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MODERN SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE MIDZI-CHENDA COMMUNITY OF COASTAL KENYA*

INTRODUCTION

Labelled typically by outsiders with the ethnonym *Mijikenda*, the community prefers and appreciates the term derived from the common Bantu mother language, which is Midzi-Chenda and used here. The Midzi-Chenda community of coastal Kenya has been studied widely by scholars of different disciplines and from all parts of the world. They include anthropologists, historians, sociologists, health and environmental scientists, and theologians. As a community member, I do not wish in this paper to bring forth subjective information. Celia Nyamweru,¹ Kaingu Tinga,² Justine Willis,³ David Parkin,⁴ Cynthia Brantley,⁵ Thomas Spear⁶ and John B. Griffiths⁷ all have

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¹ Celia NYAMWERU, "Women and Sacred Groves in Coastal Kenya: A Contribution to the Ecofeminist Debate," in *Ecofeminism and Globalisation*, ed. Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 41–56.

² Kaingu Kalume TINGA, "The Presentation and Interpretation of Ritual Sites: The Mijikenda Kaya Case," *Museum International* 56, no. 3 (2004): 8–14.

³ Justine WILLIS, *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of Mijikenda*, Oxford Studies in African Affairs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

⁴ David PARKIN, *Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual Among the Giriama of Kenya*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 18 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 482–82.

⁵ Cynthia BRANTLEY, *The Giriama and Colonial Resistance in Kenya, 1800-1920* (London: University of California Press, 1981).

⁶ Thomas SPEAR, *The Kaya Complex: A History of the Mijikenda Peoples of the Kenya Coast to 1900* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978).

explored the history and lifestyle of the Midzi-Chenda. My approach is ethnographic, and I focused on how cultural heritage can be a tool for socio-economic change. I discuss how modernity influences cultural heritage, creating—through internal and external forces—agents of change in a vibrant and needful society.

1. MIDZI-CHENDA HISTORIOLOGY

A study by Sue Feary⁸ explains the relevance of human existence in relation to cultural heritage, contending that without humans, there can be no culture and therefore no cultural heritage. As such, the historical movements and settlement along the Kenyan coast of the nine tribes that comprise the Midzi-Chenda people provides the foundation for understanding their tangible and non-tangible cultural heritage of the Midzi-Chenda include the Achonyi, Agiriama, Aarahai, Arihe, Akauma, Adzihana, Akambe, all living along the North coast of Kenya, and the Adigo and the Aduruma, who live on the south coast (Tinga). In their histories, these communities were collectively known by different names. Nthamburi⁹ explain that the early Arabs referred to them as Zinjir, while others reported that the Portuguese called them the Musungulos, or Moors. The German explorer and missionary Johan Ludwig Krapf called them the Wanyika, or Wanika, meaning “people of the bush”. Parkin and Willis established that the term Midzi-Chenda was developed in the mid-20th century, in order to avoid the use of derogatory names.¹⁰ To an extent, it became a Mombasa-based “society” in 1945, uniting the nine *chenda* communities for political purposes, and for the sharing of funeral costs for those who had died in the city and required transport to distant villages for burial. They share similar cultural beliefs and practices. For example, they cite a common origin; from the same father Muyeye and two mothers, Mbodze and Matsezi.¹¹ Another common tradition is that priests who stay in the *makaya*, or forests, on Kenya’s northern and southern

⁷ John B. GRIFFITHS, Introduction to *Hayes (South) 1935: Middlesex Sheet 15.13*, Old Ordnance Survey Maps of Middlesex (N.p., 1935).

⁸ Sue FEARY ET AL., “Earth’s Cultural Heritage,” in *Protected Area Governance and Management*, ed. Graeme L. Worboys et al. (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015), 81–116.

⁹ Zablon John NTHAMBURI, “A History of the Methodist Church in Kenya 1862–1967” (PhD diss., School of Theology at Claremont, 1985).

¹⁰ See, for example, WILLIS, *Mombasa, the Swahili*.

¹¹ Interview with Kazungu wa Ghawe Risa on November 13, 2018.

coasts must be buried there, and each tomb is to be buried with a carved wooden effigy called a *kigango*.

