

11 The King of the Mijikenda and Other Stories about the *Kaya*

Heritage, Politics, and Histories in Multiparty Kenya

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ON 18 APRIL 2003, the recently elected president of Kenya, Mwai Kibaki, began an official visit to the coast. This was his first trip away from Nairobi since the election, and it was intended as an expression of thanks to a region that had helped secure the victory of his National Rainbow Coalition (NaRC) against the Kenya African National Union (KANU).¹ In Mombasa, Kibaki was publicly “initiated” as an elder of the Mijikenda—the term used to describe collectively the people of the nine tribes who live on and just inland of the southern Kenya coast. The initiation was a widely photographed event that involved wrapping him in an array of cloths and a headdress, and it was performed by a man who was described as representing the Council of Kaya Elders.²

This public expression of mutual admiration between the Mijikenda and the new president reflected the key role that the Mijikenda were perceived to have played in the election. In Kenya’s first two multiparty elections, in 1992 and 1997, the Mijikenda had apparently voted largely for KANU, and KANU’s electoral victory had almost certainly been assisted by a campaign of intimidation against non-Mijikenda who were registered as voters at the coast but were originally from other parts of Kenya. Since 1992, there had been sporadic acts of violence, including murder and house burnings, against these “up-country” people, and leaflets urging violence against them had occasionally circulated. The most dramatic and widely publicized incidents had taken place in Likoni, Mombasa’s southern suburb, in August 1997, where in a few days of violence more than a hundred people had died and dozens of properties had been destroyed. Despite a public commission of inquiry and numerous independent reports, the precise genesis of that outburst had never been clearly established. But it was widely believed that an organized group had played a central part

in it and that that group's members had received their training in a *kaya*. Described in the press of the time as "sacred forests," *kayas* are clearings surrounded by forest, reputed to be former settlements and possessing a continuing ritual role; they are seen by Mijikenda as closely linked to their culture and identity. It was very widely alleged that leading coastal figures in KANU had in some way been responsible for financing and organizing this training and had effectively turned the cultural power of the *kaya* to their advantage, by playing on the long-standing Mijikenda fear that up-country people were dispossessing them.³ There were never any successful prosecutions of "raiders," and there is still considerable uncertainty over what happened at Likoni. But the story of KANU links to the "kaya raiders," as they were known, became a potent expression of the way that ethnic tension at the coast could be encouraged and exploited by politicians.⁴ Opposition political figures in turn presented the *kaya* as a symbol of the way in which marginal cultures and people were exploited and abused by the ruling party.⁵ In December 2002, the NaRC electoral victory resulted partly from their success in challenging KANU's claims to represent the Mijikenda, and the evocation of Mijikenda culture and the performative centrality of the "kaya elder" was an assertion of this new accommodation between Kibaki and the Mijikenda.

On hand for the celebration and initiation was a man who had played a central role in securing this accommodation. Emmanuel Karisa Maitha was a Giriama, a member of one of the two largest constituent tribes of the Mijikenda. Having risen to local prominence as a councilor in the 1980s—when he was a vocal champion of the rights of the Mijikenda against Swahili and Arab peoples of the coast—Maitha had stayed loyal to KANU through the political turmoil of 1991–92. In 1997, he was one of those whose names were widely linked with the so-called *kaya* raiders, a rumor he vigorously denied.⁶ In the election of that year, he abandoned KANU and switched his support to Kibaki, winning the seat of Kisauni, Mombasa's northern mainland suburb; following the 2002 NaRC victory, he was appointed minister for local government in Kibaki's new government.

The day after Kibaki's very public initiation in 2003, Maitha underwent a rather less visible initiation of his own—at *Kaya Fungo*, the principal *kaya* of the Giriama. There, it was subsequently announced, Maitha had gone through an extended period of retreat and instruction from a *kaya* elder, Simba Wanje, which had resulted in his own elevation to eldership. Maitha appeared at a public meeting a few months later to make a striking claim: "Displaying a horn and other paraphernalia symbolising he was the undisputed leader of the Mijikenda, Mr Maitha said the community had a duty to protect him as their leader: '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.”⁷ That a *kaya* ceremony had “installed the Minister as King of the Mijikenda” came to be widely reported.⁸ Accounts emanating from Maitha supporters and from Simba Wanje himself claimed that the initiation of a “king” at the *kaya* was sanctioned by precedent: “Before Maitha’s installation as King of the Mijikenda on April 20th last year the ceremony, steeped in mystique and tradition, had not been held since the early 1970s, when Cabinet Minister Robert Matano was initiated.”⁹ Previous “kings” were listed as Ronald Ngala, a Giriama politician and cabinet minister of the 1960s; Boy Juma Boy, a trade unionist and politician of the 1970s; and Mekatilili, the woman who had helped inspire the brief Giriama “rising” against the British in 1913–14.¹⁰

