and economically outside the steady progression toward elderhood that had previously ordered Mijikenda society. Oral histories from the twentieth-century suggest that by the middle of the nineteenth-century a mass exodus from the *kayas* began, diminishing the significance of the institutional authority of the *kambi* in Mijikenda life and of the *kayas* as ritual centers. As a result the *kayas* declined as social centers, but remained significant to Mijikenda life as ritual and historical spaces.

For several decades, the historicity of the Mijikenda origins narrative and their migration from Singwaya has been nuanced by different linguistic, archeological, and

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25 Ibid., 83-85.
26 See Spear, *Traditions of Origin and their Interpretation*.
27 Parkin, *Sacred Void*, This is is of course variable since age, gender, exposure to Islam or Christianity affect Mijikenda attitudes toward their *kayas*, however the “forests still retain powerful cultural significance” as an important component of their collective identities and communities. See Nyamweru, Staline Kibet, Mohammed Pakia, and John A. Cooke, “The Kaya Forests of Coastal Kenya: ‘Remnant Patches’ or Dynamic Entities?” in *African Sacred Groves*, 62.
textual evidence. In turn, this has challenged the place of uniformity of the *kayas* within historical memory. Using lexical evidence, Thomas Hinnebush first suggested that the Sabaki Bantu languages—which include Mijikenda languages, Swahili and Pokomo—share many linguistic commonalities with the Seuta languages spoken in northeastern Tanzania. According to Hinnebush this indicates that Mijikenda origins might lie to the south of zones Sabaki speakers currently inhabit.\(^{28}\) R.F. Morton similarly proposed that some Mijikenda groups originated in the south. Using Church Missionary Society Archives and information contained in the Swahili chronicle *Kitab al-Zanuj*, he suggested that the Singwaya story developed in the context of local struggles to determine identity. According to Morton, pre-nineteenth-century references to Mijikenda origins, especially regarding the Digo, Duruma, and Rabai indicate migration to the coastal strip from areas to the west and south. He pointed out that prior to the influence of the British in East Africa, Singwaya was considered the original homeland of the Swahili peoples, who only later would claim Arab descent in the new social climate of colonialism.\(^{29}\) Morton posited that at the turn of the century the Singwaya story was manipulated and reworked by the Swahili, European missionaries, colonial ethnographers, and the Mijikenda themselves. This played out through several developments including the attempted Islamization of the hinterland peoples, Swahili patronage and slaveholding in times of famine, and the later consolidation of a Mijikenda political identity with the establishment of the Mijikenda Union in 1945.\(^{30}\) Willis proposed similar arguments for

\(^{28}\) Hinnebusch, “The Shungwaya Hypothesis.”


the twentieth-century “making of the Mijikenda,” proposing that the formation of Mijikenda identity must be understood in the context of early twentieth-century interactions between the hinterlands peoples, the Swahili, and the British. Most notably, he suggested that the Mijikenda adopted the Singwaya narrative and forged a more corporate ethnic group through attempts to assert their relationship to the Swahili who at the time claimed Singwaya origins.31

Early twentieth-century accounts and more contemporary oral histories of the migration from Singwaya have at times included Pokomo, Segeju, Taita, and Kamba among the nine Mijikenda groups, suggesting an ambivalence which counters the uniformity of the nine homesteads.32 Previously, Spear suggested that this illustrates how the origin narrative acts as an adaptive mechanism by those who assimilated into Mijikenda society—primarily members of the Duruma and Rabai sub-groups.33 In the same way, he posited that for groups such as the Pokomo and Taita, the persistence of the narrative illustrates continuities in origins of several Bantu-speaking groups who upon leaving Singwaya were incorporated into similarly flexible non-Mijikenda societies.34 Most recently, Richard Helm critiqued Spear’s initial “linear reading” of the Mijikenda origins myth. Instead, Helm proposed that Mijikenda origins have a greater “temporal variability” than the myth accords suggesting that the historical identity of the groups is

31 Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda*.
32 Ibid., 31-32.
34 Additionally Spear explains that independent Oromo and Somali oral histories suggest that Bantu-speaking groups lived in the Juba valley until an Oromo invasion in the mid-sixteenth-century. Ibid., 56-57.
far more inclusive having been forged through a variety of developments, including migrations.\textsuperscript{35}

Helm’s argument builds on archeological studies of the \textit{kayas} from the late 1980s and early 1990s. H.W. Mutoro’s archeological work conducted on Mijikenda settlement sites suggested that there has been more a continuous settlement pattern in the hinterlands than southward migration.\textsuperscript{36} According to Helm, this has led to the emergence of “a more inclusive and multivocal reading of the Mijikendas’ past.”\textsuperscript{37} Willis collected oral histories during the gazettment of 38 different northern \textit{kaya} sites with the Coastal Forest Conservation Unit. Contrary to accepted histories on the \textit{kayas} which suggest their social uses were diminishing during the nineteenth-century, according to Willis, in the late nineteenth-century new subsidiary \textit{kayas} were actually being built.\textsuperscript{38} His findings suggest greater continuity, diversity, and conflict in the social use of \textit{kayas} and contradict some earlier assertions of decline since the nineteenth-century.

Willis theorized that the image of the nine forest homesteads—one for each Mijikenda group—occupied until the tumultuous nineteenth-century was an “enduring ideological device of elder men to legitimate their claims to power” which later became a “useful adjunct” for colonial officials.\textsuperscript{39} Much of the archeological, linguistic, and


\textsuperscript{37} Helm, 61.


\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 76-78. Parkin explains that the story of the transplanted \textit{fingo} by each group from Singwaya acts as a functional medium between an origin myth and “the explicit notion of Kaya sacredness.” This suggests
historical evidence suggests that the key symbols of collective Mijikenda identity are embedded in the social and political experiences of the nineteenth-century coast and twentieth-century Kenya. In Tanzania, G. Philip Clark found in his brief 1992 survey of Digo elders, kayas were referred to only when prompted. Moreover, they did not reference their symbolic value, stating instead that “kaya…denotes old, and in some cases abandoned, Digo settlements.” While Clark’s sample size was minimal, this example from Tanzania perhaps indicates how more recent in Kenya developments have shaped the kayas within historical memory.

While these studies destabilize the uniformity of Mijikenda origins and dispersal narratives, they underscore the relationship between their environment—specifically the kayas—and claims to an historical collective identity. This provides a starting point to examine the social continuity of the institutions and rituals associated with the kayas in the twentieth-century. Moreover, it reinforces the more recent roles of the kayas in Mijikenda society and in the institutional authority of the elders. While the kaya exemplifies the collectivity of the group, it can also act as “a tool for struggle over authority within that collectivity.” Shifts in Mijikenda authority coincided with their physical dispersal from the kayas. This dispersal created new modes of residence and political leadership as individual homestead heads or “new men” accumulated followers and assumed leadership roles. According to Spear, Mijikenda societies became more fragmented and sub-clan and lineage became more significant corporate groups than

that the key symbols of Mijikenda experience are perhaps more significant factors in forging a collective identity that the origin narrative itself. See Parkin, Sacred Void, 38.

41 Helm, 71-73.
kaya, clan, or age-set.\textsuperscript{43} This new leadership, as Willis and Suzanne Miers explained, was economic rather than traditional, and the new men largely assumed the previous authority of the elders. As a result, rather than connecting persons through the community linkages to their kayas, kinship was determined through patronage.\textsuperscript{44} Brantley explained that due to these changes “the meaning of Giriama [the largest Mijikenda sub-group] identity changed” and the kayas shifted from government to symbolic or ritual centers.\textsuperscript{45}

Historical writings on the Mijikenda have largely followed this timeline; however, the writings fall short of effectively linking pre-colonial experiences to the dynamics of eldership and authority during the colonial era. While the kayas and their associated institutional leadership mediums broke down in the nineteenth-century, they remained in flux well into the following century. As Willis suggested, while the kayas are at the center of Mijikenda “vision of the past, they also challenge it.”\textsuperscript{46} Through indirect rule, “traditional” authorities were once again placed in positions of influence. Many Mijikenda elders used this process to assert their social place that had been challenged in the preceding decades and inscribing new meanings in the kaya forests and kaya institutions.

**Environmental Historiography: the Social, the Cultural, and the Ecological**

Sacred grove forests occupy a unique place within the environmental history literature, often pointed to as counterpoints to more common “imposed” wilderness areas.

\textsuperscript{43} Spear, *The Kaya Complex*, 122-128.
\textsuperscript{46} Willis, “The Northern Kayas of the Mijikenda,” 76-78.
However, as sites of struggle, they also add to more recent trends in East African environmental history, which have increasingly moved in the direction of other postcolonial histories. These illuminate local initiatives and creativity, while paying close attention to the networks of power imbued in understandings of human/environmental relationships. The first two chapters of this thesis will deal more exclusively with the interplay between the Mijikenda elders and the colonial administration. However, the underlying themes of both chapters highlight the discursive, symbolic, and dynamic roles of Mijikenda traditions in the larger discourses unfolding. The concluding chapter will explore the environmentalisms in relation to the *kayas* more directly, to investigate their positions and narration in larger conservationist projects.

To date, the most ubiquitous theme in African environmental history has been the imposition of Western nature aesthetics on African landscapes. These beliefs are used to evoke images of African environments as “nature’s eternity,” a process David Anderson and Richard Grove have referred to as “the scramble for Eden.” In turn, more recent studies have taken a nuanced perspective on the intersection of symbols, knowledges, and narratives of African landscape and the disputes which challenge the visual aesthetics, experiences, and meanings inscribed on landscapes by outsiders. As Roderick

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49 Beinart describes this as “an essentially corrective and anti-colonial approach which emphasized African initiative in the face of European conquest and capitalist exploitation.” He points out that this has largely
Neumann wrote of those living on the borderlands of Arusha National Park, “locally lived geography is as much an expression of identity as a declaration of rightful possession” to defend “locally constituted meaning etched in the landscape.”  This asserts, as Jan Bender Shetler proposed, the landscape is a social text, upon which people—in this case Mara Agriculturalists of the western Serengeti—have “written their history.” In the processes of environmental and social change, people generated new frameworks for understanding their surroundings adding new interpretations to existing bodies of knowledge and techniques. Nonetheless, outside interpreters and “scientific” knowledge have implicated local actors in processes of deforestation and environmental decline. However, as James Fairhead and Melissa Leach showed in their seminal study Misreading the African Landscape, colonial environmental projects have incorrectly interpreted the environments they encountered, often to the detriment of local actors.

The spatial and symbolic aspects of landscapes play an important role for scholars in theorizing social relationships between humans within their environment. Using “core spatial imagery” Shetler linked the social identities of the peoples of the western Serengeti Plain to interactions with their landscapes. Drawing on Beinart and McGregor’s definition of a landscape as an “imaginative construction of the

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50 Neumann, Imposing Wilderness, 176.
environment,” she explained that the meanings attached to physical features through oral traditions embed the environment with “deep social connections.”54 This was previously accomplished by David William Cohen and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo’s monumental study of Luo people in western Kenya, Siaya, in which mapped an overlapping physical and cultural landscape unbound by the physical borders of the region.55 Shifting spatial relationships of the Giriama to their kayas according to Parkin has in turn etched new meanings to the former forest homesteads, often intensifying their sacred attributes.56

Social relations change through negotiation and contestation and these fluctuations constantly alter the meanings individuals and groups attribute to physical space.57 As Allen Howard explained, by giving greater “explanatory power” to the environment in African histories, scholars can better emphasize the drawn out process of European control, and the environmental hegemony manifested in the colonial control of lands, the demarcation of borders, and the creation of identities or “tribes.” These processes often took decades to take hold, and in some cases had little impact, if at all.58 In the context of Mijikenda historiography, the social environment of the kayas helps to add nuance and underscore African agency in the processes through which the British co-opted traditional authority and codified Mijikenda ethnicities in Native Reserves.

Because they are largely conserved through indigenous mechanisms, the environmental histories of sacred groves often contrast to the more common imposed

54 Shetler, Imagining Serengeti, 4-6.
56 See Parkin, Sacred Void, 107-111.
58 Ibid., 104.
wilderness model. Often, the local or indigenous protective strategies for preserving sacred forest patches are used to articulate their uniqueness. Problematically, however, the narratives purporting this uniqueness focus on the relic and often static nature of the cultural strategies employed by local actors in interacting with their landscapes.

Conversely, *kayas* as well as other sacred groves can illuminate more nuanced environmentalisms. The changes—through both political and ecological processes—of local power structures, European encroachments, and decolonization have eroded, transformed, and reconstituted the meanings of sacred forests.59 In Sheridan and Nyamweru’s recent edited volume *African Sacred Groves* the authors proposed that scholars must simultaneously interrogate “ecological, socio-political, and symbolic processes” to illustrate the dynamic aspects of these landscapes.60 This necessarily implies that sacred groves should be approached as arenas of power and interpretive centers that interact with shifting notions of tradition and the flux of African and foreign interactions from colonialism to capitalism and conservation. As “hybrid symbolic systems,” sacred groves are infused with dynamic meanings, illustrating that what were previously viewed as relic patches, can constitute complex components of systems of power and group identity.61

Nonetheless, “relic theory” has been the prevailing notion used to explain the social role of Mijikenda homesteads.62 Relic theory imagines the *kayas* as “cultural

62 Sheridan defines relic theory as a “standard discourse” purporting that the “ecological and cultural climax” of the sacred groves can provide the basis for conservation efforts. Problematically he continues this can result in a neglect of various “ecological, historical, social, political, and symbolic dynamics” of
museums...unchanged in fundamental detail from the time they were abandoned as residences in the mid-19th century." \(^{63}\) Even Parkin, who has most extensively discussed the symbolic place of the *kayas* in Mijikenda personhood elucidated an image of the forests in which they have persisted or even intensified, while remaining “remote and unchallenged.” \(^{64}\) While Parkin’s theory underscores the ritual, symbolic, and cultural significance the *kayas*, it also participates in the silencing of the discursive characteristics of the *kayas* and the use of *kaya* traditions in more recent social and political developments.

The preservation value of the *kayas* as forests is increasingly of interest to conservationists, especially after being given World Heritage status by UNESCO in 2008. The *kayas* are considered some of the richest and most diverse ecological zones in East Africa as the last remaining patches of the indigenous coastal forest that once stretched from Southern Somalia to Northern Mozambique and inland to the Equatorial rainforests. As the importance of the *kayas* to contemporary conservation has increased, environmental studies of the *kayas* have sought to elucidate the dynamic aspects of the uninhabited sacred groves, the methods of indigenous knowledge which have contributed to their conservation, and the extent which coastal development and changing Mijikenda beliefs and customs have influenced the cultural significance of *kayas* in the recent past. \(^{65}\)

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\(^{63}\) Spear, *The Kaya Complex*, 45-46. See also, Mutoro, 280.

\(^{64}\) Parkin, *Sacred Void*, 43.

While these studies illustrate the current ecological dynamics and conservation value of the forests, they fall short in linking the enormous cultural endowments of the kayas to the more recent social history of the Mijikenda. Even after the dispersal from their homesteads over one hundred and fifty years ago, the kayas were interpreted and redefined in attempts to identify and use local traditions by both the Mijikenda and colonial administrators. At the same time, the kayas have continued to assume roles in broader generational disputes taking place in Mijikenda communities involving social processes of market encroachment, urbanization, environmental change, and eroding cultural practices.

Framing the Elders

As the transmitters of the specialized knowledge of the kayas, the Mijikenda elders are the most significant actors in discussions of Mijikenda traditionalisms. It is important to be mindful of not only the transformations in the roles of elders, but the problems associated with codifying a single notion of the kaya elder. Historically, the elders would include members of the highest age-set of the kambi. However, after initiations of new kambis ceased in Mijikenda communities in the late-nineteenth-century, two different types of kambi elders emerged to act as legal and ritual guides for the community during the colonial era. First, were members of secret societies who formed a continuum with the ritual knowledge of past kambi elders. The second type of elders was those found on the councils organized by colonial authorities. The later

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were an outgrowth of the powerful homestead founders, who became the heads of individual clan homesteads after the dispersals from the *kayas*. For a time, these men sat on councils with other homestead heads, with the *kaya’s kambi* acting as a judiciary authority in conflicts that could not be solved in the smaller councils. In addition, they participated in the ritual life of the *kaya*, often holding additional ceremonies for their followers at their own homesteads after a return from the *kayas*. This system was retained into the colonial era, although the authority of the *kaya* council became decreasingly significant.68

The first councils of *kambi* organizations established by the colonial government were made up of these village elders under the leadership of an appointed headman.69 While some affairs were still referred to the elders of the *kaya*, government authority gradually replaced their influence.70 Still, throughout the colonial era, there were many different forms of mediating disputes only some of which were visible to the colonial administration. According to Parkin, different elders were crucial to the perpetuation of the “language of custom.” Homestead elders exercised their authority through civic participation in several mediums: government councils, local moots, and later through the Mijikenda Union. Forms of ritual expertise provided the ultimate validation of their legitimacy and status.71 Informal councils and oracles regularly heard and influenced

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69 Ibid., 137.
dispute settlements, often enforcing decisions through “fear of supernatural reprisal.” By the 1950s and 1960s, those who maintained the esoteric knowledge and ritual practices of the old kambi elders came to be known as kaya elders. Consequently, during this time kaya elders were supported by an alternative group of elders from the Mijikenda Union who relied on the traditional authority of the kaya elders to legitimize their political activities. Still, these distinctions are entangled and the specific ritual and legal role of different types of elders is often difficult to discern.

Parkin defined the kaya elders through their participation in the ritual knowledge of the kaya. He stated that they are individuals who are part of “a socially aging process of political responsibility, rather than a clearly bounded group of people.” Writing on the history of the early colonial era, Willis differentiated the elders’ participation in kaya ritual from the older political institutions, emphasizing the importance of contextualizing their role within disputes over community and power more so than that within an historical institution. Nonetheless, even in the twentieth-century, both the ritual knowledge of the elders and the institutional role of the kambi became at times entwined in colonial discourse, especially in instances where colonial administration tried to revive the kambi in its original context for administrative purposes. This vagueness makes it difficult to reconstruct even more recent historical roles of the kaya elder in Mijikenda society. The ambiguity of the elder’s social place has acted as an enabler for individuals.

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75 Parkin, Sacred Void, 34.
76 Willis, Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda, 38-40.
to use claims to ritual legitimacy to assert themselves within the political power structures of government.\textsuperscript{77}

\textbf{The Larger Setting}

The interactions between the Mijikenda and the British colonial administration can be placed in a larger Kenyan social and political context. The formation of the Young Kikuyu Association in 1921 and later Kikuyu Central Association in 1924 were watersheds for ethnic based political organizations in Kenya. When the Mijikenda Union was formed in 1945 it was a continuation of a longer history political welfare groups, constructed to organize and provide for the well-being of their leaders, political patrons, and larger community. Administrative anxieties coincided with indigenous political organization in colonial Kenya. The Young Kikuyu Association was quickly banned for violence and the Kikuyu Central Association was banned 1940 amidst growing anxiety about African organization and the influences of “the ‘semi-educated’ and ‘detribalized native’” on the peasant masses.\textsuperscript{78} In 1944, the Kenya African Union was founded, led by Jomo Kenyatta. The proto-nationalist group called for a reshaping of the colony’s infrastructure, demanding a restructuring of the power dynamics between the white settler population and Africans in political, social, and economic spheres.\textsuperscript{79}

Of course, the most recognizable political movement of late-colonial Kenya is the so called “Mau Mau” uprising. A group referring to themselves as the Land and Freedom

\textsuperscript{78} Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya & Africa (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), 240.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 242-247.
Army organized guerilla-styled attacks against white settlers. The British responded by placing thousands of Kikuyu individuals in concentration camps. While the fighters were grossly caricatured by the British as degenerates, in reality the movement was part of a broader resistance in the central highlands to colonial-appointed chiefs, the right to earn adulthood through frontier lands, and for many women the desire to end forced labor on colonial terracing schemes. Kikuyu individuals took oaths, binding themselves to the movement. Consequently, the developments in central Kenya conditioned British anxieties to political mobilization and collective gatherings. This larger context is important for understand political developments of Kenya in the 1950s.

**Points of Departure**

The first two chapters of this thesis primarily concern the use of Mijikenda traditions in colonial discourses while the third chapter explores the environmentalist impulse in colonial and more recent developments. This content will be conceptually linked through the *kayas* and conclude in exploring Mijikenda environmentalisms, suggesting how they can add to the growing body of conservationist literature on the *kayas*. While other studies have focused on the *kayas* only as homesteads or environmentally and culturally rich sacred relics, their significance to historical memory has deeper roots with greater continuity, diversity, and discursivity. Colonial encounters sometime disrupted the place and memory of the *kayas*, however new “actions, beliefs, and symbols” were created, contested, and reinforced in the dynamic fluctuations in

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While outside forces sometimes caused these initial alterations, the transformations were given impetus by local agents and action. In interrogating the intersection between traditions and the physical and symbolic role of the kayas in Mijikenda history, this thesis will highlight how Mijikenda creatively responded to colonialism, while also illuminating the role of indigenous historical practice in continually shaping what are commonly seen as unoccupied, relic landscapes.

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CHAPTER 1: DIGO ISLAM AND THE NEGOTIATION OF RELIGION AND AUTHORITY

The Digo—the southernmost Mijikenda group—were the first of the hinterlands peoples to convert to Islam. The Digo are still the only Mijikenda group, the majority whom are Muslims. This chapter will explore their integration of Islamic and indigenous Digo institutions in discursive interplay with colonial power. Focusing on the duality of the Digo religion, customs, and social life, which allowed them to at times be indexed as Muslim or “Native” within colonial administrative policy, this chapter examines the implications and use of the local religious landscape in discussions on land, inheritance, and authority in Digo society and colonial coastal Kenya. I argue that initially, the physical-symbolic image of the kayas reinforced the ambiguity of Digo identity within colonial policy. Digo elders were able to capitalize on this during the gazettment of the Digo Native Reserve. However, the social climate in Digo communities changed dramatically over the first half of the twentieth-century due to the concurrent breakdown of the authority of the elders and transformations in Digo Islam.

Representing Digo Religion

To the British, “traditional” Digo institutions and practices, which included customary authorities, communal landholding, and metaphysical and cultural beliefs centered on the kayas, appeared outwardly disparate from their coexistence with Islamic practices and enculturation into the broader Swahili coastal world. The influence of Islam on the hinterland groups was especially problematic for the British. In British and German East Africa, the colonial governments initially enlisted the help of coastal
Muslims to assist in expansion into the interior. In German territories especially, this was carried out by Muslim soldiers who were then stationed at administrative centers in the interior. However, outside of these interior centers, Islam was greatly restricted and carried little influence.\textsuperscript{82}

Although there was never an official policy toward Islam in the early colonial period, in the East Africa Protectorate, the British saw the growing influence of Islam as a barrier to establishing control over lands beyond the coast. Fearing Muslim influence up-county, colonial policies attempted to divide interactions between the coast and the hinterlands and beyond. While administrative policy required that government administrators maintain a policy of strict neutrality toward Islam, they were also instructed to restrict Arab influence among the population of their district. One memo from the Provincial Commissioner issued in 1913 requested that officials:

\begin{quote}
carefully explain to all your Arab staff that any attempt on their part to influence the tribes near the coast be they Digo, Duruma, Kamba etc. to embrace Mahomedanism or to relinquish their land laws and legitimate customs for the sheria will be reported to the Government.\textsuperscript{83}
\end{quote}

In order to maintain a “conceptual division” between the Mijikenda—at the time referred to by the pejorative term “Nyika,” meaning bush or wilderness— and Swahili, local Native Councils were created which placed approved elders in positions of power.\textsuperscript{84} By creating local administrative centers in the early twentieth-century, the British began to establish control over the Mijikenda. This fully manifested in the creation of Native


\textsuperscript{83} Provincial Commissioner, March 12, 1913, PRB/110/KFI/11.