Spear theorizes the Midzi-Chenda relocated from Shingwaya, a region close to Somalia, to settle in the Mwangea foothills on the western border of present-day Kilifi County, Kenya, before moving east, to the coast, in the 16th century.¹² Being a religious community, the Midzi-Chenda carried with them a sacred pot, called *finjo*. From the accounts of tribal elders and religious scholars, the *finjo* has similarities to the Jewish Ark of the Covenant. According to accounts by Tinga, Parkin and Johnson Mwangudza,¹³ the *finjo* protected the community against enemies, dangerous animals, disease and tragedy. Like the Ark, the fate of this most valued religious artifact remains unknown.

Mwangudza gives a different account. His is of two Midzi-Chenda communities, the Adigo and Aduruma, deciding to migrate with the *finjo* from Mwangea to what is now Kenya's south coast. At a nearby stream called Mwache, one of the carriers fell, dropping the sacred container, which broke into pieces. Elders from the Malindi District Cultural Association (MDCA) say that priests, *magohu* or *maborah*, met at the site and conducted rituals to appease God and the spirits of *Koma na Mulungu*¹⁴ before convening a general meeting to advise about the fallen *finjo*. Priests from both communities collected small pieces of the broken *finjo* in order to fashion replacements. The Aduruma buried theirs at *Kaya Mtswakara*, and the Adigo at *Kaya Kinondo*. The rest of the Midzi-Chenda settled the coast's northern hinterland, each establishing its own *kaya*, or individual forest, each with its own *finjo*. Each *kaya* was named after a tribe. Despite the Midzi-Chenda settling in two different zones—the north and south coasts—they have retained a common culture.

While Mwangudza's *finjo* narrative is maintained by the Midzi-Chenda, Griffiths, a Methodist missionary writing in 1935, reports that Arab mer-

¹² Those critiquing with dispute about Shingwaya being a cradle land of the Mijikenda include Justine WILLIS (*Mombasa, the Swahili*); Fred MORTON, "The Shungwaya Myth of the Miji Kenda Origins: A Problem of Late Nineteenth-Century Kenya Coastal History," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 5, no. 3 (1972): 397–423 (published by Boston University African Studies Center), and Thomas HINNEBUSCH, "Swahili: Genetic Affiliations and Evidence," in *Papers in African Linguistics, in Honor of W. E. Welmers*, ed. Larry M. Hyman, Leon C. Jacobsen, and Russell G. Schuh, *Studies in African Linguistics* (1976, Supp. 6): 95–108.

¹³ Johnson A. MWANGUDZA, *Kenya's People Mijikenda* (Nairobi: Evans Brothers, 1983).

¹⁴ The Midzi-Chenda are monotheistic, believing in the god *Mulungu*. *Koma* are ancestor-intermediaries.

chants in the 1840s set *Kaya* Mtswakara of the Aduruma ablaze while tracking runaway slaves. Meanwhile, Charles Champion notes British troops dynamited *Kaya Fungo* in August 1914 as reprisal for Agiriama resistance to British demands for compulsory labour. Arguably, the original *finjo* might have been destroyed in either inferno.

Elder Munga Mumbo¹⁵ explains that despite losing the original *finjo*, the Midzi-Chenda still recognize it as a divine tool for protecting the community and families from evil. There are minor *finjo* that are usually buried in family homestead entrances by *aganga*, who are traditional religious specialists.¹⁶ It is argued also that British colonial administrators and missionaries interfered with these traditions. However, the Midzi-Chenda have always struggled to ensure they are maintained.

2. CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Makaya forests are central to Midzi-Chenda cultural heritage. As noted by Brantley, Zeleza Tiyambe¹⁷ and Spear, strategic positions on forested hilltops long provided refuge from attacks by enemies such as the Orma (often called the Galla), Arab slavers and the British. The existence of foreigners precipitated many changes, especially in governance, trade, land ownership and religious beliefs. Their presence resulted in the gradual abandonment of settlements in the *makaya*, rendering the forests places for religious and cultural rituals that have suffered a similar fate in the modern age. For example, young people no longer undergo the *mung'aro*, the initiation into adulthood that prepared them for roles in gerontocratic tribal governments.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the *makaya* still are considered sacred and remain central to Midzi-Chenda cultural heritage. Believed to be dwelling homes for God and spirits, they are reserved for worship, a factor that makes them akin to the cathedrals, temples and mosques of other religions. The only difference is that while these others are man-made, the forests are natural; possessing a diverse ecosystem that includes unique species of indigenous trees, herbs,

¹⁵ Interview with Munga Mumbo on June 4, 2017.

¹⁶ Interview with Baya, Mitsanze on July 6, 2017.

¹⁷ Tiyambe ZELEZA, *Mijikenda*, Heritage Library of African Peoples. East Africa (New York: The Rosen Publishing, 1995).

¹⁸ BRANTLEY, *The Giriama*.

and medicinal plants,¹⁹ along with a variety of wild birds and animals. Anthony Githitho,²⁰ a researcher at the National Museums of Kenya Coastal Forest Conservation Unit (CFCU), cites Burgess, et al.,²¹ in observing the proportion of endemic species, such as millipedes, molluscs, forest reptiles, vascular plants and birds, as consistently high. This biodiversity has significant social and economic aspects. To a greater extent, the conservation of these forests facilitate scientific research meant to promote the well-being of human society. And they are tourist attractions. School children and university students also have the opportunity to visit and be informed about African religious heritage.

As mentioned, the *makaya* are burial sites for the *magohu* and *mabora*. When a priest dies, a log from a specific tree is cut and carved in a *kigango*, or human form, and planted on the tomb to signify rank. This long-practiced ritual is a piece of cultural heritage that enjoys respect both inside and outside the Midzi-Chenda community. Similar traditions are found in Italy, where numerous sculptures of Christian figures are placed inside and outside cathedrals. At Loreto, for example, there is an image of Pope Pius III. The practice of carved images that represent the dead confirm the belief that the dead are alive. On special occasions, the *kigango* is visited by relatives under the guidance of their priests. Similar observations can be found in Europe, where Christians celebrate All Saints Day. This same heritage influences new generations of Midzi-Chenda in many ways, such as praying for divine blessings on personal and community levels.

When US researchers in 2006 found some 400 *kigango* carvings housed at American universities and museums, they began a campaign to return the sculptures to Kenya. Former US President Barak Obama, then a US Senator, worked to at the behest of researchers from his home state of Illinois to assist in the effort that saw many of the pieces returned to Kenya and the Midzi-Chenda communities.

Despite customary laws set by the community, rising demand both for arable land and for timber resulted in gradual clearing of the *makaya* as

¹⁹ Ann ROBERTSON and Quentin LUKE, *Kenya Coastal Forests: The Report of the NMK/WWF Coast Forest Survey*, WWF Project 3256: Kenya, Coast Forest Status, Conservation and Management (National Museums of Kenya, unpublished report, 1993).

²⁰ Anthony GITHITHO, "Listing the Sacred Mijikenda *Kaya* Forests as UNESCO World Heritage Sites: 'The Long Journey'," *Journal des africanistes* 86, no. 1 (2016): 198–217.

²¹ Neil D. BURGESS, "Coastal Forests of Eastern Africa: Status, Endemism Patterns and Their Potential Causes," *Biological Journal of the Linnean Society* 64, no. 3 (1998): 337–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1095-8312.1998.tb00337.x>.

populations grew. Githitho says violation of the Midzi-Chenda tree-cutting and livestock grazing prohibitions could damage these sacred spots. The laws also restrict removal of dead logs and other forest material. Due to the restrictions, breeding of uncommon animals, such as large snakes, was high. These animals were to be left alone if encountered.