Maitha’s attempt to appropriate the power of the *kaya* is easy enough to explain, in terms of the immediate political situation. Maitha had many enemies at the coast—he was viewed with suspicion by Arabs and Swahili and also by other Mijikenda who regarded him as a turncoat and resented his claim to leadership.¹¹ Nor was his intemperate and authoritarian style as minister winning him many new friends. Though he boasted publicly of the remarkable powers that legislation bestowed on him as local government minister, it was widely felt that he exceeded those powers, notably through a series of arbitrary orders and pronouncements—“roadside sackings,” as they were called—that excited considerable criticism.¹² The desire to maintain himself as the authentic broker with the Mijikenda was understandable enough, though, as it turned out, it did not stop Maitha being demoted to minister for tourism the following year—shortly before he died of a heart attack.¹³ His funeral provided the occasion for some very public debate over Mijikenda culture and the concept of the *kaya*, in which the idea of his “kingship” was both rehearsed and questioned, as will be suggested later in this chapter.

Repeatedly, stories about history recur in this tale of modern politics. There is no single text here—no written “new local history” of the kind identified by Axel Harneit-Sievers.¹⁴ Instead, there are multiple fragmentary claims to historical knowledge, made in speeches, in newspaper articles, and in some very public arguments. These are intensely local in their focus, and they are closely related to a specific community, defining that community even as they appeal to it; they perhaps fall into the wider form of “indigenous ethnography.”¹⁵ Whether local history or indigenous ethnography, these fragments offer much to offend published understandings of Mijikenda history and culture. The assertion that there was a central, autocratic ruler for a disparate group of societies, each of which has usually been seen as “gerontocratic,” is problematic, as are the implicit assumption that *Kaya Fungo* was in some way the center for all Mijikenda (“the mother of all the nine *kayas*,” as one story put it)¹⁶ and the posthumous elevation of a woman prophet to the title of king. It would be tempting to

dismiss all this as a combination of journalistic invention and public forgetting, a manifestation of the drift away from Mijikenda tradition and the loss of knowledge of the past that many Mijikenda—and academic observers—have seen as the overriding theme of twentieth-century history: “These Giriama have forgotten their culture, and they have taken up this European culture of yours.”¹⁷ Yet on another level, these events assert the continued primacy of the *kaya* in Mijikenda ideas of identity and culture. Mijikenda were willing participants in the representation of these events, which were part of wider, ongoing discussions of history, some of them captured in interviews that, with colleagues and students from the University of Nairobi, I was involved in collecting in the mid-1990s. The histories that were being told around *kayas*, eldership, and authority in multiparty Kenya revealed layers of historical knowledge and debate that may repay consideration, for they reveal the complex nature of historical knowledge and its relationship to identity and authority.

HOW MANY KAYAS?

The reportage around Maitha’s “installation” and funeral revealed some ambivalence about the nature and history of *kayas*. The claim to *Kaya Fungo*’s primacy was implicit in the description of the installation. Yet, as some journalists also noted, “there are nine *kaya* (holy shrines), one for each of the Giriama, Digo, Duruma, Chonyi, Ribe, Jibana, Kauma, Rabai and Kambe.”¹⁸ Even more confusingly, one of the *kaya* elders who attended the funeral events was from *Kaya Ruruma*—not one of the nine listed.¹⁹ During the course of the funeral (a protracted affair that spanned several days and locations), Maitha’s body lay for a while at a newly created Giriama cultural center at *Muyeye*, near Malindi, which immediately came to be called *Kaya Muyeye*.²⁰ And even more strikingly, while all this was going on, a Giriama museologist was writing an article that identified not one or nine but sixty *kayas*.²¹ This tension between singularity and multiplicity may seem curious, but it was not novel.

That each Mijikenda group had a *kaya*, which was both a sometime residence and a continuing ritual center, was noted by a succession of European observers from the mid-nineteenth century. The fact that this was a singular “capital,” defining—and defined by—the group was sometimes made explicit.²² Yet these observers also mentioned that multiple or contending *kayas* might be founded within any one group.²³ This uncertainty between the idea of the singular *kaya* and a lurking knowledge of multiplicity runs through the literature, reflecting a chronic ambiguity in Mijikenda accounts of the *kaya* and the relationship of the *kaya* to authority and group identity. In 1915, Alice Werner’s account hinted that some Mijikenda groups might have more than one *kaya*, but she offered no explanation, nor did Arthur Champion in his brief mention of the creation of a second Giriama *kaya* at *Kidzini*, which “seceded” from