\textsuperscript{84} Willis, \textit{The Swahili, Mombasa, and the Making of the Mijikenda}, 127-134.
Tribunal Courts, which acted as administrative liaisons with the British, interpreting “customary law” for British policy makers.\(^8^5\) Coinciding with the development of an administrative structure to benefit British indirect rule, ethnic groups across Kenya—including the Mijikenda—had their lands gazetted as Native Reserves, where customary law would be able to continue. These policies reflected British conceptions of coastal ethnicity, and at the time mirrored Swahili attempts historically to restrict access to a Swahili identity in urban coastal centers. However, as Jonathon Glassman and others have exhibited, coastal ethnic identities were often “fluid and situational” and local populations creatively navigated attempts to enforce theoretical divides between peoples, religious groups, and labor in East Africa.\(^8^6\)

In this environment, both the Digo and colonial officials dialogically interpreted and inscribed Islamic and Digo traditions. These alternate representations are embedded in the colonial ethnographies. While Edward Said characterized the role of ethnographers in the colonial project as producers of rigid binaries, the portraits of Digo cultural forms expounded by colonial ethnographers were rife with ambiguous language and conclusions.\(^8^7\) Eager to moderate coastal influences in the hinterlands, they did assume a particularly narrow definition of “true” Islam by downplaying Digo religious practices. Former Provincial Commissioner C.F. Dundas captured these sentiments, describing Islam as a “doctrine superimposed on the tribal beliefs and customs which still

\(^{8^5}\) Ciekawy, “Mijikenda Perspectives on Freedom, Culture and Human ‘Rights,’” 17.


remained in practice,” pointing out that in Mtongwe, which he regarded as the “most thoroughly Mohamedan community” sacrifices were regularly offered in kaya ceremonies.88

The first Digo Muslims were those who had left their own societies to live among the coastal Swahili, while the Islamization of the rural Digo began to take place in the third quarter of the nineteenth-century.89 Until this point, the Digo had largely participated in coastal trade indirectly; however from the mid-nineteenth-century onwards, coastal traders looking to increase their profits began heading to the source of the goods, rather than relying on informal networks. Very quickly, relationships which were initially dependent on these networks became more personal. When Digo Muslim traders who had been living in Mombasa began to return to live at their homes in the hinterlands, the process of rural conversion began.90 However, the conversion of elders was even more significant to the dissemination of Islam locally. Other than traders, the elders were the first to convert to Islam because they had the most regular dealings with Muslims and Mombasa. The conversion of these elders was crucial because, more so than the traders, they returned to their villages and brought the religion back to their people. At the same time, the elders still retained the local institutions from which their authority was derived and seldom made attempts to convert their own populations to Islam.91 In 1865, one Digo senior elder from Kaya Kiteje had converted to Islam and

retained his position as a kaya elder. By the 1870s Digo in Mtongwe began to adopt Islam, the first converts largely consisting of village elders. Sperling explained, “Adballah Mwapodzo, the mwanatsi (senior elder) of Diani (south of Mombasa), is said to have been the first Muslim Digo in the area, and to have been instrumental in bringing other Digo elders into Islam.” Sperling suggested that by 1875 half of Mtongwe’s Digo population, centered on the two kayas—Kiteje and Mihongani—had converted to Islam. By the end of the nineteenth-century three mosques had been built in Digo lands immediately south of Mombasa and by 1911 mosques had been built in more than twenty Digo villages.

During this period of rapid social change, Mijikenda elders incorporated traders and wealthy men into their ranks so that they could preserve their legitimacy amidst shifting nodes of power. Because of this marriage between religion and commerce on the coast and the short timeframe between the conversion of Digo elders and the beginning of British colonization, Digo Islam was represented by colonial administrators as a superficial expression of coastal loyalties used to accrue benefits in the close interactions between the Swahili and the Digo. Rudimentary adherence to Islam meant taking on a Swahili name, wearing Muslim clothing, and occasional prayer in the mosque. As missionary Charles New expressed on his travels among the Mijikenda in the 1860s, “A few Wadigo and Waduruma have partially adopted the Kisuahili dress, and

92 Ibid., 71.
95 Sperling, “The Coastal Hinterlands and Interior of East Africa,” 283.
proudly call themselves Islam [Muslims].”98 This frustrated administrators because it enabled Digo Muslims to move from a Muslim identity to a Digo one, one stating “if the government did not approve that he was ‘Islamu kwa ngu’ and could always exchange his kanzu for a blanket.”99 Digo Islam was most fully developed in regions nearest to the coast, especially where coastal Arabs had built mosques in efforts to attract converts. Moving inland toward the Shimba Hills however, Digo institutions were less directly influenced by the broader Indian Ocean World. Here, according to Dundas “Nyika custom” was retained to the fullest extent, and he recommended that future administrators treat the superficial Islam in the Shimba Hills as a tertiary religious practice added to a local religion.100

The physical existence of the kayas added a perplexing element to colonial visual embodiments of Digo religious identities. Treating the kayas as ethnographic curiosities, colonial ethnographers represented the kayas forests as ancestral graves, important ritual centers, supernatural sites, and historical relics. Ambiguity surrounding the role the kaya played in the social organization of the Digo, as well as religious ritual and historical memory, added to anxieties colonial officials had on Islamic influence among the Digo. The actual physical site of the kaya served powerful symbolic functions in both Digo beliefs and their translation by colonial administrators. Among East African missionaries, what Derek Peterson framed as comparative religion was a strategy used to

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99 District Commissioner Mombasa to Provincial Commissioner, 1 July 1915, MP/54. This translates as “Islam by clothing” or contextually a Muslim by virtue of his clothing, while a kanzu refers to the long white gown typically worn by Swahili men.
compare the religious practices they came into contact with during colonization to doctrinal systems. Defining religious practice “as a contract agreed upon by an otherworldly God and the individual believer,” comparative religion was used “as a strategy of intellectual and political control” which was used to dismiss or manipulate indigenous beliefs, rituals and healing practices.101 Although there was a minimal missionary presence among the Digo and therefore no impetus to insert local religious practices into a teleological progression toward Christianity,102 colonial administrators drew on comparisons between Digo indigenous beliefs, Islam, and Christianity to dismiss a strong Muslim presence in Digo lands. Half a century earlier while writing mostly on the northern Mijikenda groups, the missionary J.L Krapf had expressed a similar view of the physical site of the kaya which he wrote:

binds them to the capital, the centre of their union which they deem necessary lest they lose all patriotic feeling by their being scattered abroad on their lonely plantations. All their festivities...all their consultations, everything is transacted in the kaya where the koma are...There is the heaven of the Wanika, at which their mind grasps.103

To Krapf, the social binding to the physical site of the kaya prevented widespread practice of any religious practices outside of beliefs in ancestral spirits. This material relationship inhibited religious comparisons and limited an influx of new beliefs.

Digo religious epistemology was derived from two metaphysical spheres: monotheism and ancestor worship. In mizimu or “places of spirits”—designated ritual areas within the kaya which were typically inside of caves or under large trees—the Digo would offer sacrifices to their ancestors. In their attempt to translate Digo culture,

102 Ibid., 49.
colonial officials constructed Digo religious beliefs in contradiction to their professed belief in a monotheistic higher power, *Mulungu* (*Mungu* in Kiswahili), who refers to the God of the Abrahamic tradition. Administrators alleged that Digo metaphysical knowledge was less developed than Muslim or Christian knowledge, since they relied on their “natural instincts” by going to *mizimu* for religious practice. This led colonial interpreters of local beliefs to suggest that despite claiming adherence to *Mungu*, the Digo considered their ancestral spirits to be equally important to religious ritual. Beliefs in the healing power of the *kaya* were a core component of Digo society which even the most devout Muslim Digo would turn to openly during troubled times such as famines, droughts, and illness. According to colonial officials, the vitality of what they dismissed as local superstitions and witchcraft illustrated the limits of Islamic influence among the Digo.

While the colonial narrative on Digo ritual practices indexed the Digo metaphysical worldview under the rubric of paganism and a limiting factor in Islamic practices in social life, anthropological work on divination ritual in more contemporary lives of both the Mijikenda and Swahili emphasizes the importance of Islam in local ritual and healing. Mijikenda traditional healers would commonly convert to Islam due to the belief among practitioners of indigenous medicine “that one’s level of

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effectiveness is enhanced by how much one appears to be well versed in Islamic/Koranic metaphysics."109 Islam in Mijikenda communities is commonly situationally invoked and deliberately navigated.110 For the Digo and other Mijikenda groups Islam was not only a religious faith, but a feature of daily life and ritual practices. Associations between the Digo and the Swahili for trade and patronage highlight their integration and involvement in the development of powerful port cities such as Mombasa. In an effort to limit the geographic mobility of Islam, British officials pointed toward indigenous Digo institutions to justify their beliefs that Islamic influence was superficial to Digo society. According to Dundas, the kayas and their surrounding forests were “permanent and visible memorials” to Mijikenda traditions, which were central to the continued vitality of Digo cultural beliefs despite growing Islamic influence. He stated:

So long as the Kayas stand untouched and sacred to the tribe it is difficult to see how the Mohamedan faith can have a strong hold on these Wadigo…the care for which they give to their ancestral graves must preserve in their minds the remembrance of former traditions and obstruct the spread of new religions.111

While outsiders easily dismissed what they saw as superficial syncretism, these explanations could not account for or capture the “deeply transformative ways in which the colonized reconfigured their notions about the spiritual and material characteristics of their human and physical environment."112 While the traditional kaya practices had been fading from Digo memory for decades due to the shifting social terrain, their persistence in social life and as physical markers limited colonial abilities to codify Digo beliefs.

112 Green, Sacred Sites in the Colonial Encounter, 6-7.
The inability of the British to account properly for the duality of Digo custom—which could be both “traditional” and Islamic—opened gaps in colonial power, from which the Digo were ready to benefit.

**Inheritance, Land, and Islamic vs. Customary Law**

In British East Africa, identities were primarily mobilized for administrative purposes, which emphasized a physical and conceptual division between “Mohamedan” Arabs and “Nyika” Digo.\(^{113}\) While the administration adopted an official policy of neutrality toward Islam in the Coastal Province, they placed importance on preventing the spread of Islam into the hinterland regions. In a 1913 memo from C.W. Hobley, then Provincial Commissioner to the District Commissioner in Shimoni he explained “[i]t must be realized that it is not in our interest or the interest of the people that the Mohamedan faith and the sheria should spread among the aboriginal tribes.”\(^{114}\) Although, Muslims, the Digo could not fit under both classifications because “mistaking” the Digo as Muslims would create unnecessary divisions which countered the colonial ambition to fortify identities into distinct ethnic, religious, and geographic spaces. However, because of the contradictory distinctions between “Muslims” and “Natives” the Digo were able to employ contextually both identities.\(^{115}\) This enabled the Digo to translate their unique ethno-religious location—which included elements of Islam and the symbolic authority of the *kaya*—into negotiating power, especially concerning inheritance and land disputes.

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\(^{113}\) Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili and the Making of the Mijikenda*.


The initial colonial scheme for indirect rule among the Digo through a system of appointed village headmen under the Ordinance of 1902 and later under the Ordinance of 1911 were unsuccessful. This was largely because of difficulties in distinguishing between the powers of the appointed courts and those same powers which had been exercised by the *kambi*.\textsuperscript{116} As a result, one year later, the Council of Elders was given official recognition to serve as an authority and a medium between local affairs and government.\textsuperscript{117} While British officials expected to be able to appropriate a robust traditional system of authority to benefit their administration, they instead found changing social infrastructure deeply affected by burgeoning Digo Islam. Their administrative desire to promote local powers over Islamic authorities is evidenced in the Provincial Commissioner’s dismay that in the Vanga District, Islamic officials—the Liwali, Mudir, and Kadhi—were the only leaders who were able to exercise any power over their followings outside of Mzee Shehe bin Machelozi, the senior Digo elder or *Kubo*.\textsuperscript{118} Initially some Muslim elders objected to serving on the councils and submitting to Digo law, however in the 1913-1914 report for the Mombasa sub-district in the Coast Province, the District Commissioner stated that “Mohammedans and pagans are now working amicably together on the Councils,” which he credited to the “small alien element” of “the Wadigo country.”\textsuperscript{119} His remarks highlight the blurring of Digo Islam and ethnic identity which was assumed by the British but also mobilized by the Digo elders at this time. While Muslim elders initially objected to promoting customary law

\textsuperscript{116} District Quarterly Report Mombasa ending 31 Dec 1911, AR/1/37/2382.
\textsuperscript{117} Seyidie Provincial Report 1912-1913, AR/64/260/2401.
\textsuperscript{118} Vanga District Annual Report for the year ending 31 March 1913, AR/8/157/2417.
\textsuperscript{119} Mombasa District Annual Report 1913-14, AR/8/157/2420; The Coast Province was at the time known as Seyidie Province.
by serving on the councils, it was quickly recognized that Digo Muslims could use what the colonial officials considered to be a dual identity as negotiating power. This was established by mobilizing their traditional authority on the councils, but also moving between two systems of law in their own lives.

Prior to British moves to consolidate Digo populations and customs through the creation of the Digo Reserve and Local Native Council, the coastal administration had encouraged a system of local rule based on wealth and power, creating friction among clan heads and at times undermining the authority of the *kambi*. Challenges to this authority fully manifested in the disputes issued regarding customary land tenure and inheritance on Digo lands. In these challenges, which occurred internally and against the colonial government, the dynamic facility of Digo customs were invoked, highlighting the fluidity of Digo space. Land among the Digo was communally held, and their beliefs regarding land tenure was that land belonged to God while the grass belonged to the land’s occupier because to occupy land one must clear the trees on the land. As a result of the occupiers’ labor, grass grew, and thus coconut and mango trees stood as marks of occupancy. While trees and tree products could be sold, the land in all cases remained communal and the transfer of unoccupied lands could only occur with the previous occupier’s permission. Forests and grazing lands were considered common lands for use by surrounding villages. Although lands were frequently mortgaged, especially in the case that resources were needed for marriage payments, no one could claim lands based

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120 Seyidie Annual Report 1913-14, AR//8/157/2419.
on the assertion that either they or their ancestors once cultivated it. Still, notions of landholding were highly dependent on group relationships. Unlike other Mijikenda groups except the Duruma, Digo land is inherited matrilineally, through the mother’s line or fuko which is regarded as capable of being traced back to the beginning of the lineage. In contrast, the father’s lineage or mbari can only be traced back to a grandfather or great grandfather’s lineage or landholdings. The shifting terrain of these two notions of land ownership and lineage would play a critical role in the allocation of Digo lands from 1914 onward.

Initial policies toward Digo land tenure following the establishment of the Protectorate in 1895 supported communal holdings for coastal groups, except for the Swahili and Arabs. For legislative purposes, customary tenure was translated as being owned by communal bodies which were administered by the elders. Under the supervision of the District Officer, lands became the property of the village, incapable of transfer. Later, the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1902—which served as an antecedent to the native reserves—limited the coastal peoples’ abilities to acquire land by preventing them from securing land tenure outside of native lands. A protective mechanism against land sales between coastal groups, these measures physically and economically enforced the conceptual divide between the coast and hinterlands. However, due to the

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124 Ibid., 116.
125 Judicial Officer to Ag. Commissioner and Consul General East African Protectorate, 21 August 1899, MP/338.
126 Ibid.
127 Ng’weno, “Inheriting Disputes,” 65.
varied origins of those inhabiting coastal plantations, the hinterlands, and Mombasa landholdings and land laws were far more complex and flexible than colonial administrators supposed. After the abolition of slavery in the Protectorate in 1907, land tenure in the Kwale district, especially around the Digo Reserve, was uncertain. In a 1913 report on land tenure among the Digo, the District Commissioner of the Vanga District noted that many Digo had converted to Islam, although their customary tenure patterns were adhered to in regards to land. This served to complicate colonial notions of Islam and Digo customs which he wrote were “directly opposed to the tenants of Islamism.” With increased conversion, Digo matrilineal inheritance patterns came under external and internal pressures, impelling the Kadhi to an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the senior Digo elder—who was a Muslim, to relinquish Digo laws in favor of those dictating the coast.

The earliest reports on changing inheritance patterns among the Digo did not deal with the question of Islamic versus customary law and inheritance, but rather suggested that some Digo and Duruma elders sought to align their marriage and inheritance patterns with those of the other Mijikenda groups. Prior to the emergence of inheritance questions in the twentieth-century, Digo mobilizations and local and Islamic religious practices coexisted with little internal tension. Ng’weno pointed out that Digo matrilineal inheritance patterns illuminate how shifting notions of identity played into coastal land

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130 “Memorandum on Subject of Land Tenure and Customs of the Wadigo,” 5 March 1913, MP/338.

131 Assistant District Commissioner to Provincial Commissioner Mombasa, 5 March 1913, MP/338.

132 Quarterly Report on Rabai Sub-District for the Quarter ending 31 December 1911, AR/64/260/2406.
dynamics. Digo mobilizations of local and Islamic ceremonies were part of internal and external power disputes where Digo rituals could be practiced from the home and Islam could be practiced within the larger Muslim community.\(^{133}\) However, internal tension over Islamic practice began to mount when some Digo Muslims began to push for Islamic inheritance laws. This tension is most visible in the concession of land for the Digo Reserve in 1914, during which Digo Muslims shifted their claims to lands South of Mombasa from Islamic law to “native” law. In November 1914, individuals desiring to claim land south of Mombasa were allowed to apply for title deeds. Sperling explained that this was an “an administrative mistake, because the demarcation of the communal Digo Reserves had not been completed.”\(^{134}\) As a result, over seven hundred applications for land were made by Digo Muslims, primarily prominent Digo leaders.\(^{135}\) This situation created difficulties for colonial officials. Due to the development of contrasting notions of land ownership between Digo groups, many non-Muslim Digo outside of the reserve did not apply for land titles. At the same time, Digo Muslims living inside and outside of the land gazetted as the Digo Reserve had applied for titles.\(^{136}\)

In response to pressure from the colonial administration, the Digo elders agreed to withdraw their land claims with the stipulation that their lands would be demarcated inside the Digo Reserve, thus defining its boundaries based on ethnicity rather than religion.\(^{137}\) Placing themselves under the authority of the Local Native Councils rather than Muslim leaders in Mombasa, the elders negotiated an increase of land for the native

\(^{133}\) Ng’weno, “Inheriting Disputes,” 66.
\(^{134}\) Sperling, “The growth of Islam among the Mijikenda of the Kenya coast, 1826-1930,” 133.
\(^{135}\) Sperling, “The growth of Islam among the Mijikenda of the Kenya coast, 1826-1930,” 133.
\(^{136}\) Ibid., 132.
\(^{137}\) Ng’weno, “Inheriting Disputes,” 65-66.
reserve, and preserved their role as unofficial advisors to exercise their inherent power over the appointed headmen. 138 Common lands would be included within the reserve to provide pasture land and land for planting cash crops, and within the Digo Reserve “they would be safeguarded from alienating any land to Europeans, Arabs, Indians, Swahilis and others” who were not members of the Digo community. 139 Strategically using their Digo-Muslim identity, the individuals who had applied for land registration not only protected their lands against future encroachments, but secured larger land holdings for themselves and their community. At the same time, the decision shows the importance of Digo customary institutions in maintaining authority since Digo applying for titled deeds risked losing “native” status. Instead they would be classified as “detribalized” Swahili. 140 Thus, the negotiation of the Digo Reserve conferred physical benefits to the Digo as a whole, but also helped to maintain the elders’ native status through which their authority was derived.

Colonial willingness to accommodate the Digo elders grew out of larger coastal developments which had unfolded in the preceding years. Attempts to restrict Giriama squatting on lands north of Mombasa to ensure an ample supply of laborers had already backfired against the British in the Giriama Rising of 1913-1914. Here, the Giriama had resisted British demands for taxes, labor, and attempts to control local administrative bodies. The British responded by burning and destroying Kaya Fungo, the main Giriama kaya. 141 The Giriama response to the destruction of their site of traditional power

138 “Notes on Organization and Administration of the Digo District,” DC/KWL/5/2.
140 Sperling, “The growth of Islam among the Mijikenda of the Kenya coast, 1826-1930,” 120.
conditioned the British to more carefully support customary authority thenceforth. At the same time, the rebellion also solidified British need to strictly demarcate lands for administrative purposes to contain the coast and control labor for European plantations, which was accomplished by negotiating with the Digo elders. Still, the newer strategy of cautious support toward the Digo elders would resurface within a few months.

In 1915, the same year the Digo Reserve was established, Dundas circulated a survey of several Digo clan elders to determine whether Islamic or customary inheritance would be put into place in the Digo Reserve. The elders resolved that “[i]n all matters of law we wish to follow our own customs and not Mohamedan law.” Dundas and the Provincial Commissioner Hobley suggested that the retention of customary law would aid the administration of the Digo and recommended that “for the future it should be recognized that Mohamedan law does not obtain among the Wadigo.” The decision of the elders is significant on two levels. First, Islamic power structures challenged the authority of the elders, despite “providing an alternative to colonial ones.” Secondly however, it also put the elders and Digo society as a whole in position to strategically exploit colonial officials’ narrow conceptions of Digo customs. Dundas recognized that the decision of the elders, contrary to binding the Digo to one system of inheritance law, still enabled Muslim individuals to petition their cases before the elders, but also to go to Mombasa “when it suits their purposes…and obtain a decision according to Mohamedan

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142 Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters*, 221-222.
143 District Commissioner to Provincial Commissioner, Mombasa, July 1 1915, MP/54.
144 District Commissioner to Provincial Commissioner, Mombasa, July 1 1915, MP/54.
145 Ng’weno, “Inheriting Disputes,” 70.
Employing both identities not only enabled the Digo elders to capitalize on colonial misconceptions, but assisted to reinforce Digo unity at a time when divisive currents were taking form. In relation to broader administrative currents, including land disputes and labor issues among other Mijikenda groups, Provincial and District Commissioners were, according to Willis, reluctant at this time “to push the Nyika too hard” fearing further resistance and seeking to place a lid on coastal and hinterland interactions. Cooper added that the colonial administration’s diffidence toward Mijikenda in land disputes enabled coastal squatters to remain unmolested on Crown lands into the 1920s. Similar fears prevailed in administrative decisions regarding the Digo Reserve.

**New Inheritance, New Islam**

In the aftermath of these negotiations, the Digo were considered one of the better-behaved and more progressive groups in the Coast Province. These actions were drawn out in comparison to those of the Swahili and Arab groups residing on the coast. One official wrote of the Digo, “the further they are removed from Swahili influence the more industrious they appear to be; close contact with the coast residents is more prejudicial and they quickly appear to adopt the slothful inertia of the Mohamedan.” In contrast to coastal Muslims who were alleged to have few interests beyond “loafing and ngomas,” the Digo “have a fair idea of the authority of the elders and the latter appear to realize their responsibilities as Government agents and their legal decisions so far have given

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146 District Commissioner to Provincial Commissioner, Mombasa, 1 July 1915, MP/54.
149 Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters*, 224-225.
satisfaction.” To enforce this social divide between the Digo and other coastal groups, it was proposed that outside of the native markets, entry into the Digo Reserve should be restricted to ensure that the influence of the Swahili, Arabs, and Wassin did not infringe upon the successful Digo reserve scheme. Officials pointed toward the relative homogeneity of the Digo Councils as an indicator of its success, compared to the councils established closer to the coast whose “residents include Asiatics, Arabs, Wa-Nyika, and representatives of many other tribes” thus making it “difficult to appoint a council the members of which would be recognized by all sections.” Moreover, at this same time German presence in Tanganyika, just south of the Vanga District, made it paramount that the unsteady geographies of the various ethnic groups of the region were as stable as possible due to displacements in the southern parts of the location.