The traditional manner in which the Midzi-Chenda conserve the *makaya* saw international bodies such as UNESCO engage with the government of Kenya for their preservation. According to Githitho, the Kenyan government in 1992 began recognizing the forests under the country's 1983 Antiquities and Monuments Act. This gave the National Museums of Kenya the authority to register and oversee the *makaya* as National Heritage sites. Acknowledging the efforts by tribal elders, the CFCU and has since collaborated with them to preserve the forests. Further, the *makaya* were nominated to join UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites. According to Githitho:

Because of [their] unique biodiversity and their history as the subjects of traditional conservation practices, the Kenya State Party decided to present them for listing as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. They were added to the candidate list in 1999, indicating Kenya's intention to have them listed; so began the process of preparing a nomination dossier, outlining the outstanding universal value of the sites.²²

This recognition shows the influence of Midzi-Chenda cultural heritage on nature conservation. Firstly, Kenya has drawn respect and appreciation for its cultural worldview regarding nature. The progress has been applied as a tool for creating harmony between tradition and modernity in contemporary society. It has become an example for educating society to use cultural heritage to create a friendly and mutually beneficial atmosphere between nature and human beings. Secondly, a platform has been achieved for dialogue with the Midzi-Chenda and other communities and organizations to reach collective goals of peace. UNESCO, for example, appreciated the way the *makaya* were preserved and accepted their nomination as World Heritage Sites in order to ensure both preservation and publicity. This created an opportunity for scholars who wish to conduct research, educators and tourists to visit the sacred forests, thereby creating social interaction and generating income for the local community. Generally this reinforces the spirit of maintaining cultural heritage.

²² GITHITHO, "Listing the Sacred Mijikenda *Kaya* Forests."

3. MUSICAL TRADITIONS

All communities express their values through music, making it an essential component of cultural heritage. In Kenya, traditional societies use music to comfort those in mourning. It also has a role at weddings and during other special events. Music is used for entertaining visitors and tourists. And those who seek to coopt cultural heritage in pursuit of such ambitions use music to excite crowds at political rallies. There are ancient traditional types of music in every land that are maintained in order to strengthen the culture, for example, what is called “folk” music.

Equally, the Midzi-Chenda proudly value their rich music traditions and say they must never be abandoned. The musical elements of Midzi-Chenda cultural heritage are dynamic, changing with time and space in composition and in the styles of dance that often accompany traditional music. The cultural interpretations and the meaning of music among the community have been maintained for time immemorial. For example, there are varieties of music played in certain seasons or on special occasions and events. Mourning music is called *lungo*, *msego* or *chifudu*. These songs are sung only at funerals. If the deceased was a member of a certain dance troupe, surviving members pay their last respects by dancing to this music on the day of burial. Gradually, traditional mourning music has changed. It is now called *disco matannga* and usually is used to raise funds to cover funeral costs. Worship music, called *ngoma ya Mulungu*, is usually conducted in the *makaya* to give thanks to God after harvest, to pray for rains and to appease the spirits.

Moreover, Midzi-Chenda music continues to evolve and add value to contemporary society. Midzi-Chenda music promotes cultural heritage on the coast and across the country. Due to the fact that music attracts visitors and tourists, it is a source of economic activity. Midzi-Chenda musicians such as Nyota Ndogo and Ally B are innovators whose compositions are popular with youth, the aged, and local and international visitors.

Music also creates solidarity among coastal communities when standing up to such challenges as child prostitution, drug abuse, HIV and AIDS, the COVID-19 pandemic, radicalization, terrorist attacks—and civil strife that has cost many lives and damaged trust. As such, Midzi-Chenda music is a tool for communicating moral values in ways that can transform lives through behaviour change. When music is played in public spaces, people not only listen but learn from the lyrics. This happens in schools, during large public functions, in personal and public transport. Arguably, music can

influence and transform a society that is burdened by seemingly insurmountable ills.

4. TRADITIONAL DRESS

Traditional attires such as *mahando*, *kishutu* and *mfulo* create beauty and boost senses of integrity and identity. The clothing valued highly in the past had been declining in popularity due to a preference for modern fashion. Since the adoption of devolved governance a decade ago and its mandate for counties to celebrate their local cultural heritage, traditional dress among the Midzi-Chenda has provided indigenous members with avenues for innovation that have begun to interest coastal communities. Traditional attires are once again recognized, admired and used in social events, including weddings, parties, and competitions like the annual Miss County Ladies pageant. Kilifi County has recognised the *kishutu* as an official dress, promoting business among fabric traders. Marina Svensson²³ observes how cultural heritage is becoming an important economic asset for local government and tourism-related industries in Asia. Similarly, cultural heritage management among the Midzi-Chenda is developing sources both of wealth and economic empowerment. And the leisure-time activities that allow people to appreciate the past in ways that benefit present and future generations.