While external events conditioned the British response to Digo land laws, internally the liminality of Digo laws regarding social practices of religion, inheritance, and marriage made manifest internal ruptures, creating new social spheres navigated by women and men, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. The largest social rifts grew out of mixed inheritance cases where different individuals could make inheritance claims based on Digo or Islamic custom. Internal ruptures impelled one official to comment:

So long as two laws may be applied within one and the same tribe we shall never have satisfactory conditions and that the only proper course is to adopt for one and all the law claimed by the majority. I cannot see why because a man chooses to become a Mohamedan he should be entitled to exemption from the laws of his country.

153 Mombasa District Report 1917-1918, AR/16/103/2430.
155 Charles Dundas to C.W. Hobley, 15 April 1916, MP/54.
While the administrative benefits of Digo law were emphasized in the negotiations taking place from 1914 to 1916, by the 1920s, inheritance laws were increasingly transferable from one system of law to another. In the 1927 District Report, District Commissioner Thompson stated:

It seems in fact to be very generally supposed that a change of religion is identical with a change of law but I can see no foundation for the argument, there are various Mohamedan natives who have their own laws...Nor is it reasonable to suppose that African ideas and African usage will cease by a mere change of religion.156

Digo matrilineal inheritance practices were seen by the 1920s as “obsolete” and “reactionary” by district officials.157 However, as a whole, a gradual adoption of patrilineal inheritance was preferred by the Digo and local administrators, rather than doing away with customary inheritance by the “stroke of a pen.”158 Although Muslim men outnumbered Muslim women among the Digo at this time, far from excluding Digo women from inheritance matters, conversion to Islam provided avenues to secure land rights for their children. Ng’weno explained that because marriages to non-Muslims were not recognized by Islamic law, children of these marriages were considered illegitimate, thus prohibiting the child from inheriting and allowing land to pass to the closest Muslim relative. While changing inheritance patterns affected women’s autonomy, they were able to use conversion and translate it into a new social status derived from “dress, non-agricultural labor, leisure time and economic dependency on husbands.”159

159 Ng’weno, “Inheriting Disputes,” 67-68.
Ng’weno emphasized that in these disputes, Digo individuals both reaffirmed and redefined what it meant to be Digo and to be Muslim, using the fluidity of their religious and cultural identities to resist colonial power structures. The uncertainty was institutionalized in the 1927 case of Ganyuma vs. Mohamed during which the Supreme Court of Kenya ruled that appellants could claim lands through qur’anic law and patrilineal inheritance providing that claims were initially made under Digo customary law with the assertion that a particular clan now relied on patrilineal inheritance.160 However, more than solely using inheritance as an interlocutor with colonial power, questions of Digo Islam and Digo customary laws must be read for the internal exchanges taking place between elders and youth, and men and women alike.

According to Sperling, during the inheritance disputes of the 1920s and 1930s “the Digo experienced internal disunity…such as they had not known since the beginning of colonial times.”161 Far from distancing Digo institutions from local discourse, conversion to Islam and broader integration into the lived norms of Islamic coastal social rituals inserted the narrative of Digo social rupture and continuity into the currents of Digo life. The elders’ desire to continue relying on Digo customary inheritance law was not only enacted to preserve social continuity, but to protect their own power. However, a changing religious climate granted younger generations access to new educational, religious, and economic opportunities.

The invocation of Digo institutions was also played out internally in generational disputes, which challenged and redefined Digo identity and customs in the face of

160 Ibid., 72-73.
shifting local and regional realities. According to Sperling, by 1916 more than half of the thirty-three elders at Tiwi had converted to Islam, and by 1920 five out of seventeen members of the kambi council at Diani were Muslims.\textsuperscript{162} While initially Digo elders were able to employ both traditional authority and a Muslim identity, shifting perceptions of the relationship between Islam and more local institutions by 1924 had created a “slightly restless feeling” of the youth toward Digo ritual and customs regarding land.\textsuperscript{163} These malcontents were generally played out “by young men who consider they have become so civilized as to be above control by pagan elders.”\textsuperscript{164} As the District Commissioner reported, these disputes were “the natural expression of the dissatisfaction of the youth against, to them the irksome control of age.”\textsuperscript{165} Colonial officials alleged that “[t]he feeling is chiefly confined to men who do not wish to be thought Wadigo and prefer to loitering about in fine cloths as pseudo Arabs.”\textsuperscript{166} They claimed that while many Digo were “rapidly assuming Mohamedan names and outward customs,” their actual religious practices as Muslims were “shallow to the extreme.”\textsuperscript{167} The shifting gerontocratic terrain of Digo society illustrates how the duality of Digo identities manifested internal disputes between traditional elder authorities and urbanizing youth. For the colonial administration, these generational ruptures threatened the physical, social, and cultural confinement of the Digo.

\textsuperscript{162} Sperling, “The Growth of Islam among the Mijikenda of the Kenya Coast,” 123,151.
\textsuperscript{163} Kwale Station Diary 1924, DC/KWL/5/1.
\textsuperscript{164} Kwale Station Diary 1924, DC/KWL/5/1.
\textsuperscript{165} Digo District Annual Report 1924, AR/KWL/XXVIII/2177.
\textsuperscript{166} Kwale Station Diary 1924, DC/KWL/5/1.
\textsuperscript{167} Digo District Annual Report 1924, AR/KWL/XXVIII/2177.
Headmen, Lalos, and Local Control

Amidst widening gaps in cultural and religious practices, the colonial administration maneuvered to accommodate the emerging social climate, restructuring the system of local indirect rule. Initially in 1925 the changes involved fixing a bimonthly date to assemble the three Digo Native Councils to prevent the elders and Government Headmen from solving matters under their own rules and auspices within their communities. In turn, these actions satisfied younger generations because the new system enabled them to obtain “justice under the eye of the government instead of the apparently doubtful measure doled out as such in a hole and corner manner in the bush.”\(^\text{168}\) Just one year later however, in 1926 the colonial government decentralized the local administration by recognizing lalo elders\(^\text{169}\) to closer align policies with Digo customs and more effectively micromanage the district since the lalos could maintain a closer touch with outlying villages.\(^\text{170}\) Policies oriented toward strengthening the lalos continued into the 1930s, in part due to Digo resistance to the authority of headmen, which was believed to have persisted between fragmented Digo groups since the death of the last Kubo or senior Digo elder in 1916.\(^\text{171}\) In 1934, three government headmen and sub-headmen died. Looking to use this opportunity to strengthen the lalos, the administration in Kwale District decided to abstain from appointing replacements, instead

\(^{168}\) Digo District Annual Report 1925, AR/KWL/XXIX/2178.

\(^{169}\) Lalos refer to the smaller units of Mijikenda settlement after their dispersal from their primary kayas. From these units of organization local councils or kambi emerged, which sat together with other lalo councils under the highest unit of authority which was centered in the kaya. See Brantley, “Gerontocratic Government: Age-Sets in Pre-Colonial Girama,” *Journal of the International African Institute* 3 (1978): 258-259; Parkin, *Sacred Void*, 33.

\(^{170}\) Digo District Annual Report 1926, AR/KWL/XXX/2179.

\(^{171}\) Digo District Annual Report 1932, AR/KWL/XXXVI/2185.
placing full administrative trust in the lalo elders. In the face of Digo communities which were turning toward the coast—first to settle matters of inheritance, and later increasingly as part of an emerging Islamized society—government support for the lalos is illustrative of their efforts to support and stabilize traditional institutions and authority, efforts which would prove futile in the face of the evolving social realities.

While such policies continued into the 1930s, it did not take long before problems surfaced in administering the Digo through mediums of “traditional” authority. Primarily, the existence of approximately 250 lalo elders complicated the policies of indirect rule. However, it was felt that despite the complications of this “cumbersome multiplicity of authorities,” official recognition of the lalos was the only way to build an effective native administration. In order to accomplish these ends, the authority of the remaining headmen and the local Native Councils were fully supported to provide “the organs through which the elders can make their authority felt.” The second problem was that the district could not provide the funding to pay lalo elders as government servants. While the lack of pay did not generate discontent beyond mild protest, the disorganized structure resulting from the number of elders and the dearth of monetary compensation made the lalo system inherently flawed in the eyes of some in the administration. In 1946, the District Commissioner suggested that the lalo elders were a “useless lot,” and subsequently reduced of the number of elders to 136 by 1948.

Despite government policy, the elders themselves were ambivalent toward colonial

175 Digo District Annual Report 1938, AR/KWL/XLII/2191.
demands and “many of the displaced *lalo* elders continued to exercise jurisdiction over their old territory.”\footnote{Digo District Annual Reports 1948, AR/KWL/XLIV/2202.} Finally, one year later, the *lalo* elders were abolished, the 135 remaining elders being replaced by 45 appointed sub-headmen.\footnote{Digo District Annual report 1949, AR/KWL/XLIV/2203.} While the administration’s attempts to appropriate Digo authority was ultimately unsuccessful, British support for the *lalo* system empowered the elders, allowing them to appropriate the colonial apparatus and assert their own institutional powers. Moreover, once legitimized administratively, the government had few abilities to abate the elders’ jurisdiction.

Prior to 1930, all elders on the Digo Native Tribunals were required to be present for a case to be heard by the tribunals, and consequently most cases were heard in unofficial courts in the Digo Reserve due to the relative dispersal of the population. In 1936, the tribunal system was restructured so that it sat in permanent session with rotating members, and this maneuver temporarily spurred a revival of the system. That year, 644 civil and 103 criminal cases were heard by the elders in contrast to the 47 cases heard in 1934.\footnote{Digo District Annual Report 1939, AR/KWL/XLIII/2192.} While the institutional set-up forced the elders to work within the colonial government’s parameters for hearing court cases rather than their own, they successfully manipulated the courts on several levels ensuring that their powers and not those of the colonial government dictated decisions. In a report written in 1939 the District Commissioner of Kwale complained that the corruption of the elders inhibited the functionality of the system. He continued, due “to intermarriage and polygamy at least one of the elders—among the five sitting —was, almost invariably, related in some
way to one or other of the litigants.” 180 Added to this, the elders commonly knew in
advance who would be hearing specific cases and as a result they could require a number
of presents before finally agreeing to litigate. Finally, the rotating panels and diminished
size of the courts created friction among the elders. Many of those who were excluded
felt debarred from participation in their customary right to sit on the kambi councils. 181
Again, attempts by the colonial government to employ customary authority provided
pathways for the Digo to creatively use Digo traditions to accumulate and mobilize local
power within society. Furthermore, government appropriation of Digo institutional
bodies limited their own control, as Digo elders used the legitimization of the lalo to
create their own discourse.

Urban and Rural Digo

While the architecture of the systems of local authority was foundationally set on
customary Digo institutions, Digo society was becoming more closely aligned with the
rhythms of urban coastal life. As widespread Islamic conversion commenced, Digo
Muslims began integrating more and more into the littoral society and economy. During
the 1920s, many Mijikenda made economic decisions to move closer to the coast for
employment. As Cooper explained, Mombasa fit Mijikenda work preferences, providing
ample opportunities for day labor which provided high wages and a short-term
commitment. 182 However, for the Digo especially, migration to the cities were often
more permanent. The administration saw Digo movement into the coast from the “fertile
foothills” in a shallow light, suggesting for example, that Digo migration could be

182 Cooper, From Slaves to Squatters, 245-246.
attributed primarily to “their partiality for a fish diet and for the more varied social life to be had among Mohammedan communities.” This contrasted sharply to the Duruma who only left the hinterlands during times of famine, returning once food was again more readily available. As they began to move physically and socially closer to the coast, many Digo started to favor the coconut over agriculture. According to one official this choice in cultivation differentiated them sharply from “the true Nyika type of Wadigo that practices steady agriculture.”

The acculturation of a more-Swahilized Islam in Digo communities closer to the coast is evident in their educational demands. In 1924 the majority of Digo parents refused to send children to the local Technical School at Waa despite the efforts of the District Commissioner. This was followed in the 1930s with an increase in demand for Qur’anic schools, as “Muslim parents began to feel that their children needed a deeper, more comprehensive training in Islam to counteract the secularizing Christian influence of government schools.” Soon Digo youth were receiving more formalized religious and educational training, and adapting their religious practices closer to those of more urban coastal locations. In contrast to earlier Digo Muslims, Digo converts of the twentieth-century were led by the first indigenous Digo teachers and Imams. According to Sperling “[t]hey were a different kind of Muslim from their fathers and grandfathers,” having been exposed to Islam from their birth, and thus were more devoted to strict

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183 “Minutes of the Meeting of Departmental Officers Held at Kwale, Digo District on 5th July 1939,” PC/Coast/2/3/25.
184 “Minutes of the Meeting of Departmental Officers Held at Kwale, Digo District on 5th July 1939,” PC/Coast/2/3/25.
185 Kwale District Annual Report, 1927, AR/KWL/XXXI/2180.
Islamic doctrine. These individuals were not only transforming their perceptions of Digo Muslim identity, but reacting to the broader authority which the elders represented. The most intense hostilities took “the form of objecting to all Native Tribal Authority” including requests “for village cathis [Kadhis] instead of native councils.” The District Commissioner speculated that the elders’ authority reinforced problems that the “elders have brought upon themselves.” By 1927, many Digo began to give up drinking palm wine, and shortly after, many Digo men were found wearing the ubiquitous Swahili *kanzu*, these choices stemming from a general rejection of the values and authority of pagan Digo society.

While the social climate transformed, government policies in the Kwale District continued to support the authority of the elders. The administration was hesitant toward promoting the newly educated youth claiming that “very often they lack the personality to run a location smoothly yet firmly.” From an administrative perspective this was problematic since increasingly it was believed that the elders had little to offer the administration except “on matters effecting [affecting] tribal law and custom.” However, the coastal hinterlands and the coast in general were of diminishing importance due to their remoteness from Nairobi, the influence of Islam, and the perception that the Kwale district was becoming a “backwater” making it a low priority. For

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188 Kwale District Station Diary 1924, DC/KWL/5/1.
189 Ibid.
190 According to Sperling in 1935 the District Commissioner wrote “The average poor man owns two *kanzus*, one for special occasions and one for daily use.” In Sperling, “The growth of Islam among the Mijikenda of the Kenya coast, 1826-1930,” 185.
administrative simplicity indirect rule structured through the *lalo* was the most pragmatic choice, especially since the most ambitious Digo youth were deserting their homes for the city. As the District Commissioner observed, the “progressive” Digo had “little hope of being elected to Council by the conservative stay-at-home element which rules the electorate” since they increasingly sought out work and took up residence in Mombasa.\(^{194}\)

While decades earlier, Digo elders had capitalized on their dual Digo and Muslim identities in negotiations with the colonial government, increasingly inheritance laws threatened the unity of the elders. In a 1941 meeting, several Digo elders complained about “the injustice of pagans not being allowed to inherit from Mohammedans even though they [the pagans] were wives and children, and Islam had only been embraced on the deathbed.”\(^{195}\) Over the next decade inheritance choices transformed. In 1952, the District Commissioner in Kwale noted that Islamic inheritance laws continued to become more widespread in Digo society, adding that on the whole “the Kayas are also gradually losing their significance,” which he considered the natural result of the extension of Islamic teachings.\(^{196}\) Meanwhile, the system of local authority based on Digo tradition was on its last leg. Within the *lalos*, elders were being promoted through elections held on a prearranged rotation, regardless of their participation or performance on the councils.\(^{197}\) The social climate in Digo communities changed dramatically over the first half of the twentieth-century due to the concurrent breakdown of the symbolic and institutional authority of the elders and transformations in Digo Islam.

\(^{194}\) Digo District Annual Report 1948, AR/KWL/XLIV/2202.
\(^{196}\) Kwale District Annual Report 1952, AR/KWL/XLV/2207.
\(^{197}\) Kwale District Annual Report 1955, AR/KWL/XLV/2210.
Contrary to assertions that from the middle of the nineteenth-century onwards traditional Mijikenda institutions were fading from the social life of the Mijikenda, over the first half of the twentieth-century Digo elders used customary authority to redefine and maneuver Digo traditions in opposition to colonial power and harness their own internal authority in a changing Digo society. However, at this same time, urbanized youth also redefined what David Robinson has described as “Muslim space.”\(^{198}\) In their initial merger, the Digo drew on their physical landscape to carefully navigate the discursive geography with which they were faced, capitalizing on the ambivalence of the colonial administration toward the merger of kaya traditions, matrilineal inheritance patterns, and Islam. However, from the 1920s, disputes increasingly turned inwards as generations debated the marriage of vernacular Digo institutions and a localized translation of Islam. Far from rendering Digo traditions obsolete, generational disputes highlight the role that customary Digo institutions played in larger debates on Islam and Digo identity.

**Conclusions**

Islamic practice uniquely positioned the Digo in relation to British administrative policies on the coast. The persistence of the kayas as physical and symbolic sites, initially conditioned colonial treatments of Islam. By capitalizing on the inability of the British policies to correctly account for identities, laws, and beliefs that could be situationally either Islamic or “customary” Digo, elders were able to create negotiating

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\(^{198}\) The indigenizing of a faith developed on the outside, thus “making the faith universal and local at the same time” David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 201.
space in dialogues with the colonial state and reaffirm their “traditional” generational authority. Nonetheless, broader Digo participation in urban Mombasa and shifting notions of Muslim-Digo identity among Digo youth produced social ruptures challenging the power elder generations had previously assumed through the twofold mobilization of Islam and custom. The administration responded by supporting the more conservative *lalo* homestead heads; however, the elders more often used this authority to pursue their own interests. While Digo society and Digo customs transformed dramatically over the first half of the twentieth-century, administrative impressions of Digo Islam and Digo traditions contributed heavily to the discourses and dynamics of colonialism.
CHAPTER 2: IMAGINING THE KAYAS: CUSTOMARY AUTHORITY IN MIJIKENDA AND COLONIAL DISCOURSE

This chapter begins in exploring British attempts to revive traditional authority in Mijikenda communities and how these efforts were used by Duruma and Giriama elders to create their own discourses. The second section of the chapter examines historical constructions of the kayas and kaya ceremonies from the middle of the nineteenth-century to the middle of the twentieth-century. I argue that the Giriama used administrative interests in reviving their indigenous institutions and ceremonies to increase their ritual importance and later influence political developments as Kenya moved toward independence.

Traditionalisms in Colonialism

The codification of customary law transformed the internal power dynamics of African societies during colonialism.199 During the early years of British colonialism, “customary” authorities were located, appropriated, and codified to act as government agents. Through what is often referred to as “the invention of tradition,” traditions and customary authorities were legitimized in official government discourse.200 At the same time, notions such as tradition, ethnicity, and custom acted as arenas “for debates about social morality, advancement and citizenship.”201 As a result, traditions themselves

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became as interpretive processes, shaped by the societies and actors at their center.\footnote{202} As Feierman exhibited in his seminal work *Peasant Intellectuals*, Africans used the idiom of collaboration in dialogues with the government to blur the power relationships between the colonial state, colonial agents, and peasants.\footnote{203} Local leaders capitalized on the advantages of their own cultural knowledge, using traditions to produce political discourses that were unfamiliar to and therefore incapable of being fully controlled by the colonial administration.\footnote{204} Among the Mijikenda and other groups, such strategies provided local leaders the opportunities to create space from, manipulate, or benefit from the impacts of colonial control.

**Mijikenda Kambis and the Crisis of Authority**

Early Mijikenda communities were ordered through specific age-sets, clans, and sub-clans. The members of a common *kaya* were unified through their *rikas* or age-sets. In each *rika*, men of a common age were brought together to serve specific functions to their communities. Men were initiated into thirteen sub-rikas every four years with the three highest *rikas* assuming the role of the *kambi*, which constituted the leadership of the *kaya*. The highest sub-rika acted as the foremost authority of the *kaya*.\footnote{205} According to Brantley, age-sets served several important functions for the Giriama: providing political organization, creating a generational timeline for recounting the past, and ensuring the

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\item \footnote{203}{Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*; also discussed by Allen Isaacman in “Peasants and Rural Social Protest in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 2 (1990): 31-33.}
\item \footnote{204}{Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*, 43.}
\item \footnote{205}{Spear, *The Kaya Complex*, 58-59.}
\end{itemize}
continuation of Giriama culture and customs. This provided a system for individuals to participate in and contribute to Giriama society based on age-grade. Judicially, the *kambi* acted as “instruments of appeal” in the community, using sanctions to enforce their decisions including fines, exclusion, and supernatural powers.\(^{206}\) Using age-sets, social, cultural, and political continuity were all sustained through appeal to custom and authority by gerontocracy. However, the shift to a market based coastal economy during the nineteenth-century created new avenues for maturing generations to accrue wealth and followers and the authority of the *kambi* gradually waned. Consequently, the last initiations of a new *kambi* among the Duruma and Giriama prior to British colonialism took place in the 1870s.

Detailing the lead up to the Giriama Rising\(^{207}\) Brantley characterized the authority of Giriama elders at the beginning of the twentieth-century as largely ineffective, stating that the senior elders of the *kambi* “were old, and their generation was due for retirement.”\(^{208}\) In contrast, the “new men” whose status was built on economic success in the preceding decades and junior-ranking elders were appointed as customary headmen, limiting the authority of the older generation.\(^{209}\) Thus, Giriama resistance against British control was only one component of a larger response to the breakdown of generational authority. Despite some elders calling for a revival of the *kaya’s* government structure, Spear explained that the elders were too old and powerless to adapt to the changing social

\(^{207}\) The Giriama uprising against the British which took place in 1913-1914.
\(^{209}\) Ibid., 70-74. According to Willis and Miers, these “new men” largely assumed the authority of the elders and the ceremonies of age-set initiations and rituals became forums for the performance of “individual patronage or authority rather than of group identity.” See Willis and Miers, “Becoming a Child of the House,” 488.
climate. Moreover, younger generations had not been properly initiated into the *kambi* to enable a revival of the traditional system. As a result, early efforts to return to the older system of government were a failure.\textsuperscript{210} Leading up to the Giriama rebellion against the British in 1913-14 the colonial government destroyed the Kaya Giriama in an attempt to demonstrate colonial power. In the aftermath of the rebellion, the British sought to reestablish the *kambi* system in its traditional form, which decades of social transformation and earlier administrative actions had undercut.

Similarly, the British administration arrived in Duruma locations finding a local structure of governance that was already declining. By the 1910s several decades had passed since the initiation of the last *kambi*. The surviving members were too old to govern effectively, or deceased. This created gaps in local authority, exacerbated by the large geographic breadth of the Duruma who occupied lands to the South, West, and North of Mombasa. In this setting, the administration committed to holding initiations for *kambi* in an attempt to reestablish centralized authority. According to one report by the Assistant District Commissioner of Rabai in 1913, the district officials faced a problem “that a population of nearly fifteen thousand possess no tribal authority except ten tottering old men and their twenty half-fledged colleagues.”\textsuperscript{211} The young men of the district regularly defied the existing council of elders without any the opportunity to become elders themselves.\textsuperscript{212} Therefore, they believed that a new *kambi* would offer the

\textsuperscript{210} Spear, *The Kaya Complex*, 143.
\textsuperscript{211} Assistant District Commissioner Rabai to Provincial Commissioner Mombasa July 28, 1913, PC/Coast/1/11/144.
\textsuperscript{212} Assistant District Commissioner Rabai to Provincial Commissioner Mombasa July 28, 1913, PC/Coast/1/11/144.
opportunity to put younger, more capable men into senior positions while maintaining the
traditional avenues of authority, thus “inducing more cohesion in the tribe.”

While the colonial government was motivated to codify and restrict ethnic groups in coastal Kenya during the early twentieth-century, studies by Brantley and Cooper illustrate the difficulties that failures to properly “contain” hinterland ethnic groups created for the administration both economically and politically. Thus, the British viewed the *kambi* as an administrative asset. As a result, efforts to restore the *kambis* and subsequent treatments of these administrative decisions by both the Giriama and Duruma created powerful cultural and political tools. The elders in turn wielded these tools to manipulate generational authority and create space from administrative power. While Spear suggested that the degeneration of the *kambi* is illustrative of cultural decline and an increasing dependence on capitalist markets, an examination of twentieth-century discourses on the *kambis* reveals creative indigenous responses to colonial attempts at invention.

**Reinstituting the Giriama Kambi**

The Giriama are the largest of the nine Mijikenda groups. Their main *kaya*, Kaya Fungo or Kaya Giriama is the furthest west of the Mijikenda *kayas*, located in the dry cattle zone west of Mombasa. Some oral traditions suggest that Fungo was established after the founding of two or three previous Giriama *kayas* and was elevated in significance through the leadership of Fungo, a powerful Giriama leader from the mid-

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213 “Notes on the Wa-Duruma, Kayas, Kambis, Customs,” PC/Coast/1/1/199.
214 Described in Chapter 1 and in Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda*.
nineteenth-century, thus the existence of two names for the *kaya*\textsuperscript{217}. In the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries the Giriama dispersed widely from their more western homeland into the coastal belt and north of Mombasa to Malindi.\textsuperscript{218} The Giriama are the most widely discussed group in historical and anthropological studies on the Mijikenda.

Brantley provided the most thorough social and political history of the Giriama in the early years of the British administration, building upon the notion that Giriama resistance manifested out of the “British inability to understand noncentralized African systems of government.”\textsuperscript{219} Ambiguity surrounding the complexity of local politics and British reliance on indigenous African groups for labor within their East African Protectorate often placed Africans in a powerful negotiating position vis-à-vis colonial power. For the Giriama, the collapse of the coastal plantation economy after the abolition of slavery in 1907 granted them additional maneuverability within the Coast Province. Their primary strategy—squatt ing on plantation lands—enabled broader participation within the coastal economy, especially in the trade of *tembo* or palm wine. In 1908, the British administration established an artificial boundary called the Baratum Line, conceptually separating “Afro-Arabs” from the Giriama in an attempt to halt coastal squatting.\textsuperscript{220} At the same time, the British needed to recruit workers—often former slaves and up-country East Africans—to supply the demand for laborers to work on newly acquired crown lands.

\textsuperscript{217} Willis, “The Northern Kayas of the Mijikenda,” 86.
\textsuperscript{218} Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters* and Parkin, *Sacred Void*.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 60-65.
Cooper characterized Mombasa as the “crucial link” for moving and distributing labor from up-country and the coast into the coastal economy. Thus, the British administration set out to foster if not force a steady supply of labor on government lands and in Mombasa. As the closest inhabitants to this system of demand, the Mijikenda quickly became seen as the most important labor force to the success of the emerging colonial infrastructure. By drawing a legal distinction between landowning coastal Arabs and Swahili and the landless Mijikenda, the administration attempted to resolve the labor issues by enabling the possibility to expel squatters from the land or commission them as wage laborers. However, these efforts were unsuccessful and colonial attempts to exert control over Giriama labor and mobility ended in rebellion. In the aftermath of the Giriama Rising, a new administrative strategy was deemed necessary to provide continuity within the coast. In this setting, the colonial government turned to reconstructing the Giriama’s traditional structure of government as a way to stabilize the coastal lands north of Mombasa.

Leading up to the Giriama Rising, administrative interests in Giriama regions were centered on fostering a strong governmental structure and restricting encroachment onto Crown Land. Giriama governmental headmen were appointed under the Headmen’s Ordinance of 1902, and while some forms of traditional authority persisted in the community, the gradual weakening of the *kambi* system required new branches of local authority. While the new forms of authority were different than previous traditional systems, due to the nascent governmental system, the influences of remaining *kambi*

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221 Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters*, 235-240.  
elders were often indistinguishable from those of newer “Native Authority.”

Moreover, the administration had a difficult time containing the newly appointed chiefs, many of whom were “inclined to be extortionate” due to their recently acquired community power. Fearing that damage to “the prestige of the Chiefs” in the public eye would undermine the “influence and efficiency of the Chiefs as instruments of Government” indirect rule was instituted delicately.

Giriama society and the administration faced several obstacles in accommodating the initiation of a new *kambi*. Although the powers of the two bodies differed, some of the appointed government headmen were also what would be considered traditional elders. As a result, the younger generations were assuming their powers from an older generation, some of whom acted as native headmen. In order to alleviate any tension that would occur as a result of this change-over, the administration proposed changing the system by which the headmen were appointed to popular vote so as not to interfere with the passage of authority according to Giriama custom. The government’s judgments on local authority were largely based on concurrent, albeit contradictory, beliefs in the *kambi*’s weakness as a local institution and its historical relevance. According to Assistant District Commissioner Arthur Champion, the *kambi* provided a “genuine tradition” that could provide continuity between the Giriama past and the future of the administration.

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223 Seyidie Province District Quarterly Report Mombasa for the Quarter Ending 31 December 1911, AR/1/37/2382; Seyidie Province Annual Reports 1911-1912 AR/64/260/2401.
224 Seyidie Province Annual Reports, Reports ending 31 December 1912, AR/64/260/2401.
225 Seyidie Province Annual Reports, Reports ending 31 December 1912, AR/64/260/2401.
The place of the headmen with their present and desired governmental structures was complicated by this trajectory. By administrative definition, the headman was a “spokesman of the Kambi” on behalf of all of the elders to the government.\textsuperscript{228} However, the judiciary *kambi* which existed at that time seldom stuck to administrative mandate. One official writing in 1913 claimed that “the Kambi seldom meets in large numbers, and judicial disputes are usually settled by the headmen and 3 or 4 elders.”\textsuperscript{229} This was in part due to the “fluctuating nature of the population,” and that the administration had few abilities to force their own form of order on the Giriama.\textsuperscript{230} While the administration recognized that strong local authorities could be vehicles to a more fluid local administration, the existing institutions were not appropriate for the needs of the colonial government, or salient for the Giriama. Consequently, the earliest efforts in the years preceding the Giriama Rising to revive and benefit from the indigenous governmental structure were a complete failure.\textsuperscript{231}

In British attempts at controlling the Giriama they destroyed, Kaya Fungo, the one organizational center that could be used to effectively promulgate indirect rule in the region.\textsuperscript{232} In the aftermath of the Giriama Rising, the British believed that a new *kambi* could restore administrative order in the region. Their stance was that *kambi* initiations would create a “foundation on a firm basis of the assembly of elders, a form of local government, indigenous respected and quasi responsible, providing a definite chain of

\textsuperscript{228} Annual Report for the Takaungu Sub District 1912-1913, AR/8/157/2414.
\textsuperscript{229} Annual Report for the Takaungu Sub District 1912-1913, AR/8/157/2414.
\textsuperscript{230} Annual Report for the Takaungu Sub-District 1912-1913, AR/2414/8/157; Malindi District Annual Report 1913-1914, AR/11/47/2421; For further discussion see Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters*, 220.
\textsuperscript{231} District Commissioner Giriama to Provincial Commissioner Mombasa, 9 July 1913, MP/296.
responsibility from the Administration to the lowest native.\textsuperscript{233} They hoped that legitimizing the elders through local custom would enable them to better enforce the headmen’s orders and foster better relations between older and younger community members.\textsuperscript{234} However, the social landscape of the coast was not ideal for consolidating singular groups under common authority.

In the Malindi District, Giriama squatting on coastal lands formerly belonging to Arabs refused to be confined to the boundaries of the Nyika Reserve. The District Commissioner in Malindi wrote that these Giriama “recognize no tribal authority and the few old men of them have neither the wish nor the power to exercise control.”\textsuperscript{235} Moreover, native authority among religiously mixed populations—especially regarding court decisions—was limited by the distinctions between customary Giriama law and Islamic law and beliefs that the councils could not deal with such cases impartially. Even many non-Muslim Giriama sought appeals in alternative courts among the coastal Swahili since the power of appeal to custom and the monopoly held by the \textit{kambi} on judicial decisions had largely dissolved. Complicating this administratively, Islamic authority was largely impenetrable by colonial policy.\textsuperscript{236} Governmental authority was limited among Mijikenda groups, especially those closer to the coast. In an attempt to satisfy and differentiate Muslim Mijikenda or “Mahaji,” the administration created a

\textsuperscript{233} Seyidie Annual Report 1913-1914, AR/11/47/2418.
\textsuperscript{234} Kilifi District Annual Report 1924, AR/KFI/2/2231.
\textsuperscript{235} Malindi District Report 1915-1916, AR/2424/22/177; See also Kilifi District Annual Report 1920-21, AR/KFI/1/2225.
\textsuperscript{236} Malindi District Annual Report 1919-1920, AR/MAL/1/2283.
Mahaji Reserve; however, few converts wished to leave the coastal strip, and the government had little capacity to force them to do otherwise.237

Even among those Giriama who were regarded as being more “tribalized,” the British were unsuccessful at instituting a system of salient local authority. They believed that hostility toward the government in the aftermath of the rebellion was the primary culprit. The District Commissioner noted the authority of the *kambi* was “being supported in every possible way, but progress is very slow owing to the overwhelming apathy of the Elders themselves.”238 The Giriama used subtle techniques to prolong colonial attempts at appropriation. As one administrator stated “they promise everything and perform as little as they dare,” pointing out that Giriama elders had learned that any government action entailed a lengthy legal process and that persistent delays would eventually lead the government to abandon their policies or proceedings.239 Additionally, poor harvests inhibited younger men from accumulating the wealth necessary to pay the initiation fees to retiring elders that were required by customary law. Since new initiations at the *kayas* involved sacrifices and feasting, the poor rains provided an additional basis for the delay of the ceremonies.240 Without monetary incentives, many elders preferred holding onto their limited authority rather than fully transferring their powers to a younger generation through the initiations.

The absence of their *kaya* for ceremonial purposes was added to the list of deliberations in 1918-1919 when Giriama elders issued an application to the

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239 Seyidie Province Annual Report 1917-1918, AR/16/103/2430.
240 Seyidie Province Annual Report 1917-1918, AR/16/103/2430.
administration to reopen Kaya Fungo to legitimize the initiation proceedings. The District Commissioner of Nyika advocated for their request since it provided “the one step necessary to re-establish complete confidence and friendliness towards Government.”

Urging that the Giriama would view the reestablishment of the kaya “as a sign of forgiveness” his endorsement came despite his recognition that elections would once again be delayed several months due to the dilapidated state of the kaya, which “would take several months to restore.” The Provincial Commissioner concurred, noting in the year-end report that “as soon as I am convinced that they really intend to carry out their elections I am prepared to recommend to Government that this concession be granted, as I realize that the tribal ceremonials can only be valid if conducted at the Kaya.”

The decision to reopen Kaya Fungo as part of the instillation of a new kambi was significant for two reasons. First, it stalled the transfer of power to a new generation, which had the dual impact of delaying colonial influences on local affairs. Second, the decision placed the Giriama kaya at the center of discourses on authority, sacred knowledge, and continuity.

Support for the revival of the kambi at the kaya had to be qualified by the administration since they considered certain practices such as the sacrifice of an outsider to the group and naked dancing undesirable. Nonetheless, they believed the revival of the kambi would have a positive local impact since, as one stated, “were the institution to

241 District Commissioner, Nyika to Provincial Commissioner, Mombasa 16 January 1919, PC/Coast/1/1/341.
242 District Commissioner, Nyika to Provincial Commissioner, Mombasa 16 January 1919, PC/Coast/1/1/341.
pass away...the tribe would lose their history.” Further, they believed that by changing the undesirable customs of the kambi ceremonies the Giriama could “progress” due to the kambi’s past success as a mediator of social morals such as “restricting the young people of both sexes from tembo drinking.” Of course, the government assumed that their support was necessary to promote these progressive elements and provide the apparatus to restructure and revive the indigenous authorities. The administrators believed that adapting a new kambi organization to the existing administrative scheme would benefit the Giriama by reviving and institutionalizing local traditions. However, primarily, district officials saw that the changes would benefit the government, which would take the form of joint authority through a customary body of kambi elders and the Local Native Council.

The progression toward achieving these goals did not occur with ease. As Brantley explained, the rituals to institute a new kambi was a complicated process requiring the participation of the entire community in four lengthy ceremonies each of which could only take place following a good harvest. Because only the people could enact the kambi, the tepidity of some community members who did not desire to pay their obligatory fees to the elders was a severe limiting factor and stalled the progress of initiations. While the administration favored a swift transition believing that the kambi in place needed to be turned over to build and sustain successful and progressive relations

244 Minute No.20/40. “Revival of Native Institutions ‘Kambi,’” PRB/KFI/12/113.
245 Minute No.20/40. “Revival of Native Institutions ‘Kambi,’” PRB/KFI/12/113. See also Herlehy, “An Economic History of the Kenya Coast,” 212-222.
246 Minute No.20/40. “Revival of Native Institutions ‘Kambi,’” PRB/KFI/12/113.
248 Minute No.20/40. “Revival of Native Institutions ‘Kambi,’” PRB/KFI/12/113.
with the Giriama, control of the transition of power fell into local hands. Thus, the administration had little ability to speed up the initiations. As the District Commissioner of Kilifi District expressed in 1920, “the present Kambi, as its name ‘Choka’ implies is tired out and useless.”249 While the government believed in the importance of Giriama initiatives in the changeover, the elders insisted on the assistance of the government in order to ensure the handing over of fees to the retiring kambi were paid and legitimized.250

Ambiguity regarding the initiation ceremonies only added to the difficulties of the initiations because, as one administrator stated, “no one not in the Kambi really know how the ceremonies were inaugurated except that members of certain kayas had to approach other kayas.”251 Because the previous kambi had fallen into disuse, the actual ceremonies of the initiations remained mysterious. Giriama traditions held that other Mijikenda groups including the Chonyi and Kauma customarily performed their initiations prior to the Giriama; however, the weakening of local practices among other Mijikenda groups broke down the symmetry of these relationships.252 The decentralization of Giriama authority and dispersal of the population inhibited the consolidation of ceremonial power. They were unable to mobilize broad Giriama support for the initiations, even among the former leaders. The elders in Malindi took little interest in participating in the initiation ceremonies at the kaya, which the district administrators suggested was a strategy employed in order to further delay the initiations.

249 Kilifi District Annual Report 1919-1920, AR/KFI/1/2224. “Choka” meaning to be tired in Kiswahili.
251 Minute No.20/40. “Revival of Native Institutions ‘Kambi,’” PRB/KFI/12/113.
Many of the authorities in place were widely regarded as being deviant and pursuing their own motives regardless of administrative policies or interests. Despite these hang-ups, the administration resolved to forge ahead under the conviction that once the new kambi was initiated problems with “tribal discipline” would be thwarted.

By 1925, consecutive successful harvests “created a favourable atmosphere” for the elders of the kambi who were “desirous for the ceremony to start.” The elders recommended that the government collect the rikas due to be initiated and direct them to Kaya Fungo for the ceremonies. Mzee Wanje—a Giriama elder who had not been recognized by the government since 1915 in the aftermath of the Giriama Rising—ordered his sons “to call the Nyeri immediately to pay their initiation dues at Kaya Giriama.” Some of the elder nyeri due to be initiated according to one official appeared to be slightly reluctant to take part in the ceremonies, but nonetheless, many willing men followed the mandate of the elders and government.

After several years of deliberations and preparations the initiation ceremonies were finally underway by 1925. The Kilifi Station Diary from 1925 describes these proceedings including the complicated and lengthy process which kambi initiations

253 A story recounted by Giriama elders in the Kilifi District Safari Diaries according to its transcriber provided a useful anecdote for Mijikenda attitudes toward the administration. In the story, one Giriama named Galegalli wa Hooka killed another man, Abagila wa Dida in 1922, two years prior to the stories telling in 1924. When Boru wa Abagila, the son of the deceased approached Kalama wa Koru, the Giriama chief he fined the murderer three cows and a bull—which he took for himself—and a women to be paid to Boru wa Abagila. “Kalama evidently believes in Home Rule in preference to that of supreme court. He is also by the way of being considered the best of the Giriama Chiefs in Kilifi!!” This recounting highlights the disregard of even the local powers serving the British for administrative policies. See Kwale Station Diary December, 1924, DC/KWL/5/1.

254 Kilifi Sub-District Annual Report for 1925, AR/KFI/2/2234.


257 “Nyeri” also spelled nyere refers to the “warrior class” in traditional Mijikenda society or those mature men who were not members of the kambi. “Kaya Initiation Ceremonies” Malindi Political Record Book A-D Jan. 1925, PRB/KFI/12/113.
involved. In June, elders began teaching—at a charge—the initiates the initiation dances, and by November the initiation ceremony had begun. The district administrator described the ceremonies noting:

The ceremony is a stage in the somewhat lengthy process of handing over the reins of Government to the members of the new kambi to be initiated next year. It appears that certain marika of the present kambi went through the ceremony 2 years ago and the remaining marika are doing it now; it seems that there are certain mysteries to which kambi elders have to be initiated before they can retire from the kambi.258

Before the initiation ceremonies officially began, the Giriama elders alleged that they needed to show the initiates the physical dimensions of the Giriama land. Despite objections by the neighboring Rabai, the Giriama elders used the buildup to the ceremonies to claim boundaries to their ancestral lands. As one official explained in the Kilifi Station Diary:

The Giriama elders in accordance with their customs after Kaya initiations wish to show the initiates the ancient Giriama boundaries and for these to be freshly marked in the presence of representatives of the neighboring tribes. The boundary claimed however extends well into the present Rabai Location and across the railway to the Mwachi River in Duruma.259

While the administration denied this request, it illustrates the dynamic displays of authority hashed out through initiation ceremonies which could be used to accrue wealth as well as display power within their communities, to the colonial administration, and to neighboring Mijikenda groups.

With the well organized and complex ceremonies underway, “the reins of government” were handed over to the new kambi that year.260 Despite what the administration saw as a promising buildup to the new initiations, in the aftermath of the initiations little changed in regard to local authority. While district officials were

258 Kilifi Station Diary November 1925, DC/KFI/4/1.
259 Kilifi Station Diary, 21 May 1925, DC/KFI/4/1.
260 Kilifi Station Diary 1925, DC/KFI/4/1.
impressed with the initial progress of native authority in the Nyika Reserve, much of the population remained disorderly, primarily according to local administrators due to alcoholism.\textsuperscript{261} It was quickly clear to government officials that the authority of the newly initiated \textit{kambi} organization had lost any of the vitality that the administration had anticipated based on previous customs. Apathy toward the “mooted change of rika” illustrated according to the District Commissioner that “old custom…is dying a natural death.”\textsuperscript{262} By 1930, some administrators suggested that all authority with regard to the law should be placed in the hands of the headmen due to the ineffectual nature of other judiciary bodies.\textsuperscript{263} In the years that followed administrators and local government agents explored the possibility of making further attempts to revive the old \textit{kambi} system, but these never materialized.\textsuperscript{264}

In the 1910s and 1920s, the colonial administration believed that reestablishing legitimate traditional authority was foundational to successfully controlling the Giriama. After many years of deliberations, the Giriama elders held the necessary ceremonies to properly turn over the reins of government to a new generation of elders. However, rather than revitalizing local authority, the initiations acted as functional mediums for elders to accrue wealth amidst the changes of preceding decades at the frustration of the colonial administration. The cultural context of Mijikenda ceremony requires “proper leadership, proper location, proper timing, proper sacrifice offering, and finally proper

\textsuperscript{261} Kilifi District Annual Report 1927, 1928, AR/KFI/2/2234, 2235. See also Herlehy, 218-219.
\textsuperscript{262} Kilifi District Annual Report 1929, AR/KFI/2/2236.
\textsuperscript{263} Kilifi District Annual Report 1930, AR/KFI/2/2237.
The creation of this correct cultural context delayed the process of Giriama initiations. In turn, this allowed Giriama elders space to contest encroaching colonial influences. Internally, the delays held off the ceremonies until an abundant harvest allowed elders who had specialized ritual knowledge to receive the necessary amount of wealth through gift-giving and feasting that they required of the new initiates.

**Duruma Delays**

The Duruma similarly prolonged the process of initiations and diverted the colonial administration from appropriating traditional authorities. According to Jeanne Louise Bergman the failures at instituting a new Duruma *kambi* illustrate their passive resistance to British demands. She suggested this eliminated “the possibility of colonial appropriation of legitimate traditional authority.” While the Duruma rejected an imposition of older forms of authority, the relationship between the *kambi* and their *kayas* to Duruma society at that time played an important role in facilitating their non-compliance.

The Duruma are the third largest Mijikenda ethnic group, living primarily to the south and west of Mombasa. While the Duruma are believed to have borrowed the Mijikenda origins narrative from adjacent hinterland communities, they share similar linguistic and cultural traditions to the other Mijikenda. As the westernmost Mijikenda group, the Duruma have historically been the most distant from the coastal urban centers, which perpetuated beliefs among the

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266 Bergman, “A Willingness to Remember” 123.

267 The same is believed to be the case for the Rabai, see Spear, *The Kaya Complex*, 33-35.
British administration that the Duruma are the most uncivilized, savage, and superstitious of the hinterlands groups.\textsuperscript{268} They believed that the authority of the elders—who were allegedly “very much under the thumb of the witch doctors”—was limited and the administration feared that the most powerful practitioners had permeated the Native Councils.\textsuperscript{269}

So that they could create order and cohesion within Duruma communities the administration resolved to initiate a new \textit{kambi} organization to replace the system that they found in place which they claimed was old, corrupt, and ineffective.\textsuperscript{270} In a 1913 letter, the Provincial Commissioner in Mombasa suggested that the District Commissioner of Rabai form a council out of the heads of Duruma villages in the sub-district “whether they are in the kambi or not.” He believed that “fresh elements” could help to “build upon a body” of “tribal authority” which would be beneficial to the administration of the district.\textsuperscript{271} By their estimates, the last \textit{kambi} initiations had taken place forty or fifty years before making “a reorganization of the old kambi…an almost superhuman task.”\textsuperscript{272} Instead, they began organizing “tribal elections” believing that through elections “some of the more aged and useless headmen might be persuaded to resign” which in turn would allow them to build a new body of effective leadership with traditional authenticity.\textsuperscript{273} To legitimize the elections, the administration proposed holding ceremonies at each of the three Duruma \textit{kayas}; however, the decline of the

\textsuperscript{268} Seyidie Annual Report 1911-1912, AR/64/260/2401.
\textsuperscript{269} Seyidie Annual Report 1917-1918, AR/16/103/2430.
\textsuperscript{270} Provincial Commissioner Mombasa to Asst. District Commissioner Rabai 8 August 1913, PC/Coast/1/11/144.
\textsuperscript{271} Provincial Commissioner Mombasa to Asst. District Commissioner Rabai 8 August 1913, PC/Coast/1/11/144.
\textsuperscript{272} Kilifi District Annual Report 1921, AR/KFI/1/2226.
\textsuperscript{273} “Notes on the Wa-Duruma, Kayas, Kambis, Customs,” PC/Coast/1/1/199.
Duruma *kambis* created some conflict between the two types of power which government intervention invoked. The administration feared that the three Duruma headmen who were already in place “may endeavor to take an unduly prominent part in the elections, a more important part than their actual status in the tribe would admit.” They did not want tensions between traditional and institutional powers to threaten the legitimacy of the *kambi*’s revival.