CONCLUSION

This paper has briefly analyzed the cultural heritage of the Midzi-Chenda community—both tangible and intangible—and how it influences the way modern society addresses crucial issues. It has demonstrated that cultural heritage can influence society, fostering innovations that meet social, economic and spiritual needs. Accomplished with traditional religious knowledge, conservation of the *makaya* has attracted the attention of local and global researchers and tourists. This environmental care brings praise to the region. Traditional music and its roles have evolved and transformed to fit every

²³ Marina SVENSSON, “Cultural Heritage Protection in Peoples Republic of China: Preservation Policies, Institutions, Laws and Enforcement in Zhejiang,” in *Making Law Work: Chinese Laws*, ed. Mattias Burrell and Marina Svensson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 225–66.

generation and context. The paper has also mentioned the traditional attires through which men and women, youth and children proudly identify as Midzi-Chenda. Traditional attires also create job opportunities and improve the local economy. Generally, cultural heritage influences behavioral change that may help improve self-image and dissuade society from the criminality and vice that extinguish community spirit and reduce prospects for sustainable development. Similar to other communities around the world, the Midzi-Chenda, need appropriate management and conservation of cultural heritage for the benefit of future generations.

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Summary

All African cultural heritages suffered suppression when foreigners from the East and West came to dominate and introduce hitherto unknown lifestyles, technologies and skills. Like many African communities, the Midzi-Chenda community of coastal Kenya have struggled to maintain their heritage. This study examines the influence of modernity and its attendant social standards on the cultural heritage of the Midzi-Chenda. The study was carried out with the aim of identifying the cultural heritage values that are keys to addressing critical issues that affect coastal communities in Kenya and Africa. Sources for this study include oral histories, focus group discussions, interviews, documented information, and the author's personal experience as a member of a Midzi-Chenda community. The insights here may be applied to tackle crucial challenging issues such as drug abuse, human trafficking, gender-based violence and types of radicalization in a vibrant changing society.

Keywords: cultural heritage; innovation; social change

WSPÓŁCZESNE INNOWACJE SPOŁECZNE W RAMACH DZIEDZICTWA
KULTUROWEGO SPOŁECZNOŚCI MIDZI-CHENDA NA WYBRZEŻU KENII

Streszczenie

Afrykańskie dziedzictwo kulturowe zostało zepchnięte na margines od czasu, gdy życie ekonomiczne, a także społeczne i kulturowe, zdominowali cudzoziemcy ze Wschodu i Zachodu, wprowadzając nieznaną dotąd styl życia, technologie i umiejętności. Podobnie jak wiele innych społeczności afrykańskich, społeczność Midzi-Chenda zamieszkująca wybrzeże Kenii, walczyła o zachowanie swojego dziedzictwa. Niniejsze opracowanie analizuje wpływ nowoczesności i towarzyszących jej norm społecznych na dziedzictwo kulturowe Midzi-Chenda. Badanie przeprowadzono w celu zidentyfikowania wartości dziedzictwa kulturowego, które jest kluczem do rozwiązania krytycznych problemów mających wpływ na społeczności ludzi wybrzeża w Kenii i szerzej, w Afryce. Oparto je na historii mówionej, dyskusjach w grupach fokusowych, wywiadach oraz na udokumentowanych informacjach i osobistych doświadczeniach autora jako przedstawiciela społeczności Midzi-Chenda. Spostrzeżenia przedstawione w niniejszym artykule mogą być pomocne w rozwiązywaniu takich trudnych problemów społecznych jak narkomania, handel ludźmi, przemoc na tle seksualnym i różne formy radykalizacji w dynamicznie zmieniającym się współcześnie społeczeństwie kenijskim.

Słowa kluczowe: dziedzictwo kulturowe; innowacja; zmiana społeczna