Although the administration was prepared to begin initiating a new *kambi*, several delays inhibited the formation of a new body of authority. The initial ceremonies were postponed due to the death of Muhenda Gazi, the head of Kaya Duruma. He was recognized as the primary elder responsible for initiating the new generation of the *kambi* “by directing ceremonies at the kaya.” However, this delay was brief and the administration had several elders prepared to undergo initiations in short time. As once administrator noted “All ‘watu wazima’ seem ready and anxious to become duly constituted members.” Despite the alleged optimism the initiations for the new *kambi* continued to face obstacles. Initially, conditions such as drought and food shortages and instabilities due to geographic proximity to German Tanganyika during the war contributed to delays in the initiations. Colonial officials believed that a good harvest could stimulate elections, but administrative optimism was stunted with anxieties that the surviving generation of elders would die off before being able to properly initiate a new

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274 “Notes on the Wa-Duruma, Kayas, Kambis, Customs,” PC/Coast/1/1/199.
275 “Notes on the Wa-Duruma, Kayas, Kambis, Customs,” PC/Coast/1/1/199.
276 19 November 1917, PC/Coast/1/1/199; See also Seyidie Annual Report 1917-1918, AR/16/103/2430. *Watu wazima* referring to mature adults or elders.
For several years into the 1920s, delays continued due to a famine which scattered the population and a smallpox epidemic, further aggravated by the aversion of the population to vaccinations. During this period, the existing councils ceased to function, while disease and famine left the Duruma with “a mere handful of duly constituted elders” responsible for reconstructing the *kambi*. These difficulties only heightened the administrative impetus to revamp the *kambi* system. In a social climate where diseases such as small-pox were becoming more prevalent, they alleged that due to the “extreme conservatism and distrust of innovation of the average native” a successful administration among the Duruma could only develop as a result of a reconstructed *kambi*.

By 1924, administrative frustration over deliberations had peaked, as one officer noted:

> It is now clear that the Duruma have wasted most of the month given to them to carry through this initiative and it will now have to be held over until the next dry season: and then it is obvious that they will literally have to be taken by the scruff of the neck and pushed into it or they will procrastinate until all of the elders have died.

Generally, it was assumed that due to alleged Duruma backwardness, persuasion would be necessary “to get the beer loving old die hard elders to settle down to the serious work of initiation.” Still, primarily, the problems of initiating a new *kambi* revolved around generational authority and legitimacy. The Duruma had developed a reputation as one of the most difficult groups to administer among the Mijikenda because their infrastructure

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280 Kwale Station Diary March, 1924, DC/KWL/5/1.
281 Kwale Station Diary April, 1924, DC/KWL/5/1.
was made up of many small councils consisting of two or three elders who made
judgments instead of centralized councils. The geographic dispersal of the population
in the preceding decade due to famine and disease had in part contributed to this political
fragmentation. Moreover, those who still held some more broad based authority were
reluctant to facilitate initiations of new authorities who could undermine their own.
Mwayaona, the senior headman of the Duruma was supposed to commence the
initiations; however, he remained troublesome and complacent. As one administrator
suggested “he is not too anxious to do this as he is one man alone now and after the
initiation there will be many elders.”

Several factors contributed to problems of governance which affected both
Duruma society and the colonial administration. The absence of legitimate authority had
broad social implications and was perceived by the British to contribute to the
backwardness and drunkenness of the community. The youth who did nothing but “drink
and defy their elders” were seen as being especially distrustful of the administration and
outsiders. Meanwhile youth frequently defied the authority of the corrupt Native
Councils. They were especially distrustful of the corrupt council members who regularly
sold Duruma land to coastal strangers without opposition from their fellow
constituents. An address by the Agricultural District Commissioner at Mariakani in
May 1924 challenged both the elders and young men to improve their work habits and

282 Vanga District Annual Report 1922
283 Kwale Station Diary September, 1924, DC/KWL/5/1.
284 Asst. District Commissioner Rabai to Provincial Commissioner Mombasa 28 July 1912,
PC/Coast/1/11/144.
PC/Coast/1/11/144.
protect their society. Especially critical of the elders, the address demanded cooperation asking that they “try to see the young man’s point view.” He called out the elders for spending “much too much time in dreaming of the past in drinking your beer and taking your snuff when you should be trying to look into the future a little further than in the end of your nose.” At the same time he condemned the idleness of youth and the deforestation which threatened to turn their country into a desert.\footnote{Ag. District Commissioner “Address to the Elders and young men of Duruma” 30/5/24, DC/KWL/5/1.}

The colonial officials placed these failures in a broader social context. They saw the Duruma practice of matrilineal inheritance as an additional burden that did not mesh with social changes that the administration wished to enforce such as education. Blaming this on Duruma women who refused to let their children go to school, the administration disliked the waning although still existent matrilineal patterns, determining that uncles exercised too little power over the ability to enforce education since “the Duruma fear their women.”\footnote{Kwale Station Diary April, 1924, DC/KWL/5/1.} In contrast, the administration cultivated that belief that “the only thing the women fear is the ‘kambi,’” however, its power and social legitimacy were lacking. In this setting, the administration believed that breaking with the tradition of matrilineal inheritance needed to take place “without destroying all Duruma tribal rule.”\footnote{Kwale Station Diary April, 1924, DC/KWL/5/1.} The reinstitution of an effective governing body in Duruma communities could counteract these changes while providing continuity with Duruma collective traditions. The administration hoped that a successful \textit{kambi} organization could thwart the ruptures manifesting between elders, youths, and women among the Duruma.
The Duruma *kayas* formed a central component of discourses on the crisis of authority. The physical presence of elders within and about the *kaya* could forge cohesion and legitimize the authority of the elders. In 1924, Kidanga, a Duruma elder left his family to settle near his *kaya*, living in a small hut waiting to conduct his ritual business. Reflecting on these actions one official wrote, “I have only just realized that Kidanga has really done for his tribe a good act in that he left his home and farm and family to come and settle near the clan’s kaya.”\(^{289}\) Due to the centrality of the *kayas* within discourses on Mijikenda traditional powers, authority was intrinsically linked to place. While these sentiments pervaded colonial notions of proper Duruma authority, debates over the legitimacy and community significance of the three Duruma *kayas* proved to be another limiting factor in creating a new local administration. According to one oral tradition collected for a colonial report, there was a clear hierarchical division between the three *kayas*:

Each kaya settled its own affairs through its kambi but occasionally if business of a nature affecting the whole tribe (e.g. prayers for rain at a time of famine) had to be transacted, the three all met at the kaya Mtswakara. Elders were chosen from each kaya to arrange the matter, the kaya Mtswakara selecting their delegates first, then the kaya Duruma, then the kaya Chonyi. The same order was preserved when the division of meat and tembo took place, the kaya Mtswakara consuming their portion first and the other two afterwards according to the order of precedence.\(^{290}\)

Meanwhile, opinions among the Duruma regarding the significance and existence of the three *kayas* were sometimes disparate:

There is a divergence of opinion regarding claim for precedence of 3 kayas. Both Duruma and Mtswakara kayas being cited as the most important. It is stated that the opinion of the authorities at kaya Duruma prevailed over those of the other kayas, when these were not in agreement, Mwlienda Gazi was universally recognized as head of the whole tribe. It is claimed that kaya Mtswakara is the oldest.\(^{291}\)

\(^{289}\) Kwale Station Diary June, 1924, DC/KWL/5/1.
\(^{290}\) “Info obtained from Mzee Ngoma wa Mwazumu” PC/Coast/1/1/199.
\(^{291}\) “Notes on the Wa-Duruma, Kayas, Kambis, Customs,” PC/Coast/1/1/199.
Meetings that were held between all of the Duruma headmen, elders, and initiates became complicated by the differentiation of the kayas. In one case, the main elder from Kaya Duruma refused to attend a meeting at the Kaya Chonyi insisting he was too old for the journey. This created further difficulties in what the British perceived as an already dawdling process of initiating a new kambi. The administration feared that this would necessitate separate meetings and thus result in further divisions of the Duruma, and complications in creating a unified “tribal” government.292

Eventually, the initiations, which for years were thought to be crucial to the functionality of the administration of the Duruma, were abandoned. The reinstitutionalization of traditional powers to a new body of men ultimately would not have the effect of reigning in Duruma youth or reestablishing the authority of the elders. As one official explained, the Duruma youth are “much too up to date to want to bind himself to be ruled by reactionary and in many cases very drunken initiated elderly elders. I fear the elders have lost their ancient authority and rule by the young and vigorous is the alternative.”293 Unsuccessful efforts to reestablish the kambi, which stretched out over a decade, occurred much to the dismay of the administration. According to Bergman, the Duruma act of “forgetting” the kambi was a deliberate sacrifice made in the early colonial era. She suggested Duruma actions can be viewed “as collective acts of resistance to new and foreign forms of power.”294 By refusing to

292 Kwale Station Diary June, 1924, DC/KWL/5/1.
293 Digo District Annual Report 1925, AR/KWL/XXXIX/2178.
collaborate with the colonial government, the Duruma successfully created distance between their society and the colonial apparatus of indirect rule.

In the aftermath of the unsuccessful reinstitution of the *kambi*, popular administrative images of the Duruma provided a confirmation of their capabilities of being administered by the government, despite a failure to institute a new body of “traditional” powers. According to the District Commissioner, the Duruma “conform more nearly to the popular idea of a typical Nyika tribesman,” hardened by their geography, they were alleged to closely follow their “tribal customs.” In contrast to the Digo in Kwale District, the administration perceived the Duruma as a more peaceful group to administer due to these conservative elements. The Duruma were less influenced by the rapid Islamization of the Digo and they largely refrained from participating in the coastal squatting of more northern Mijikenda groups, factors which assisted in cultivating these impressions. Colonial perceptions of the Duruma helped to solidify their autonomy.

**The Limits of Colonial Rule**

Attempts to reinstitute the Giriama and Duruma *kambis* illustrate several important dynamics of twentieth-century Mijikenda society. Both cases emphasize the changing gerontocratic landscape of early-twentieth-century Mijikenda communities outlined by Spear and Brantley. Elderhood was less of an authoritative medium than earlier histories of the Mijikenda would suggest, and consequently the remaining elders of the *kambi* used the apparatus of colonialism to reassert their influence. These

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295 Digo District Annual Report, 1927, 1928, AR/KWL/XXXI-XXXII.
296 Digo District Annual Report, 1927, 1928, AR/KWL/XXXI-XXXII.
dynamics are especially visible among the Giriama where *kaya* ceremonies were used to collect payments and receive gifts for their roles in dances and feasts of the new initiations. In the process, the Giriama elders instilled “symbolic value” into their own traditions. Using delay tactics, the Giriama heightened the symbolic power of their role as mediators in local ritual while simultaneously refusing colonial appropriation. Similarly, the Duruma used deliberation and ambivalence to disregard the outside interests of the colonial administration. Innovative uses of the traditions of the *kambi* acted as potent interlocutors with colonial power, crafting spaces of autonomy and distance from administrative control.

**J.L. Krapf and the *Kayas* in the Historical Imagination**

As the social role and cultural authority of the elders of the Giriama and Duruma *kambis* transformed from the nineteenth- to twentieth-centuries so too did the *kayas*. According to Brantley, nineteenth-century generational conflicts, a changing economic climate, and organization against British encroachment transformed *kayas* in Giriama society from practical to symbolic institutions. At the same time, while the *kayas* assumed a central role as symbols of continuity, they also were used as sites of power and contestation. These changes from homesteads into ancestral lands, sacred groves, sites of

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297 While the colonial reports contain few details regarding the social aspects of feasting in *kaya* ceremonies, Glassman covers extensively the role of competitive feasting in gathering followers, accruing status, and claiming citizenship within Swahili communities in coastal Tanzania, see Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*, especially 161-174. If similar, feasting could have been used by Mijikenda elders to reassert their prominent places within the *kaya* and their community.

298 Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui explained that Mijikenda elders have contextually and dynamically employed certain aesthetic elements of their power from the heyday of the *kambi* system through the present despite the vast societal changes due to world religions, Western education, and commercialization. See Orchardson-Mazrui, “Expressing Power and Status Through Aesthetics in Mijikenda Society,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11 (1998): 85-102.

299 Brantley described that the notion of the *kaya* as a center of political authority and organization gave way to new meaning of the *kaya* as a “storehouse” of medicines and traditional knowledge. See Brantley, *The Giriama and Colonial Resistance in Kenya*, 40.
institutional authority, centers for spiritual healing, and political symbols are linked to the social climate of the twentieth-century. The remainder of this chapter will situate these shifts by examining the continuous and changing roles of the Mijikenda kayas from the end of what Brantley has termed the “kaya phase” in the 1850s until the early years of the Mijikenda Union in the 1940s and 50s.300

Due to their early presence in African societies, historians and cultural anthropologists have used missionary writings as tools to re-imagine aspects of the pre-colonial past. While the cultural baggage of missionary writers colored their perceptions of African societies, often rendering social life and ritual as “backwards” or “uncivilized,” they provide some of the earliest historical ethnographies and can help to illustrate changes in African institutions over time. Rather than positioning missionary writings as records of the encounter or contests between the doctrinal systems of Christianity and (what are often homogenized as) “African traditional religions,” the missionary presence more often illuminates struggles over “the possibility of God, law, and ritual.”301 Both Africans and missionaries “contested, misjudged and realigned another’s definitions” of sacredness, while their power struggles erased the boundaries between spiritual and material realms.302 As a result, these writings can illustrate the

300 The kaya phase refers to the period lasting until the early- to mid-nineteenth-century during which most of the Mijikenda are believed to have lived within their respective kayas. Discussed in Brantley, The Giriama and Colonial Resistance in Kenya, 1800-1920, 10-18. The Mijikenda Union was a political and public welfare group established in 1945 to represent the interests of the Mijikenda, mostly regarding land, and was a component of the earliest official efforts to forge a collective identity and heritage among the nine Mijikenda groups.
301 Peterson, Creative Writing, 35.
creative power of Africans who acted as intellectual agents within the struggles and transformations of their own communities.

The journal of Johann Ludwig Krapf has long been used as a source for nineteenth-century Mijikenda history. Krapf, who opened the first missionary station in East Africa at Rabai spent many years living and traveling among different Mijikenda groups. As a result, his writings are a valuable, albeit biased, source for understanding Mijikenda social organization in the middle of the nineteenth-century. Drawing on Krapf’s writings, this section will examine how Mijikenda institutions were constructed and imagined in the last days of the kaya phase. While not directly interrogating local struggles over meaning, this section will use Krapf as well as more recent historical and anthropological writings to explore the archeology of beliefs on the kayas themselves.

Krapf’s first reflection on the kayas comes from the journal entry on his first visit to Rabai while searching for the right location to open a missionary station. Here Krapf described the kaya as a simple and largely vacant forested village:

Ascending from the shore across a grassy soil we arrived at a wood of lofty trees. The narrow footpath in the wood led to three entrances in a triple palisade which encircled the village; which with its wretched cone-shaped huts lies quite in the wood. We saw only two men, who beat upon great drums in honour of the visit, and I was sorry not to have seen the chief and people of the village.303

Of course, the state of the kayas at this time was not always uniform. Another missionary, Charles New who traveled among the Mijikenda in the 1860s found the kayas he visited to be in several different states as homesteads. According to New, Kaya Kambe was fully occupied with over one hundred and fifty huts inside of the kaya. While at the Chonyi kaya there was several hundred huts, but most of the population as

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New was informed “only visited the kaya on special occasions.” Kaya Jibana in contrast “had been forsaken by its people, who prefer in times of peace to live upon their plantations.”304 In the journal entry for Krapf’s second visit to Rabai, he expanded upon the religious aspects of the kaya, noting that it was used for religious services, sacrifices, festivals, funerals, and for hanging charms used for protective purposes by waganga or spiritual healers.305

Further entries from Krapf’s stay in Rabai make several references to the role of the kayas as centers of local ceremony. He positioned this as a counterpoint to his goals as a missionary, condemning the “drunkenness” and “gluttony” of the kaya festivities. Moreover, he expressed that the ceremonies served to “bind the people together…and thus they form strong bulwarks against missionary labour.”306 Krapf perceived the festivals as paramount examples of local backwardness. However, his observations and constructions of local ritual practices indexed Mijikenda ceremonies and interests as material more so than spiritual. Although Mijikenda materialism included spiritual beliefs, these beliefs, which were tied to ancestral spirits, inhabited the material earthly realm, specifically the kayas. The material desires of the Mijikenda formed a central component of his explanation of the relative disinterest he experienced regarding religion and conversion.307 Emphasizing this materiality, Krapf stated the “Wanika need trouble

305 Krapf, 146.
306 Krapf, 163, 203-204. During this time the social uses of palm wine by the Mijikenda was representation of the “diametric opposition” between Mijikenda custom and missionary beliefs. Ultimately, this contributed their lack of success at converting Mijikenda communities to Christianity since the missionaries were unsuccessful at surmounting local custom due to the cultural and economic centrality of palm wine to Mijikenda life. See Herlehy, “An Economic History of the Kenya Coast,” 155-160, 281.
themselves about nothing except Tembo (cocoa-wine), corn, rice, Indian corn (Mahindi), and clothes;—these are their heaven." This was symptomatic of the tendencies of missionaries and colonial agents to distinguish between the material and the spiritual due to their disparate worldviews from those of the Africans whose societies with which they interacted.  

While Krapf perceived ceremony and belief to center on material practices, he was both intrigued and frustrated by the cultural strength of the *kayas*. He singled out local customs for promulgating Mijikenda backwardness and his failures at attracting Christian converts. In one instance he noted his frustration over the refusal of elders and parents to allow their children to go to school due to fears “that the Ada or customs of the Wanika will be destroyed.” According to Krapf they believed “that the young people will conform to the Ada of the Europeans, and that the Koma or spirits of the dead will be angry, withhold the rain, and send diseases.” The *ap*easement of the ancestors was central to Mijikenda beliefs in community well being and the health of the land. This created a direct relationship between the physical space of the kaya as the residing place of the ancestors and the center of community knowledge.  

Krapf was repeatedly impressed by the “freedom and dependence” of the community and the land cultivated in Mijikenda communities. Eventually, Krapf capitalized on the centrality of the *kaya* to Mijikenda life and its use as a meeting point for the community by opening a mission station in Rabai. In doing so he appropriated the community space

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308 Krapf, 140.  
309 Green, *Sacred Sites in the Colonial Encounter*, 3.  
310 Krapf, 186.  
311 Ibid., 186.  
312 Ibid., 202-203.
of the *kaya* as a shared space for worship, holding religious services inside of the homestead.\textsuperscript{313}

While Krapf indexed *kaya* practices within this framework of collected traditions, he also used the *kayas* to illustrate moments of disunity. This was especially the case with rainmaking. Looking to undermine indigenous practices in favor of Christianity, Krapf claimed that the authority of the elders in providing rain for their communities had questionable credibility. He pointed out that many “look upon rain-making as mere Mateso, or artifice; and as a tradition without least foundational reality…The medicine men (Waganga) diligently observe the nature of grasses, plants, &c., but envelope the healing are in superstitious ceremonies.”\textsuperscript{314} Similarly, New alleged that while the only religion the Mijikenda possessed was related to “witchcraft,” most members of the community recognized its “hollowness.”\textsuperscript{315} The emergence of ideas about the ceremonial attributes of the forested landscapes is connected to beliefs in the importance of ancestors within Mijikenda communities, primarily the notion that ancestors provide for the health of the land. Thus the role of ancestral spirits or *koma* in social continuity is central to the imagined transformation of the *kayas* as homesteads to sacred space.

According to Parkin, among the Giriama an epistemological divide can be drawn between the Western or traditional reaches of their geographic dispersal and the more urban and culturally enmeshed east. In imagining this geographic divide between East and West, the Giriama draw power and unity from the symbolic functions embedded in the traditional West: Kaya Fungo, its *fingo*, and the *koma* which inhabit this

\textsuperscript{313} Ibid., 213.  
\textsuperscript{314} Ibid., 170.  
\textsuperscript{315} New, 106.
spiritual/lived realm. New alleged that Mijikenda notions of their ancestral spirits were “of the most shadowy character, and cannot be said to indicate either a belief of an existence after death, or of a separate spirit-world.” However, Krapf interpreted the koma slightly differently. While the majority of Krapf’s writings on the kayas deal with their practical and material roles, the metaphysical connection Krapf perceived between the Mijikenda and their kayas existed through ancestral spirits. This is best displayed in a description of the kayas and the koma appearing in Krapf’s journal dated 7 August 1847:

It is clear that the Wanika ascribe a higher nature and power to the Koma, the spirits or shades of the dead, just as the Romanists do to the saints; but the Wanika have no image or idol of the Koma, nor indeed of any kind whatsoever. The Koma, they say, is at one time in the grave, above the earth, or in the thunder and lightning as it lists; it cannot, however, be seen, although it receives the gifts which are offered to it, and it is appeased by them and rendered friendly to the living. The chief resting-place of the Koma is in or about the Kaya, the central point or chief town of the tribe, where a hut is erected for its habitation; and in that hut, all property deposited by the people is safe, for a Kirapo, talisman, is suspended in it, which prevents the approach of thieves. As the Koma dwells in preference at the Kaya, the people often bring their dead from a great distance thither; and even disinter them in distant localities, and transport them for reinterment to the graveyard at the Kaya, thinking that they find there greater repose—so great is the longing of man’s nature for rest after death. It is clear from this faith in the Koma, that the Wanika have some idea of a future state after death, and that idea gives a missionary a common point to start from; whilst heathenism which affords none such would be a very difficult one for missionaries to contend with; but there is none of that sort in Eastern Africa.

From this description of the koma, several crucial ideas about the social role of the forests can be surmised. First, that the Mijikenda possessed some notion of the “other world” which in Krapf’s mind would ultimately make conversion easier. Second, the ancestors served as a higher power and acted as protective mediums within the community. Because the Mijikenda possessed “no image or idol of the Koma” the physical space of the kaya itself attained the sacred power attributed to the ancestors. Finally, as a result of

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316 See Parkin, Sacred Void, 108 and 144.
317 New, 105.
318 Krapf, 176-177.
this power that permeated the kaya’s spaces, the forests were ascribed new meanings as the “central point” of a community.

As Parkin expressed, the kaya exists in the contemporary realm as a “spatial text.” He stated, the kaya “is a liminal idea of homogenous space positioned between a centre and an uncentred complexity, whose interrelationship is always in the making.” While Spear has dealt primarily with questions on Mijikenda origins, his analysis of the movement from “kaya phase,” to “relic phase” supports the analytical evolutions of the kayas. The cultural institutions of Mijikenda origins myths according to Spear have largely ceased to have relevance with the abandonment of age-sets and the movement of the Mijikenda from the kayas to their farms. Although customary authority continued to be invoked well into the twentieth-century, the formation of new networks of power in Mijikenda communities undermined kaya authority, but added to its more recent complexities. Meanwhile, the role of Mijikenda origin narratives in the more recent historical memories of Mijikenda groups infuses the kayas with a powerful symbolic function as group homesteads and, more importantly, as ancestral grounds.

The kayas were clearly transformed socially and spatially in the conceptual and physical move from homestead to uninhabited space. As Krapf’s writings indicate, the kayas did serve as important ritual centers in the mid-nineteenth-century, but by his perception, the ceremonies were built on a material base. Nonetheless, the entanglement of indigenous practice, ancestral spirits, and public ritual provided the basis for

319 Parkin, Sacred Void, 9.
320 Spear, Traditions of Origin and their Interpretation, 16.
321 Spear, The Kaya Complex, 142-143.
322 For examples see Spear, Traditions of Origin and Their Interpretation.
sacredness. Parkin suggested that the sacredness of the *kayas* in this process has been “intensified and even exaggerated if not invented” in Mijikenda communities. Pointing out that the most important functions of *kayas* during the period of occupation were defensive or trade related, Parkin suggested that Giriama *kayas* in particular have experienced a “growing mythicisation” as the population moved closer to the coast, proposing that physical distance increased the sacred attributes. Customary ceremonies led by elders in the early- to middle- of the twentieth-century layer these transformations in sacredness and point toward the critical roles of the local imagination, political discourse, and generational difference in the making of the Mijikenda *kayas*.

Indeed, much of the correspondence between colonial officials regarding the sacred places in the Coast Province illustrate that early on, administrators were unsure of the levels of sacredness of the Mijikenda *kayas*. In 1912, the Provincial Commissioner issued a request for a report on all of the sacred places in the districts of the Coast Province “giving their position and names and stating whether they are groves of trees, rocks, etc,” continuing stating that “I believe that in most of the coast districts they are called kayas.” The District Commissioner’s report outlines that among the Teita—who lived west of the Mijikenda—there were a variety of sacred places so many in fact that “it would be impossible to name them all as almost every grove in the hills is such a place.” However, only two sacred places were reported among the Mijikenda: Kwa Kidodo and

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323 Parkin, *Sacred Void*, 43.
324 Ibid., 43.
325 Provincial Commissioner Mombasa to District Commissioners of Province 22 November 1912 PC/Coast/1/3/25.
Zia ra Halo. Both of the Mijikenda sacred spots, he noted were regarded as places that were “visited only in times of stress by the natives to make propitiatory offerings to the deity and to the ‘koma’ or spirits of the dead.” Turning to the kayas he explained that “Kayas i.e. Giriama and Kauma are not sacred places but revered for their historical associations…In the case of Kaya Kauma, it is laid down by immemorial custom that all Wa-Kauma dying outside it should be brought for burial to the precincts of the Kaya.”

In the minds of missionaries and colonial officials the kayas were primarily historical spaces and interests in kaya ceremonies rested on material concerns. Thus, the intensification of sacredness in kaya narratives was far from a colonial invention and more a product of indigenous discourses that encapsulated the changing social landscape of nineteenth- and twentieth-century coastal Kenya. Kaya ceremonies underscore the shifting terrain of Mijikenda social relations and power.

Performing Authority: Kaya Elders and the Poetics of Custom

Approximately every four years the senior most of the nyeri or warrior class of the sub-rikas were initiated into the wisdom of the kambi. The passage of each age-set from one stage to the next was performed in ceremonial initiation dances. Dancing ceremonies typically involved ritual adornments, smearing the body with mud, special medicines, and sacrifices. The highest powers of the kayas were given oaths to initiate them into secret societies. This enabled them to provide health and protection for the land and the community and to personally accrue influence, prestige, and power.

328 For a full discussion of the rika and Mijikenda initiation ceremonies see Spear, The Kaya Complex, 58-65.
Among the Giriama, the ceremonial advancement of elders into the *kambi* occurred during two ceremonies: *Kirao* and *Sayo ra Mudhanga*. However, because no age-sets overlapped within the *kambi*, power transfers needed to be forced from outside the ruling elders. Thus, when the initiations of new age-sets ceased in the nineteenth-century, the knowledge of ritual and customs held by the highest age-set faded as elderly men died.\(^{329}\)

Although many Giriama rituals lost significance during the tumultuous nineteenth-century, the importance of *Kirao* was enhanced. Homestead heads continued to dance the *Kirao* in order to advance their age-sets. In time, the *Kirao* was adopted within the *lalo* system as the smaller homestead units became the holding ground for the dance ritual. Brantley explained, “New initiates returned from the *kaya* to the *malalo* and recreated a part of the ritual which, in effect, installed into *Kirao* those of the *kambi* age who had been unable to attend the ceremonies in the *kaya*.“\(^{330}\) Although adaptive, the governmental system of the Mijikenda groups broke down in the course of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. Still, as attempts were made to reinitiate and reconstruct *kambi* organizations in some communities, the *kayas* were reinserted into Mijikenda life as ceremonial sites. Among the Giriama, the ceremonies were delayed and finally commenced by the elders when they could strategically use the ceremony to imbue their own social role with symbolic functions which were to their benefit. In Duruma communities, the ceremonies were met with ambivalence which limited colonial influence at these locations. While the Giriama ceremonies failed in the eyes of the government to create an effective system of customary local government, the *kaya*  

\(^{330}\) Ibid., 259.
ceremonies evoked powerful performances of cultural heritage, solidarity, and generational authority. By performing their roles as customary elders, Mijikenda men used the perceived saliency of the kayas within communities’ historical memories to display their authority to members of their community and to the British administration. In turn, these interactions between the Mijikenda elders and colonial officials created or revived meanings for their institutions, traditions, and spaces while enabling the elders to forge new collective memories of the kayas. These developments were an early step toward politicizing the ritual expertise of the elders in colonial and post-colonial discourse.

Norman Denzin framed performance as an interpretive event that can be “aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, participatory, political and commemorative.” In performing their authority, the kaya elders open a discourse containing “meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context.” Since it had been over forty years since the last kambi had been initiated, most Giriama had a difficult time describing how initiations took place in the “old days.” Indeed, Wanje wa Mwadorikola was the only remaining elder who had been properly trained in the rituals and wisdom required for installing a new kambi the last time the ceremonies were held in the 1870s. Due to his role as a resister during the Giriama Rising, the administration was likely distrustful of Wanje’s actions as a mediator. What memories remained of the ceremonies

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331 Green, Sacred Sites in the Colonial Encounter, 8-9.
relate that they typically included the sacrifices of bulls and fowls and feasting among members of the different *rikas*. The feasts were followed by the capture and sacrifice of an outsider by the rising initiates, after which they would return to the *kaya*. At the *kaya*, initiates received the colored cloth that symbolized the *kambi* and “took their place under the great trees and all night long they sat there being taught the mysteries and shown the wisdom for the elders they were to supersede.” Finally, the *Kirao* ceremony took place, which featured several more days of feasting and dancing.335

In the buildup to the new initiations Champion questioned whether or not the geographic dispersal of the population and the loss of the authority of the *kaya* elders to the government would impact the ceremonies, stating “it must be a matter of some doubt whether these ceremonies will be repeated when in a few years time the Kambi Kavuta will have run its appointed span of time.”336 Still, the administration encouraged Giriama ritual since they saw the succession of custom as fundamental to establishing the authority of the elders and the new initiates within their communities. They anticipated that in turn this would facilitate indirect rule and increase the elders’ ability to reinforce the headmen’s orders at their own locations.337 In addition to initiating new leadership for administrative purposes, they further hoped that the ceremonies would assist at sustaining collective community beliefs and heritage. This would reinforce the ethnic boundaries mandated in colonial policies.

In Mijikenda communities, rainmaking serves an important function of collectively healing the misfortunes afflicted upon the community due to violations that

335 “Native Administration and the Constitution of the Kambi,” PRB/KFI/12/112.
336 “Native Administration and the Constitution of the Kambi,” PRB/KFI/12/112.
337 Kilifi District Annual Report 1924, 1925, AR/KFI/2/2231, 2232.
occurred in *kayas* or community.\textsuperscript{338} Similarly, rainmaking ceremonies served the governmental purposes of pacifying the Mijikenda during extenuating circumstances or to promote the authority of the elders within the community.\textsuperscript{339} Despite the motives of social control, the sometimes divergent interests of the Mijikenda elders could not be contained. As discussed earlier in this chapter, appeals to proper discourse in public ceremonies were used by the Giriama and Duruma elders to control the initiations of a new *kambi*. Ritual performances at the *kayas* formed a significant component of the strategies employed by elders to express their authority both within and outside of their communities. The following substantial account from the 1925 Giriama initiations illustrates the highly performative ritual process followed throughout the process of initiation:

The kaya presented a very animated scene with groups of elders sitting round in circles each group with its women folk doing the cooking just in the rear…The elders being initiated had all had their hands decorated with small pieces of wood sharpened at one end, the other end “frayed” out to resemble a flow, thus the rest was in the distance rather like a white curly wig…Coloured loin clothes are not allowed to be worn by any who have not been fully initiated, all Elders being initiated wore an iron ring round their necks, flattened on the inside like a cured blade; this is only worn at “Kirao” ceremonies…Also those being initiated carried staves to which were tied short pieces of stick, they are not allowed to move about without these staves, one purpose to which they are put is tapping the small stick against the stave while singing—the effect is rather like hearing rain drops in trees they also initiate thunder by stamping their heals on the ground quickly and moving slightly backwards. Another dance is with “Njuga” (bells) fixed to their right ankles and goats beards tied above the elbow they sing and rattle the bells and wave their goat bearded elbow in perfect rhythm, a feature of this dance is two large hallow bamboo poles which are stamped on the ground, end on and make a noise like a drum.\textsuperscript{340}

The ceremony itself lasted for three days and three nights after which the women held a separate *kaya* ceremony.\textsuperscript{341} The complexity of these ceremonies made the special

\textsuperscript{338} Bergman, “A Willingness to Remember” 71-72.
\textsuperscript{339} Parkin, *Sacred Void*, 194.
\textsuperscript{340} Kilifi Station Diary, November 1925, DC/KFI/4/1.
\textsuperscript{341} Kilifi Station Diary, November 1925, DC/KFI/4/1.
knowledge of elders vital to the social reproduction of local authority. At this time, Mijikenda rituals were ambiguous to the administrators who had difficulty differentiating between the types and context of Mijikenda ritual practices. Because of the powers vested into their roles by the colonial administration, the retiring elders effectively used the official discourse of the initiations to direct the new ceremonies and validate themselves.

Administrative interest in rainmaking increased as an important component of initiation ceremonies. As part of the new initiations the retiring kambi chose six men from each mbari or clan to “be shown the secrets of the tribe including the rain making business.” The passing of rainmaking capabilities was followed by individual rain rituals by new members within their communities:

Of old, all thirty six will receive the rain-making dope and would bury this in their won localities (Kuzika chombo) so that all the country was covered...Then if rain continued to fail when expected in certain locality, someone from that locality and the man responsible for the dry area would be seized and tied up and probably beaten and generally ill-used. He would have to go and enact certain ceremonies at the place where he had buried the dope. Rain may still fail in which cases he would again be roughly used and then would have to go through further ceremonies, this time in public at the same place.

The administration encouraged these ceremonies suggesting making official positions for members of the kambi as “leading rain priests of their localities.” They believed that these would create natural leadership positions within communities to encourage stability during times of drought, while legal mechanisms could be instituted to protect the

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343 Letter from E.R. ST Davis to Tisdall, from Malindi 21 August 1937, PRB/KFI/12/112.
344 Letter from E.R. ST Davis to Tisdall, from Malindi 21 August 1937, PRB/KFI/12/112.
345 Letter from E.R. ST Davis to Tisdall, from Malindi 21 August 1937, PRB/KFI/12/112.
rainmakers in case the rains failed despite prayers. Moreover, by legitimizing cleansing activities within the colonial governmental structure, the administrators encouraged the Mijikenda to partake in local bureaucracy.

According to Champion, traditional “rain praying” ceremonies and rituals involving a “cleansing of the land” were performed by medicine men of influence in Giriama society and kambi elders to ward off evil spirits and curses and to appease the ancestors. Among elders, the ability to bring rain was highly valued and served them as a source of ritual power. However, as Willis had noted, the physical and economic power of young men threatened the ritual power of the elders for several decades leading into the governmental changes of the colonial administration. Within the public discourse, ceremony became an important medium for elders to re-legitimize themselves and display their collective importance.

The development of the kayas in local and colonial imaginations was entwined with political discourse. Due to the lack of success of the attempts at reviving the kambis in the 1920s, administrative discussions of the kayas were largely dismissive of the role of customary authority in the government. However, after the formation of the Mijikenda Union in 1945 interest in the kaya institutions increased. This is visible in the Kilifi District Annual Reports which starting in 1946 included a section on “Indigenous Authorities.” In this section the District Commissioner briefly described efforts “to resuscitate certain Wanyika customs including the appointment of Kambe [kambi] elders

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346 Letter from E.R. ST Davis to Tisdall, from Malindi 21 August 1937, PRB/KFI/12/112.
348 Champion, *The AGiryama of Kenya*, 31-34.
349 Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda*, 45.
and the restoration of the Kaya” which had already occurred at several locations. On the governmental level, the elders assumed tertiary political roles, working as intermediaries on minor land and boundary disputes with varying degrees of success.

At this same time, the meanings of the institutional roles of the elders were also transforming to differentiate between the knowledge and practice of the kambi and kaya elders. By the 1950s and 1960s, certain individuals came to be known as kaya elders for their ritual knowledge and maintenance of the practices of the old kambi elders. The kayas too had transformed, earlier ceremonies increasing their sacred image in the eyes of the colonial administration. In a 1951 safari report, the District Commissioner of Malindi included a lengthy description of the sacred stones and trees in the morho or the most sacred part of the kaya during a trip to Kaya Singwaya. As an outsider, he was largely unaware to the sacred knowledge associated with this area and the “elders were reticent as to the ceremony which took place when the tree was planted and stated that the planting ceremony was secret, all except the elders being kept indoors at the time.”

While initial treatments of the kambi pertained largely to their public responsibilities to the social order of their community, the esoteric knowledge and rainmaking abilities of the elders became increasingly emphasized in both public and private discourse.

In 1954, elders from across the coastal district were invited to Kaya Giriama to take part in a rainmaking ceremony. This event was part of the development of Pan-
Mijikenda consciousness that had increased since the formation of the Mijikenda Union less than ten years earlier. According to Parkin, the political party thrived on gerontocracy and leaders whose legitimacy was sealed by their “ritual expertise” and roles “as spokesmen on esoteric elements of Giriama ritual life.” The authority of the kaya elders was used to mobilize support for younger, more educated, urban politicians. Their influence, explained Parkin was promoted by reconstructing kaya sites and exercised through consolidated local support. In this specific rainmaking ceremony, the elders took the initiative to bring together a range of kaya elders in a Pan-Mijikenda ritual celebration of sacred knowledge and collective heritage.

In October, the Giriama elders invited kaya elders from other Mijikenda groups in the Coast Province to participate in the ritual ceremonies. Their goal was to hold a ceremony that was “representative of as many of the Nyika tribes as possible,” bridging their collective heritages in a cultural and entertaining event for the elders. Convened on October 15-16 following a meeting in Kaloleni, the ceremonies brought together nine kaya elders from the Kilifi District as well as one Digo and one Duruma elder from the Kwale District to participate in the rain prayers. While the alleged push by the elders

356 Ibid., 90.
357 District Commissioner Kilifi to District Commissioner Kwale 26 July 1954, CC/12/33.
358 District Commissioner Kilifi to District Commissioner Kwale “Rainmaking Ceremony in Kaya Giriama” 26 July 1954; Chief Kidogwa to District Commissioner Kwale, “Hali ya Ukavu wa Nehi” 31 August 1954, CC/12/33.
359 District Commissioner Kilifi to District Commissioner Kwale “Rainmaking Ceremony in Kaya Giriama” 26 July 1954; Chief Kidogwa to District Commissioner Kwale, “Hali ya Ukavu wa Nehi” 31 August 1954, CC/12/33.
to “continue to follow the customs of the kaya like long ago” was approved by the administration, there was apprehension regarding the continuation of such ceremonies.\textsuperscript{360}

The District Commissioner expressed that holding a rainmaking ceremony for all of the \textit{kayas} at just one site could create problems by centering the culture and authority all of the Mijikenda \textit{kayas} at one \textit{kaya} site.\textsuperscript{361} That same year, he noted in the Kilifi District Annual Report that the \textit{kaya} “as a symbol of the old traditional way of life...might be always be used by unscrupulous persons” and that the administration should disregard the “back to the Kaya movement.”\textsuperscript{362} Largely, the administration was fearful of the political authority developing around the \textit{kayas}, as the District Commissioner stated in his 1955 report:

\begin{quote}
Anyone who wishes to depreciate the Chiefs and African Courts in this district is prone to play up the Kaya elders as a counter or irritant and to this extent they may become a tool of demagogues. But their influence on the district apart from this can be considerably exaggerated and they cannot be regarded as a possible alternative form of local government.\textsuperscript{363}
\end{quote}

This coincided with the social disruptions up-country where the British had declared a “State of Emergency” in response to the Land and Freedom Army or “Mau Mau.” While Kilifi District administrators noted that the events up-country had no effect on the coast, they were clearly aware of the impact the spread of these sentiments would have on their jurisdiction and, therefore, pleased that the Kenya African Union was unsuccessful at garnering patronage from the Giriama.\textsuperscript{364} Moreover, they were unmistakably apprehensive about the political implications of collective gatherings and the influences

\textsuperscript{360} District Commissioner Kilifi to Chief Ali wa Nyawa 2 December 1954, CC/12/33.
\textsuperscript{361} District Commissioner Kilifi to Chief Ali wa Nyawa “Sherehe ya Kuomba Mvua” 17 December 1954, CC/12/33.
\textsuperscript{362} Kilifi District Annual Report 1954, AR/KFI/6/2268.
\textsuperscript{363} Kilifi District Annual Report 1955, AR/KFI/6/2269.
of “traditional” leaders. Quickly, the administration began to distrust the *kaya* leaders, feeling that they were asserting themselves too much within the local governmental structure.

Some Giriama *kaya* elders according to one report in 1959 had “attempted to establish themselves as a rival to government” by undermining chiefly authority, claiming their exemption from taxation due to being “members of the Kaya,” making arrogate claims to which traditional healers were able to practice in their locations, and fomenting a strike.\(^{365}\) The administration also implicated regional leaders in these developments and accused the prominent Giriama national political figure Ronald Ngala and his party K.A.P.U. of encouraging dissent in addition to having tendencies toward “neo-paganism” to promote his popularity.\(^{366}\) The close affiliations would not last long. By the 1960s, chiefs and district officers began issuing permits to control community cleansing rituals and the dynamics of healing became gradually more politicized. Increasingly, ritual practices turned against the *kaya* elders through witchcraft eradication movements led by non-elders. These occurred with the support of the emerging new elite who explicitly defined themselves as progressive non-traditionalists.\(^{367}\)

**Conclusions**

Rainmaking and cultural ceremonies provided a saliency to the borders of Mijikenda identity and further helped to establish political clout for local leaders in the

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\(^{365}\) Kilifi District Annual Report 1959, AR/KFI/6/2274.


proto-nationalist developments of late-colonial Kenya.\textsuperscript{368} However, by the 1960s the social place of the \textit{kaya} elders transformed again as they went from being important political patrons to primary targets, while the dynamic reality of the \textit{kaya} continued to shift. In her study on gerontocracy in pre-colonial Giriama, Brantley proposed that scholars should, “as the Giriama themselves do, use descriptions of the evolved kaya institutions in order to measure subsequent changes.”\textsuperscript{369} As the cases outlined in this chapter suggest the \textit{kaya} has evolved in Mijikenda societies in the century from the 1850s to the 1950s. The transformation from forest homestead to relic sacred grove forest has been the primary development traced by scholars along this timeline. In contrast, this chapter places Mijikenda traditions at the center of social and political discourses of colonial coastal Kenya. Attempts to revive the Giriama and Duruma \textit{kambis} were ultimately a failure for the administration. For Giriama elders, the initiation ceremonies provided an opportunity to reaffirm their status. In both cases, the Giriama and Duruma drew on “tradition” as a key component of the strategies they employed to create space from colonial influence. Later uses of the \textit{kayas} by Mijikenda elders and political groups highlight their roles as powerful symbols of unity, continuity, and historical memory. At the same time their actions display a continuum of the political uses of the \textit{kayas}, first in

\textsuperscript{368} Parkin, \textit{Sacred Void}, 32-36; Cynthia Gillette, “A Test of the Concept of Backwardness: A Case Study of Digo Society in Kenya” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1978), 111-112. See especially Parkin, “Politics of Ritual Syncretism” 228-229. Here Parkin notes that leading to independence Giriama elders increasingly participated in political and traditional activities including fundraising to build a new kaya, festivals to celebrate the “traditional” Giriama New Year, and participation within the Kilifi African People’s Union. Parkin writes “The sentiment of tribal nationalism was now encouraged by young, educated, and dynamic Mijikenda politicians but was expressed through the kayas and other council elders. Such roles had lain effectively dormant for years. Now they were seen to be supported again by traditional ritual powers such as the rights to administer certain ‘oaths’, and to hold rainmaking and other ceremonies.”

\textsuperscript{369} Brantley, “Gerontocratic Government: Age-Sets in Pre-Colonial Giriama,” 250, 258.
power struggles during early colonialism and later as cultural tools for articulating legitimacy within the changing social landscape of mid-century Kenya.
CHAPTER 3: NARRATING THE KAYA IN POLITICS, CONSERVATION, AND PUBLIC MEMORY

This chapter will explore the narration of the kayas in several settings. A field story from my own experiences visiting four kayas with a local conservation group, an exploration of the role traditional lands played in demarcating forest and nature reserves during colonialism, a glance at the politicization of Mijikenda institutions in more recent Kenyan public culture, and finally an exploration of the narration of Digo religious practice and environmental change through local traditions will be used to understand the role of kayas in creating physical, cultural, and political boundaries in coastal Kenya. In light of these anecdotes, this chapter will conclude by exploring and offering a critique of conservation models which often silence the unique ways that conserved spaces have been used and narrated historically. I argue that conservation practices need to more successfully address these tensions in their presentation of the environmental history of the kayas.

Raising the Sign: Land and Local Politics, a Story from Four Kayas

In the past two decades, the kayas have been institutionalized within Kenya and later internationally, first by being made national monuments and later World Heritage sites. In turn, this recognition has created the opportunity for individuals to use the sacred landscapes to make cultural and institutional claims to land or authority. In July 2009 members of the Coastal Forest Conservation Unit (CFCU) invited me to accompany them to several kayas to raise the signs marking them as World Heritage sites.\(^\text{370}\) We

\(^{370}\) The Coastal Forest Conservation Unit or CFCU was a special division created by the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) in 1992 for the purpose of initiating conservation programs for Kenya’s coastal forests,
visited four *kayas*: Mudzimyvya and Bomu—which make up the Rabai *kayas*—as well as Ribe and Kambe. Each setting provided me with a unique perspective on the strength and mobilization of *kaya* traditions within specific communities. At both Bomu and Ribe, we were left on our own to find the *kayas*, determine where the signs should be located, and put them in place. In contrast, at Mudzimyvya, which is being prepared to be opened as an ecotourism site, the raising of the sign was a community event, attended by *kaya* elders, the *kaya* women’s group, and a dozen workers who were constructing a visitors center outside of the *kaya’s* entrance. At Kaya Kambe, the final site we visited, I witnessed a different type of *kaya* narrative which offered a fascinating glimpse into the more discursive and disputed aspects of these social and cultural landscapes.

Taking a drive into Kambe is nothing short of gorgeous. The impressive *kaya* sits high up on a thickly forested ridge that is approached by way of an undulating dirt road. As we approach the village, I can see the outline of four bodies two hundred meters ahead rested along the right side of the road. The CFCU officer leading our excursion turns to me; these are the elders we are to meet. They stop our vehicle and without hesitation begin directing us to place the sign on the road leading into the village. The vast Kambe *kaya* extends from the imposing ridge above us down to the road where we are stopped; however, it does not seem to any of us to be the ideal spot to place the sign. The leader of our trip begins explaining this to the elders and after some deliberation they agree to let us take a look at the site closer to the main path entering the *kaya*. As we make our way into the village, which sits adjacent to the immense *kaya*, I am very

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primarily the *kayas*. They have offices in Kilifi and Tiwi and administer the World Heritage Sites through UNESCO, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and the National Museums of Kenya (NMK).
aware—especially being an American *mzungu*—that youth being let out of school, men returning from agricultural work, and women ambling outside their homes are quickly attentive to our presence. We park the Landcruiser and another worker and I grab the sign for Kaya Kambe, while the others begin unloading the cement and shovels. I hear the shout of one of the elders, and our traverse across some farmland toward the *kaya*’s entrance is halted hastily.

“*Kaya linaanza papa hapa*”—“the *kaya* begins right here”—he explicitly states pointing to the grassy patch of farmland beneath our feet. I look up and realize that there is probably a hundred meters of farmland, most of it cultivated between the spot we are standing and the beginning of the forest. Quickly interjecting, one officer’s right hand is raised, “*Sio hapa, twende huko*” pointing toward the beginning of the forest. A game of cat and mouse is unfolding as the minor dispute escalates. When we initially arrived there were only a handful of community onlookers sauntering around the spot where we were settled. However, as news of the dispute begins to spread, locals—especially young students—begin forming a semi-circle around us, and before long the crowd runs four or five people deep.

Adamant that the sign must be put at the entrance of the *kaya*, our group’s leader continues insisting that we must move across the farmland and raise the sign outside of the forest. If someone who did not know what a *kaya* was were to see the sign in that spot they would take an entirely incorrect perspective of what the sacred forests consist of, he argues. “Because of the World Heritage site, people will want to come to see the *kayas*” he claims. However, the group of elders is equally unyielding. Amidst the
exchanges, another elderly man breaks through the crowd and begins to speak up. Apparently he is the location chief, but I am still trying to piece together the bigger picture of what is unfolding. Concurring with the members of CFCU, he begins to deliver a diatribe against the elders’ claims regarding the *kaya* boundary.

For a long time crops had been planted on this land, however the elders are claiming it was initially part of their *kaya*. Things click, and I drift back to some articles I’ve read on *kaya* traditions and social continuity. This is a land dispute and the *kaya* is at the center of its discourse. Conservation, livelihoods, land use, access and ownership: I’m trying to analyze what should be done, but nothing is lucid. Not wanting to involve himself in the dispute or cause any damage to the sign which was donated by WWF, our leading officer finally resolves to return the sign to the original roadside spot outside of the village. And so, we—along with at least half of the onlookers—move a kilometer down the road to raise the sign. I scan the four elders, recognizing their disappointment. They no doubt hoped to provide some impetus to their cause in this land dispute through international recognition of the farmland as *kaya* space by virtue of the sign’s location. The day bordering darkness, we get to work putting up the sign on the outskirts of the village and the situation seems to have reached a resolution.

In hindsight, I believe the elders’ initial request that the sign be placed by the roadside was a strategic choice. Their collective claim that the roadside was where the sign should be placed—a suggestion that would be and was hastily rejected—was a performance. This would make it easier for us to agree to put the sign up on the farmland, because it was not on the side of the road. When we arrived into Kambe, they
were waiting on the side of the road in the exact spot they requested that the sign be placed. There was no set time that we were scheduled to arrive at the kaya and if I had to guess, they had been sitting there waiting for us for most of the day. The four communities we visited are all very close to each other and yet, there was very tangible variability to the strength and use of these traditions in each community. In this particular case, I witnessed a performance of the kayas spatial dimensions and significance, through the elders’ attempts to appropriate the international legitimacy of a World Heritage site while invoking traditional claims to the land.

**Kenyan Environmentalisms**

Due to the core images of the kaya forests within Mijikenda history, their physical presence is indicative of the continuity of the community and celebrates the role of elders as custodians of the kaya space and traditions. As the story above indicates, the kayas can act as political tools in contemporary Kenyan conservation. These roles as interlocutors in both local and broader disputes highlight the unique environmentalisms of the kayas.

Environmentalism is often defined by the political agendas implicit in its espousal of environmental knowledge.\(^{371}\) While the power dynamics of environmentalist discourse are complex and multilayered, environmental knowledges are often systematized and reproduced through political concerns.\(^{372}\) Critics of environmentalism suggest that the worldview of particular groups and their respective political doctrines are

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fundamental to environmentalism, as is power. Due to strong political interests, the policies guiding environmentalisms can sometimes be historically false or manipulated—enacted to preserve the interests of leading individuals and institutions and articulated through a neocolonial platform. This is especially visible in degradation narratives and discourse, which according to Fairhead and Leach “has constructed alien ideas of tradition and community, reinforced ethnic stereotypes and differentiation, and denied people their own history with all its significance for their social and political relations and capacity to live on their own terms.” The particular environmentalisms this chapter will explore are the underlying tensions between codified conservation narratives and the historical flux and dispute embedded in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century experiences of the Mijikenda and their kayas.

The conservation of the kayas is facilitated through several institutional centers and financial supporters. In 1992, the National Museums of Kenya established CFCU with supporting funds from the World Wide Fund for Nature. The CFCU works in conjunction with local elders to gazette recognized boundaries of kaya forests and raise public awareness to the threats faced by the forests, including tree poaching and development related to the coastal tourist industry. To help facilitate the conservation of the forests the Kenyan government redefined the parameters for national monuments

375 Nyamweru, “Sacred Groves Threatened by Development.”
to include significant cultural and ecological zones. This enabled the kayas to be protected under the Ancient Monuments and Antiquities Act.376

Because of the powerful historical associations embedded in sacred sites, their protection can often be guided by historically grounded “spiritual beliefs, social rules and norms” to help regulate access and guard their sanctity.377 East Africa’s coastal forests—including the kayas—are considered among the top ten “priority ecosystems” on the African continent for biodiversity conservation. Thus for conservationists the idea of a “spiritually policed” forest sanctuary is enticing, however this assumes that the Mijikenda associate homogeneous beliefs and cultural values to the forests.378 Within Mijikenda communities, the value placed on the forests varies greatly. Adherence to Christian or Islamic religious practices, age, or gender can influence the cultural vitality of the kayas. Typically the ritual functions of the kayas are largely held by elderly men. This influences how certain community members view the forests. Women for example, overwhelmingly point to the kayas foremost as a valuable source of firewood.379 In addition to women, young people, especially under the age of 35, are the most consistent violators of the social norms regulating the kayas. Seeking profits from coastal

378 Ibid., 28-30.
developers, many go to the forests to get timber or sell access to outsiders to cut their own timber.380

At first view, the unique environmentalisms of the kayas illustrate the value of indigenous mechanisms in their conservation, particularly the symbolic role of the elders as the custodians of the forests and the use of social stigmas to regulate access to and behavior within the kayas. Conversely, the Mijikenda—even the elders—have experienced variability and flux as “custodians” of the kayas, their land, timber, and other forest products.381 Often this is reduced to the decline of traditional mechanisms of indigenous conservation through social development, but transformations in indigenous environmental knowledge and traditions must also be viewed within a broader historical framework than the “traditional” being supplanted by the “modern.”382 People interact with their environments dynamically and neither pre-colonial nor present Africans can occupy the timeless role of “natural conservationists” or “destroyers,”383 and the places where indigenous beliefs or actions are compatible with science cannot be “reduced to a naïve awe.”384 Power relationships and political motivations are similarly important components in the formation of local environmental discourse. Such is the case in conservation, where local actors often have quite different motivations for developing a

382 Kibet and Nyamweru, “Cultural and Biological Heritage at Risk,” 287-295.
conservation project than conservationists or even other members of their own community.385

Contemporary conservation programs work on a specific model which dictates which ecologies “fit” their particular schema and how those sites are recognized and protected.386 The kayas fit the conventions set by UNESCO for World Heritage Sites for their cultural heritage. As defined by the convention, cultural heritage includes the “works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view.”387 Accordingly, the kayas meet three different criteria marked by the convention: (1) as “ancestral homes” and “focal points of Mijikenda identity;” (2) as “repositories of spiritual beliefs,” and (3) as sustained natural forests “under threat both externally and from within Mijikenda society through the decline of traditional knowledge and respect for practices.”388 All three of these criteria are unquestionably true of the forests and are elucidated upon in sections of this thesis. However, by solely presenting the kayas as landscapes under threat, local innovation and invocation of the kaya sites and institutions are not visibly manifest. As a result, the relationship between the Mijikenda and their cultural and natural heritage persists but at a disjunction from the political agendas that have circulated in the spheres of Mijikenda social life.

386 I am indebted to the commentary of participants at the Mid-American Alliance for African Studies conference in Tulsa, OK on 10/9/09, particularly those of Jim Igoe for drawing my attention to this point and challenging me to more deeply interrogate and nuance the environmentalisms of the kayas.
387 “Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage” <http://whc.unesco.org/?cid=175>.
Colonialism and Land Claims in Kwale District

Competitions over land and resources have deep roots in the Kwale district. As local groups, colonial administrators, and conservationists have ironed accords on the local environment the “idea” of the kaya has served as an important component of the larger discourse. This section will briefly explore how traditional rights and access to the kayas have been invoked by elders in land disputes with the district administration.

The Mwachi Forest Exchange:

In 1908, Duruma elders signed an agreement with the acting District Commissioner pertaining to the sacred rights of the Duruma to access their kayas. They leased sections of their land to the government for the construction of a railway line. Two of their kayas were located within the land leased to the government; however, the agreement stipulated that the kayas would be left unaltered by the colonial foresters. Recognizing the Duruma rights to these important religious and cultural centers the agreement stated, “The Duruma people shall at all times have the right to proceed to the area...for a religious purpose and they shall have the rights to proceed at all times to the Kayas and burial grounds on any other areas.” In addition to financial compensation, the Duruma gained free access to the adjacent crown forest to collect firewood and cut timber. Four years later, the agreement came into play after several Duruma elders complained that timber had been cut within one of their kayas. In response, the administration moved swiftly to ensure that they observed “the sacred tribal rights of the

389 Bergman, “A Willingness to Remember,” 144-146.
390 Agreement of Duruma Elders Witnessed by the Assistant District Commissioner, 4 June 1908, MP/213.
391 Agreement of Duruma Elders Witnessed by the Assistant District Commissioner, 4 June 1908, MP/213.
Wa-Duruma.”³⁹² Realizing that one Duruma kaya had been gazetted within the developing Mwachi Forest Reserve, which at the time did not have fully surveyed and demarcated boundaries they quickly resolved to take more care in the future and work to outline a more clearly defined boundary for the reserve.³⁹³

By 1926, the boundaries of Mwachi Forest Reserve had been resurveyed and after Duruma elders complained that timber was being cut inside of Kaya Mtsokara inquiries into the matter revealed that both Kaya Mtsokara and Kaya Duruma were located inside of the boundaries.³⁹⁴ While the Duruma elders and the Assistant Conservator of Forests agreed to reexamine boundaries of the forests, demarcating the kaya boundaries with stones, the kayas remained inside the reserve.³⁹⁵ Two years later, kaya boundary issues were raised again after a proposal by the Mombasa Water Supply to extend a pipeline through Kaya Mtsokara was flatly rejected by the Agricultural Provincial Commissioner “[o]wing to the agreement made and in respect of native custom and the very strong resentment that would arise if the Mtsokara Kaya is disturbed.”³⁹⁶

Meanwhile the elders and colonial authorities began to negotiate a land transaction to re-gazette the two kayas outside of the forest reserve in exchange for forested land which was part of the Duruma Native Reserve. For several years following the proposed transfer administrators from Kwale District expressed their frustrations at the failure of the Mwachi Exchange to take hold. This was in part because the Duruma

³⁹² Agricultural District Commissioner Mombasa to DC Mombasa 26/7/12, MP213; Agricultural District Commissioner Mombasa to Land Officer Nairobi 17 July 1912, MP/213.
³⁹³ Asst. DC Mombasa to Asst. DC Rabai 30 July 1912, MP/213.
³⁹⁴ “Notes on Kayas Mtsokara and Duruma” PRB/KWL/1/124.
³⁹⁵ “Notes on Kayas Mtsokara and Duruma” PRB/KWL/1/124.
³⁹⁶ Correspondence from Agricultural Provincial Commissioner to the Executive Engineer, Publics Works Department, Mombasa, PRB/KWL/1/124.
continued to occupy all of the lands granted to them, including the *kayas* despite current Forest Department boundaries.\(^{397}\) It was not until 1937 that the exchange was finally settled and the two *kayas* were officially surrendered by the foresters and left “entirely in the hands of the Duruma,” although the Duruma elders remained highly suspicious of the Forest Department’s activities.\(^{398}\) While this dispute was eventually resolved, for several years the Duruma were able to paralyze successfully the Forest Department from implementing administrative authority. The Duruma effectively held onto crown lands, drawing on the “sacred rights” they were able to exercise over the *kayas*, with or without government recognition.

*Kaya Kwale and Shimba Hills:*

When the borders of the forest reserve that would later become Shimba Hills National Reserve were extended in 1939 the Digo Kaya Kwale was gazetted inside of the Crown Forest’s lands. With strong opposition, the elders of the Digo Local Native Council proposed that the land be made into Native rather than Crown Forest.\(^{399}\) In their petition they made claims based on their ancient and honored rights to their *kaya* requesting a realignment of the reserve’s borders via maintenance of the original borders of Digo territory. Making a plea for social continuity, the elders emphasized the importance of Kaya Kwale for providing health to the land and the community.\(^{400}\) The administration responded knowing that disregarding the elders’ claims would not be beneficial to the management of the forest.

\(^{397}\) Digo District Annual Report 1936, AR/KWL/XL/2189.
\(^{399}\) Shimba Forest Extension, 1 December 1939; 12 December 1939, CC/9/2.
\(^{400}\) Rashid Mbwara to Local Division Forest Office Mombasa, 13 September 1946, CC/9/6.
The Kwale District officers resolved to block any attempt at disturbing the kayas on the grounds that any disturbance would be “indefensible and strongly resented by the Wadigo.” However, the question of protecting the kaya site was complicated by the settlement of non-Digo in the area. Up-country migrants altered the cultural and religious makeup of the Shimba hills, often violating the social norms and traditional uses of the kayas and continuing the process of decline in these institutions among younger generations. Recognizing the value of protecting the kayas within lands restricted by the government, the elders agreed to the preservation of the forest with the understanding that kayas too would be protected. Keenly aware of the need to provide access to the kayas, the Forest Department permitted Digo elders to perform all customary rituals and ceremonies within the kayas, providing that they sought out the head forest officer prior to entering and did not partake in any activities inside of the reserve other than “customary worship.” The accord was a pragmatic choice for the Digo elders because it protected the kayas within the Shimba Forest from encroachment by outsiders, while still allowing them unmitigated access.

Shimba Hills Today:

401 Excision From Forest Reserve—Kwale, 27 July 1948, CC/9/2.
402 Excision From Forest Reserve—Kwale, 27 July 1948, CC/9/2. British impetus to create a “white highlands” up-country spurred resettlement schemes which relocated members of up-country ethnic groups to coastal regions. See Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992). In the Shimba Hills, a resettlement scheme initiated in the early-1940s and lasting through the late-1950s drastically altered the ethnic makeup of the local population, relocating members of the Kikuyu, Kamba, and other ethnic groups to the region; In the process of redistributing lands, areas which were considered sacred by the local Digo were given to newer migrants, Conversation with Mzee Hamad Omari Ngata in Lukore 7/25/09.
403 Conversations with Mzee Hamad Omari Ngata in Lukore, 7/25/09 and Hari Kabi in Shimba Hills, 7/18/09.
Eventually, what had been a crown forest and later a game park—today the Shimba Hills National Reserve (SHNR)—was established on the forested lands surrounding several Digo and Duruma kayas.\textsuperscript{406} Today there are five kayas located within SHNR and the adjacent Mwalungaje Elephant Sanctuary (MES).\textsuperscript{407} For local individuals, the fencing has fostered a positive attitude toward the conservation land and the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) since the kayas are protected from destruction by the reserve and officers from the KFS are able to provide security from local elephant populations when the elders need to visit kayas for ritual purposes.\textsuperscript{408} However in the region which is historically over populated by elephants, the kayas have suffered from the impact of elephants. In MES, the Duruma Kaya Tae has been severely deforested by the elephants, while in SHNR, Kaya Kwale—the primary Digo kaya—has also suffered from the impact of the elephants.\textsuperscript{409} Human-elephant conflicts have long affected livelihoods on lands around SHNR. In 1999, an electric fence was created surrounding most of SHNR. While this limited human-elephant conflict, it also created a territory that for the Digo lies ambiguously between the vacant (uncultivated), the foreign, and the sacred.\textsuperscript{410} In addition, these policies limit access to important agricultural, environmental and cultural resources.\textsuperscript{411}

Through interactions with conservationist programs the kayas have been used as historical markers, influencing and disputing the demarcation of boundaries in the Kwale

\textsuperscript{406} See file AJ/1/10 on the creation of Shimba Hills Game Reserve.
\textsuperscript{408} Conversation with a member of the Shimba Hills Forest Guides in Kwale, 6/21/09.
\textsuperscript{409} Knickerbocker and Waithaka, “People and Elephants in the Shimba Hills, Kenya,” 228-229.
\textsuperscript{410} Ibid., 228-229.
\textsuperscript{411} Conversation with Jame Mwakwari in Kwale, 7/28/09. See also Shetler, Imagining Serengeti, 234.
District. The environmental history of Kenya’s coastal hinterlands is entwined with these
dynamics which have woven new meanings into the landscapes. Today, the existence of
conservation lands surrounding several kayas in Kwale District complicates the notion of
indigenous environmentalism since the forests are protected by fences rather than
symbolic mechanisms and are threatened by elephants rather than by people. The kayas’
ecological value and persistence as symbolic physical sites cannot be divorced from their
encounters during colonialism and their present state of interaction with broader
conservation issues.

**Kaya Elders in Political Culture**

Perhaps the most unique development in the kayas’ narration is more recent
invocations of Mijikenda traditions in political dispute. Land access and ownership have
long been contentious issues for many Mijikenda. In the independence era, migrations
and resettlement schemes reinforced coastal mistrust and animosities toward up-country
migrants who quickly bought up lands and marginalized the coastal Mijikenda
economically. Politicians have capitalized on these fears by playing into Mijikenda
distrust of up-country encroachments. Their techniques are used to build political
platforms and forge popular support for candidates based on protecting coastal lands from
outsiders. Leading up to the 1997 Kenyan Presidential elections, these sentiments fully
manifested in an organized outbreak of political violence meant to destabilize regions in
opposition to incumbent president Daniel Arap Moi and his KANU party. It is widely
believed that the movement evolved through political manipulation by coastal members

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412 See Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters*, especially Chapters 5 and 6.
413 Ciekawy, “Politicians, Party Politics and the Control of Harmful Magic,” 129-130.
of the KANU party. Playing into Mijikenda fears of dispossession by up-country migrants, the party leaders believed that violence and uncertainty would help to create votes for Moi and his KANU party who could help to effectively restore order.415 The image and cultural centrality of the kayas and kaya elders were entwined in the crisis and subsequent political events. This illustrates how, as Diane Ciekawy has argued, in post-colonial Kenya, Mijikenda traditions have been utilized as “technologies of power.”416

The crisis began when approximately twenty mostly Digo young men burned the Likoni Police Station, just south of Mombasa Island. The violence quickly spread and escalated, eventually displacing between 4,000 and 5,000 members of up-country ethnic groups. Members of the attackers who eventually numbered close to 8,000 retreated to the forested areas of Kenya’s coastal hinterlands, some which were identified as kaya forests. The attackers were referred to in print media as the “kaya raiders” and many adorned themselves in clothing that included symbols of Mijikenda healers and Islam.417 In conjunction with rumors that the raiders had taken oaths which were administered by kaya elders, images emerged from Kenyan media coverage representing the kaya “as a centre of dangerous and disorderly power.”418 In the national spotlight, Mijikenda traditions were demonized and cast backwards.

Only five years later, the kaya leadership again entered the political sphere, this time under highly disparate circumstances. In the aftermath of the 2002 Kenyan

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415 Ciekawy, “Oathing, Deoathing, and Faux Oathing,” 2; Justin Willis, “The King of the Mijikenda and Other Stories about the Kaya,” 233-234.
418 Ibid., 303.
elections, Emmanuel Maitha, a Giriama politician linked with the kaya raiders in 1997 was awarded for his support of the new president Mwai Kibaki’s NARC party by being appointed to a local minister position. The day following his initiation by President Kibaki, Matiha was initiated again, this time at Kaya Fungo and declared “King of the Mijikenda.” Confirming his position within a continuum of Mijikenda tradition he stated “I was taken to the Kaya and made your leader; these are the symbols that signify my status. You must protect me because if people abuse me and due to anger I shed tears, that person will drop dead according to the Mijikenda.”

Departing from the demonic portrayals of kaya leadership that prevailed in 1997, politicians used the kaya as a symbol of empowerment as a marginal group who had been “exploited and abused by the ruling party.” While images of Mijikenda unity prevailed publically, others critiqued Maitha’s position as “King of the Mijikenda,” claiming he attained this prominent role in the eldership for his political power rather than ritual expertise. Maitha’s story further complicates the relationship between the kaya leadership and contemporary political power. As an example, after Maitha’s death in 2004, contenders for his parliamentary seat approached the leadership of Kaya Fungo, bringing with them gifts and cash in exchange for the elders’ blessings. Although the legitimacy of politics in kaya traditions was challenged, traditional leaders and local politicians continued to collude in both political and esoteric spheres.

419 “Maitha Moves to Reconcile with Khamisi,” Daily Nation, 6 October 2003, Quoted in Willis, “The King of the Mijikenda and Other Stories about the Kaya,” 235.
420 Willis, “The King of the Mijikenda and Other Stories about the Kaya,” 233-234.
421 McIntosh, “Elders and ‘Frauds,’” 43.
Internally, the entwinement of *kaya* leadership and politics has challenged conventional notions of legitimacy, ritual progression and claims to elder status, and the ability to represent the Mijikenda community.\(^{422}\) To many, the contemporary image of the elders has been blemished by their roles in Kenyan politics and the commoditization of their expertise. Elders have continued fostering relationships with important political figures, blessing them in *kaya* ceremonies or granting them honorary eldership—frequently for gifts or financial compensation.\(^{423}\) Janet McIntosh suggested that this has led to a “structural nostalgia” for a time when elders acted as custodians of community health and wellbeing rather than “vendors of tradition.”\(^{424}\) This has manifested public anxieties regarding authenticity and expertise in Mijikenda communities and, for some, a desire to return to the ritual purity of Mijikenda tradition and *kaya* elders.\(^{425}\)

The politics of “being” an elder and an expert has consequently taken on contextual meanings which in a political sense or ritual sense can be highly disparate. In the political events of the 1997 crisis, those reported as *kaya* elders misrepresented Mijikenda elders. *Kaya* rituals, in turn, were presented in a way that was fundamentally “false.”\(^{426}\) Cases such as Maitha’s illustrate how the symbolic endorsement of *kaya* leadership bestows important representational power and “legitimacy” on local politicians. In both of these instances, the linkages between the symbolic authority and esoteric knowledge of *kaya* elders were invoked in expressions of state power.\(^{427}\) Today

\(^{422}\) Ibid., 43-45.
\(^{424}\) McIntosh, “Elders and ‘Frauds’,“ 35-36.
\(^{425}\) Ibid., 46-50.
\(^{427}\) Ibid., 22-23.
the variety of actors a kaya ceremony might include is virtually limitless: national political figures, local politicians, conservationists, tourists, community members, or perhaps only elders. In conservation ceremonies and activities on collective heritage administered by national or international environmental organizations and NGO’s, the issue of local identity in ceremony becomes quite chaotic.428 By politicizing the symbolic authority of the kayas and kaya elders, the sacred sites assume a centrality in highly controversial issues affecting contemporary Kenya, particularly the politics of land, ethnicity, and belonging.

Landscape as Social Text: Kaya Narratives in Contemporary Digo Culture

On the local level, debates on social continuity of Mijikenda customs add to the living traditions of the kaya forests. Now that the kayas have been officially recognized by the Kenyan government as well as by UNESCO as World Heritage sites, the role of the kaya elders as custodians of both Mijikenda culture and the forests has increased in relation to conservation projects. While this recognition affirms the role of the kaya elder, it also illuminates friction over the role of Mijikenda traditions today. This section will explore how Digo religious practices, intergenerational relationships, and environmental change are narrated in a contemporary setting through the kaya forests.

Digo elders who continue to participate in the ritual activities of the kaya, emphasize the need to preserve an “ideal” culture, which has been challenged by colonial power, education, and technology. This is not a fight against “progress,” as elders readily accept more-qualified younger community in their new positions of authority. Still,

among some elders there is skepticism toward the waning of Digo rituals, especially rain-making ceremonies, which have been eroded by the breakdown of the “ideological unity between society and environment” via a waning gerontocracy. Questions of Digo social continuity are part of broader issues stemming from intersection of Islamic and traditional space, local authority, and environmental change—dialogues which are foundational to the local history of the Digo.

Islamic social norms, such as recognizing Allah as the only god and abstaining from consuming alcohol are used to challenge the kaya practices which contradict these norms. However, to some elders, going to the kayas is an integral part of maintaining their culture and traditions. One used the proverb “Mwacha mila ni mtumwa” meaning “he who forfeits his culture is like a slave.” Among the elders I spoke with, there was consistency in their belief that Islam and Digo customs could remain in practice together. However, the youth increasingly differentiate between Islam and kaya practices, associating the kaya with backwardness or witchcraft. One Digo youth expressed to me that it is not in conflict with their religion, but certain practices such as being seen going to the kayas to offer a hen or a cock for sacrifice is embarrassing, especially in front of their peers. In response to the revival of the kayas in some communities through conservation, some youth protest against beliefs associated with the kayas, telling the elders that the holy books say the kaya is against God’s commandment.

430 Conversation with Mzee Ali Aaharani in Shimoni, 7/30/09.
431 Nyamweru and Kibet observed similar phenomenon among Rabai Muslims while finding that most Christiana distanced themselves from kaya traditions. See Kibet and Nyamweru, “Cultural and Biological Heritage at Risk,” 291.
432 Conversation with Soleman Shillingi in Lukore, 7/25/09; Mzee Ali Aaharani in Shimoni, 7/30/09.
Social pressures contribute greatly to these sentiments. Their friends pressure them into thinking that doing what the elders do lowers their dignity. In a group conversation several students expressed to me that real Muslims cannot go to the kayas because it is against their faith.

Folklore was once conventionally used to protect the kayas and make sure that people adhered to Digo customs. According to oral traditions, the misfortunes that would befall people for turning away from the kayas or entering without permission was articulated by the elders through tales of evil spirits, snakes, and natural disasters. However since the elders did not have the same access to school as younger generations, today they have less authority in their communities to reinforce such rituals. Access to technology has also broken down the authority derived from being the holder of oral traditions. Two elders expressed that “zamani”—“in olden times”—they were able to use songs and stories to transmit the culture and help build knowledge to the origins of Digo culture and the kayas; however “now people go to songs on the radio for their stories.”

The lack of rainfall in Kenya continues to be a major concern, especially among the nation’s rural population. Due to inconsistent rains and dissatisfaction with crop yields, magic and kaya sacrifices have been maintained in Digo agricultural practices. In Peasant Intellectuals, Feierman describes this as a dialogue on “healing and harming the land,” during which peasant intellectuals in northeastern Tanzania historically have

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433 Group discussion in Shimba Hills, 7/25/09.
434 Conversation with Mzee Hamad Omari Ngatata in Lukore, 7/25/09.
435 Mzee Ali Aaharani, 7/20/09.
436 Conversation with Mzee Soleman Hamid Cumbo and Mzee Hamadi Abdulah Mwakweli in Kinondo, 7/27/09.
437 Mohamed Pakia, African Traditional Plant Knowledge Today: An ethnobotanical study of the Digo at the Kenya Coast (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), 118.
used rainmaking to translate “local understandings of misfortune as caused by God or human action.”\textsuperscript{438} Similarly, \textit{kayas} have been inserted into dialogues on environmental change, challenging standard environmental narratives and community involvement in Digo customs. When speaking about environmental and cultural concerns surrounding the \textit{kayas}, I heard several individuals speculate that if people persist in not using the \textit{kayas} the rainy season will continue to take longer to come and cattle diseases will be more frequent. One elder suggested to me that if the youth took the practices of long ago, the droughts would not happen, and people would come together more as a community if they were using the \textit{kaya}.\textsuperscript{439}

A Digo youth explained that the \textit{wazee} believe that God provides the rain, while many youths draw on science and blame the old men for cutting trees and causing environmental decline. In contrast, elders, he claimed, tell them that changes are occurring because the culture is not being followed like long ago.\textsuperscript{440} However, today many youths believe that the practices associated with the \textit{kayas} were only used in the past because of illiteracy, and should be abandoned now that people know more about the environment.\textsuperscript{441} Of course these beliefs are far from uniform, and discussions of local environmental history and tradition cannot be framed through a dichotomy of old and young. What these contemporary debates on tradition, community, and the environment do illustrate are the social tensions present in questions of cultural preservation.

\textsuperscript{438} Feierman, \textit{Peasant Intellectuals}, 264.
\textsuperscript{439} Mzee Ali Aaharani, 7/30/09.
\textsuperscript{440} Soleman Shillingi, 7/25/09.
\textsuperscript{441} Conversation with Othman Hassan in Shimba Hills, 7/25/09.
The Conservation Model and Local Culture

The above anecdotes illustrate the dynamic settings in which Mijikenda traditions have been invoked and transformed in the twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries. While these arenas of Mijikenda social and political histories are highly discursive, more popular conservation narratives effectively limit the experiences and public memories of these events.

The implications of conservationist programs on local communities and their histories are far reaching. At worst, the environment becomes something that is prescribed a fixed value. As Charles Zerner explained “Nature is analogized to a warehouse, a library, or a safe-deposit box containing fixed, valuable, and threatened commercial assets.” These key phrases illustrate the ideology championed in eco-tourism and commercial outfitters operating in national parks across the globe. However, such beliefs have the effect of producing what Said termed an “imaginary geography” between tourist/conservationist and landscape/culture/other. Just as Eurocentric scholarship has been accused of fetishizing the “exotic,” tourism brochures and websites create “a conceptualization of nature, that treats nature as ‘scenery’ upon which aesthetic judgments can be laid.” By infusing landscapes and cultural identities with outside values and knowledge and singularizing those as “truth” without space for alternative

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443 Said, Orientalism, 54.
444 Neumann, Imposing Wilderness, 9-10.
ways of knowing, colonial and neocolonial legacies are perpetuated within an environment.\textsuperscript{445}

When viewed as features of Mijikenda social history, the \textit{kayas} like other terrains of the past can be performed and positioned in more recent lived experience, creating space for agency, counter-narrative, negotiation, as well as continuity.\textsuperscript{446} Often, the narratives which emanate from these experiences are incompatible with the \textit{kaya} stories espoused by both local and international conservation groups. The impetus to conserve the Mijikenda forests first grew out of a 1981 Oxford University ethnobotanical study that emphasized the rich botanical and cultural heritage of the forest groves.\textsuperscript{447} Later H.W. Mutoro’s 1987 archeological study of the \textit{kayas} provided an outline for the basis of a conservation program for the \textit{kayas} which begat the establishment of CFCU in 1992.\textsuperscript{448} This eventually led to the gazettment of over sixty forest patches as \textit{kaya} forests and the eventual establishment of eleven \textit{kayas} as UNESCO World Heritage sites in 2008.

Largely, the assertion that the \textit{kayas} are historical relics of the original Mijikenda homesteads has prevailed in explaining their significance, drawing on the Singwaya origins myth that has come under so much fire.\textsuperscript{449} At the same time, however, the conservationist project inherently contradicts the Singwaya narrative, illuminating tensions in the process of determining \textit{kaya} sites. As I experienced while accompanying

\textsuperscript{446} Bhaba, \textit{The Location of Culture}, 336.
\textsuperscript{449} These explanations draw heavily on the Singwaya origins myth to explain the social and cultural significance of the \textit{kayas}. For an overview of the debates on Singwaya and Mijikenda origins see the introduction.
CFCU, *kaya* boundaries might be used to gain access to land resources or settle long standing disputes. Similarly, Willis observed that when the *kaya* conservation project was first initiated some areas which had been cultivated for decades were identified and gazetted as *kayas*, thus removing the occupant farmers from the land.\(^{450}\) Moreover, by identifying close to sixty *kaya* forests—a number well in excess of the purported “nine homesteads”—the notion of a “singular ‘capital,’ defining—and defined by—the group” is disrupted.\(^{451}\) This problematizes not only the chronology and historicity of these records mobilized in academic studies and conservationist literature, but also the relationship between the *kayas* and the formation of Mijikenda identity.\(^{452}\)

The programmatic approach of World Heritage relies heavily on the cohesiveness of the sites’ historical and cultural endowments.\(^{453}\) Thus, in order to preserve the patches of indigenous forest, the traditional importance of the sites needs to be revived if not reinvented.\(^{454}\) The nomination dossier that inscribed the *kayas* as World Heritage sites described the forests as an “outstanding and unique African example of how the collective attitudes and beliefs of a rural society have shaped or sculpted a landscape over time in response to prevailing needs.”\(^{455}\) While the proposal addressed criticisms and various interpretations of Mijikenda history, the public view espoused by ecotourism

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\(^{451}\) Willis, “The King of the Mijikenda and Other Stories about the Kaya,” 236.

\(^{452}\) Ibid., 236.


projects, conservationists, and the signs located at the entrance of the *kayas* make claims to a simplified and uniform narrative, effectively silencing counter-histories and overemphasizing a singular “tradition.” For example, the website for Kaya Kinondo Ecotourism Project harkens this idea of making a traditional Digo experience part of one’s coastal vacation. Describing the tour, the website states,

> Visitors are let though the forest and listen to numerous tales and legends about the characters that lived there, their strength, weakness and unique traits. This is an essential part of the experience deepening one’s sense of the Kaya’s living history and Digo traditions.456

In this description human experiences are central to the environment, dictating its “moral center.”457 However, the particular images evoked within this portrayal are both ancient and different.

The evolution of eco- and ethnotourism has been critiqued for representing models that embody a new form of exoticizing, fetishizing, and othering “traditional” culture. Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe explained that “the ideas of remote, untouched, unspoilt and even primitive are used as markers of ecotourist desirability, and Other is presented as the antithesis of industrial society, where local cultures in the ecotourist destination are often portrayed as extensions of the natural world.”458 Accordingly, the value of the forests and their cultural associations must be affirmed through Western eyes.459

Although their culture is commoditized, local populations are not passive actors in this process, playing into tourists’ desires for evocations of the “primitive” or “untouched” to extract revenues.\textsuperscript{460} Indeed, Kaya Kinondo is a locally driven project, and by creating or “mimicking” the expectations of ecotourists and conservationists, participants normalize their relationship to power and capital while simultaneously producing a new set of knowledge, minimizing the relationship of hegemony to their social place and identities.\textsuperscript{461} Moreover, many believe, in the face of shifting Digo cultural practices and encroachment from the nearby tourist beach resorts in Diani, a viable ecotourism project is the most effective way to preserve the forests today.\textsuperscript{462} The project was first initiated by national institutions, but the local management staff and the advisory group of elders with whom they consult direct the project’s current initiatives and the representations which tourists and outside groups are privileged to witness.

Still, contemporary conservation is foundationally driven by Western appropriation of indigenous lands, environmental knowledge and participation.\textsuperscript{463} This propagates the same strategy of “sterilizing” and “policing knowledge” embedded in colonial discourse and later academic productions of knowledge on Africa, which reproduces structures of Western hegemony.\textsuperscript{464} From a postcolonial perspective, the

\textsuperscript{460} Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe, \textit{Nature Unbound}, 143.
\textsuperscript{461} Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture}, 122-123, 277.
\textsuperscript{462} Conversation with Mzee Soleman Hamid Cumbo and Mzee Hamadi Abdulah Mwakweli in Kinonodo, 7/27/09. Indeed the actual boundaries of Kaya Kinondo are still under dispute as some of the land the Digo claim as part of their \textit{kaya} is owned by foreign developers. This has prevented Kaya Kinondo from being included as part of the Mijikenda \textit{Kayas} World Heritage Site. Conversation with Kaya Kinondo site manager in Kinondo, 7/27/09.
\textsuperscript{464} Depelchin, \textit{Silences in African History}, 1. Senevoratne even suggests UNESCO’s maneuvers to inscribe and manage the world’s heritage sites can be made analogous to the economic control international
management of conservation sites illustrates the delicate relationship between celebratory histories and silence. Sudharshan Seneviratne, for example, linked the conservation of the World Heritage site Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka to the Orientalist tradition, arguing that the histories on the site contained in classical texts were adopted in colonial historiographies thus codifying the narrative hierarchy of great men from the “Golden Age” of Sri Lankan history and marginalizing minority histories. This narrative eventually provided the basis for the inscription of the site’s world heritage, and continues to serve as the basis for perpetuating its value and authenticity. Just as was the case in imperial projects, the West reserves the privilege to decide what and who is authentic.

Control over the meaning of a site is critical for understanding the tensions between older “traditional” forms of knowledge, colonial and outside influences, and political struggles of collective memory. In the histories purported on the kayas under the World Heritage model, the dynamics extrapolated upon in this and prior chapters are neglected. Instead, the dossier stated, the “history of the Kayas in the 20th century is primarily that of their protection and management as traditional cultural sites.” Thus, the storied past and transformations of the Mijikenda kayas in relation to broader
historical developments are diminished from their grand narrative. Under the World Heritage Convention the *kayas* are framed as “continuing landscapes” for the persistently evolving role they have played in the social life of the community.\(^\text{469}\) However, this is expounded only to the extent of the landscapes’ movements from “settlements to ritual or ceremonial sites” to isolated “forest patches.”\(^\text{470}\) It is this picture of relic, endangered, and culturally homogenous sacred forests that is captured, allegedly “etching them more clearly in the panoramic view” of Kenya’s and the world’s heritage.\(^\text{471}\) The model put into motion celebrates a world heritage while socializing a particular narrative, effectively silencing the “small voice of history.”\(^\text{472}\)

Once internationally validated, an ecological World Heritage site becomes the intellectual and cultural property and “biological wealth” of the “global community,” their endowments appraised and then policed by NGOs and other international actors.\(^\text{473}\) The organs of management of the *kayas*—managed by members of the local community through the sub-division of NMK, CFCU—are disparate from many top-down “fortress” models bent on removing the human factor from a conservation site.\(^\text{474}\) Still, the World Heritage model effectively “worlds” the *kayas*, favoring a homogenous image of their history and contemporary significance. In contrast, this thesis has evaluated several

\(^{469}\) Ibid.\(^{470}\) Ibid.\(^{471}\) Ibid.\(^{472}\) Ranajit Guha, “The Small Voice of History,” *Subaltern Studies Writings in South Asian history and society* 9, ed. Guha (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1996).\(^{473}\) Zerner, “Telling Stories About Biological Diversity,” 72.\(^{474}\) “Fortress conservation” according to Brockington describes the model where people are physically removed from an area in the name of development or conservation policies. The alternative however, community conservation is also problematic as “communities” are portrayed as homogenous entities and represented by only a few powerful actors. The extent of my research is not broad enough to fairly access whether or not this is the case in *kaya* conservation. See Brockington, *Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve, Tanzania* (Oxford: James Curry, 2002), 7-9.
different settings in which the Mijikenda *kayas* were invoked and inserted into coastal Kenya’s twentieth- and twenty-first century experiences. By enmeshing the *kayas* in local discourse, their standard historical narrative is disaggregated by power imposed from the outside and drawn upon internally, politicizing the landscapes in local practice, and stressing “discontinuities as well as continuities, of past and present practices.” The past practices of the *kayas* illustrate struggles over their significance as well as disparate interpretations of the “symbolic meaning of the landscape and its relevance to a people’s history.”

This critique is not a call against conservation. The *kayas* forests are impressive, rich historical, cultural, and ecological landscapes facing very real threats from deforestation due to coastal and local development. The ecological damage they have already accrued also constitutes a significant loss to the heritage of the Mijikenda. I do, however, argue that contemporary conservation needs to be more effectively historicized to account for the lived dynamics of landscapes. *Kayas* have been consistently and historically implanted into the social and political developments of Kenya. As a result, discursive power is engendered into the physical landscapes and institutions. While the conservationist view presents this image as one of continuity and uniformity, historical experiences disaggregate this image.

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CONCLUSIONS

The nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries were times of rapid flux and social change in Kenya’s Coast Province. For the Mijikenda, the development of a market based economy on the coast created new opportunities for younger generations to accrue wealth and power. While they “aggressively sought out new trading connections,” the older gerontocratic government and settlement patterns in their kaya homesteads were replaced by a more decentralized system. As a result, the periodization of Mijikenda history accounts the kayas as relic spaces from the 1850s onwards. However, in the twentieth-century the physical spaces of the kayas and more often their symbolic institutional power influenced the dynamics of British colonialism and Mijikenda social life. This thesis developed three primary themes: first, how the kayas were used in different ways to create space from colonial influence, second, how Mijikenda elders used the symbolic role of the kayas and kaya institutions to reaffirm their esoteric knowledge and place of authority on both the community and regional political level, and finally, this thesis explored the shifting image of the kayas in relation to colonial, political, and environmental discourses.

Throughout the colonial era, the Mijikenda used the advantages of their own cultural knowledge to influence British appropriation of tradition. Among the Digo, Islamic practices placed them in an ambiguous place relative to colonial policies. While the British administration was bent on separating interactions between the “Mohamedan” coast and the “pagan” hinterlands, Digo social and religious practices and the persistence of the kayas complicated colonial perceptions of Digo identity. Because the Digo

477 Spear, The Kaya Complex, 142-145.
retained beliefs and practices that the colonial government saw as “pagan,” “traditional,” or “tribal,” the administration was dismissive of Digo Islam, which they reduced to the adoption of Muslim dress and names for prestige or patronage in coastal trade. These ambiguities empowered Digo elders to reaffirm their generational authority internally and create negotiating space with the colonial administration by employing situationally both their Digo and their Muslim identities during the gazettment of the Digo Native Reserve. However, very quickly, rapidly changing notions of Digo Islam created a generation of younger individuals who challenged authority represented by the elders. Seeking to efficiently administer the hinterlands and maintain the divide between the Swahili coastal population and the Digo, the colonial administration continued to back the lalo homestead heads. Nonetheless, Digo society continued in flux while inheritance laws and urbanization made the elders’ status increasingly vulnerable.

Among the Duruma and Giriama, administrative interests in reviving their kambis enabled elders to passively resist encroachments of British authority. Famines as well as the relative disorganization of the Duruma and their ambivalence to colonial government delayed the initiation of a new kambi. Eventually, the administration abandoned holding new initiations due to social ruptures between the elders, the kayas, different generations, and genders. This not only, as Bergman had previously suggested, prevented the colonial administration from appropriating legitimate authority, but inhibited them from having an effective governmental structure in place to administer the Duruma.

The Giriama used similar delay tactics to push the initiations of a new kambi back to 1925. Eventually, the Giriama elders acquiesced to administrative desires by
beginning new *kambi* initiations; however, they did so on their own terms. Using *kaya* performances, the elders delayed the initiations until a successful harvest and accepted the food wealth of the community as the required gifts for the initiations while charging new initiates fees to learn the customary initiation dances. As the bearers of Giriama ritual, the elders used community performances to display legitimacy and specialized knowledge, reaffirming an important social place in the aftermath of several decades of decline. However, the initiations did not bring about rapid social change as the colonial administration hoped. Rather than reconstituting an organized system of government to assist in the administration of Giriama locations, the *kambi* initiations acted mainly as a functional medium for the elders to use the sponsorship of the government to reassert themselves socially and accrue wealth. Rather than making Mijikenda customs obsolete, the attempted revival of the *kambi* served as a springboard to later political mobilizations of the Giriama elders’ authority.

The symbolic importance of the *kayas* has fluctuated in the movement of the Mijikenda away from their homesteads—in many cases increasing in importance.\(^{478}\) These shifting images can be located in historical experiences and interactions. For the Muslim Digo, debates on social continuity, authority, beliefs, and custom are embedded in contemporary articulations of the *kayas* and the contrasting notions of what it means to be both Digo and Muslim that emerged in the transforming social climate of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-centuries. Giriama elders invoked custom and continuity very directly, using ritual performance to illustrate their legitimacy and authority to the colonial administration and their communities. As more bounded notions of Mijikenda

\(^{478}\) Parkin, *Sacred Void*. 
identity began to crystallize in the 1940s, those individuals who participated in the ritual activities of the kayas became important political patrons in the emerging political climate as Kenya moved toward independence. Again, the elders articulated their legitimacy and newfound political significance through ceremony, these symbolic gestures continuing to influence the images and sacredness of the kayas.

In the past two decades, interest in the conservation value of the kayas has heightened. As a result several interlinked conservation organizations have made tremendous strides toward conserving the kayas as sacred grove forests and reaffirming their significance within hinterland communities. While conservationist discourses recognize that the forests are significant ecological and cultural entities, they continue to be framed as historical relics. Meanwhile, the ways the symbolic institutions of the kayas were inserted into the social and political history of the coastal Kenya after the end of the kaya phase in the middle of the nineteenth-century are largely neglected. Very recently, the symbolic authority of the kaya elders has been woven into larger discussions not only of their own legitimacy, but land and conservation disputes, as well as debates on ethnicity and belonging with very real political implications. These developments did not occur in a vacuum. Reading the colonial experiences of the Mijikenda through the lens of the kayas illuminates the important role played by indigenous traditions in shaping their relations with the colonial administration.

When viewed temporally, the starting and ending place of a narrative “profoundly alters its shape and meaning.”479 This study began with the notion that the kayas and symbolic kaya institutions have deeply influenced political and social discourses of

479 Cronon, “A Place for Stories,” 1364.
twentieth-century coastal Kenya. By deeming the *kayas* as phased out of Mijikenda life by the middle of the nineteenth-century, their meaning as social sites is limited to the relic. However, by examining the ways that Mijikenda traditions and the physical and symbolic role of the *kayas* have interacted in local social history, encounters with British colonialism, and in more recent political and environmental discourses, the lived role of the landscape is fully manifest.
REFERENCES