Kaya Fungo.²⁴ In the 1930s, a missionary noted briskly but somewhat confusingly of the Duruma that “the Kaya was the headquarters of the tribe. Of the three Kayas the oldest and the one that mattered was Mtswakara”; a former administrator wrote in the early 1960s that “there are a number of major and minor Kayas” but gave no more detail than that.²⁵ In the 1970s, Cynthia Brantley’s classic account of traditional Giriama gerontocracy emphasized the centrality of Kaya Fungo, but it mentioned Kaya Kidzini in passing. And though Tom Spear recorded the assertion that there was one kaya for each group, he also noted that the Digo had more than one kaya, and he published historical accounts that included several references to multiple kayas.²⁶

Circumstances from the early 1990s exacerbated this ambiguity. On the one hand, they encouraged an idea of a unified Mijikenda political identity that accorded Kaya Fungo primacy; on the other hand, they promoted a new emphasis on tellings of history that suggested intragroup multiplicity and conflict, rather than singular ethnic solidarity. The politics of multipartyism and the politics of heritage and conservation came to the kayas—and, apparently, both reduced and multiplied them.

Despite their political importance, before the 1980s the kayas had not excited the attention of the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), a body whose conservation and heritage remit embraces both human culture and “natural history.” The museums service at the coast had concerned itself largely with the archaeology and architecture of Muslim societies, but in 1981, a “university expedition” to the kayas from Oxford had made clear the association between botany and human culture in calling for conservation: “Culture and botany must be considered *in toto* if, as we sincerely hope, the Kaya forests of Kenya are to be successfully conserved,” and “the Kaya forests . . . are the focal points of a culture, and as such part of the material representation of the ability of that culture to maintain itself.”²⁷ The kayas were identified as repositories not only of human culture but also of biology; they were relicts of an ancient coastal woodland that harbored plants and animals that were widely endangered. As a UN Environment Programme document suggested in 1998, the interests of “cultural heritage” and “environment and conservation” came together in the kayas.²⁸

This linkage between a culture under threat and a unique habitat under threat was an easy one to make, not least because there is consistent historical evidence of local resistance to any cutting or clearing of kaya forests.²⁹ The linkage is not an absolute or clear one: some sites that were regarded as kayas had been cleared, and by far the largest patch of surviving coastal forest, at Arabuko-Sokoke, contained no kayas. But the association between conservation and heritage management was alluring. Here at last was a conservation issue that could absolutely claim local community support—“forest islands

that are willingly and voluntarily taken care of by the local community.”³⁰ In the literature of the conservation groups, there emerged an ideal, consensually governed traditional society, committed to conservation, that conservationists could help revive: “Social taboos, enforced by the kaya elders, regulated activities that could damage the kaya forests and sacred places. Cutting trees, grazing livestock and collecting or removing other forest material was strictly forbidden. . . . A code of behaviour, emphasising decorum, respect and self-restraint also protected the forest.”³¹ Reviving such a community would create a local group committed to conservation, even though members of the group—concerned only with their parochial cultural interest—might not realize its significance: “Many people possibly may not know the true value of the work they are doing.”³²

With this inspiring model, a permanent museum exhibition on Giriama culture was created in Mombasa, and two botanists produced an initial survey of kaya plant life as part of wider work on coastal forests.³³ In 1992, one of these botanists secured funding from the World Wide Fund for Nature to set up, within the National Museums, a body called the Coastal Forests Conservation Unit (CFCU), the remit of which was specifically to protect the kayas (the largest actual coastal forest, Arabuko-Sokoke, was under the control of the Kenya Wildlife Service). The funding provided for the employment of local fieldworkers, who would recruit “forest guards” to protect the kayas. These fieldworkers would also, most importantly, seek the support of local people to demarcate precise boundaries for the kayas and publish these in the *Kenya Gazette* as national monuments (which would bring their use, though not their ownership, under the control of the National Museums).³⁴

In setting this target, CFCU was apparently working on the assumption that the number of kayas was quite limited; there were, after all, only believed to be nine kayas.³⁵ But by the end of the 1990s, the CFCU had identified some forty-seven kayas, and it was seeking to have all of them gazetted; by 2002, “more than fifty” kayas had been identified; and by 2004, as noted earlier, one member of the NKM staff reported that sixty kayas had been identified for publication in the *Gazette*.³⁶ There had been what can only be described as a kaya explosion, as the fieldworkers of CFCU, occasionally escorted by journalists or visiting conservationists from international groups, had set to work trying to identify boundaries. CFCU itself did not seek to gather historical testimony, though its workers sometimes were accompanied by others (including myself and my colleagues) who were collecting historical accounts of these multiple kayas.³⁷

There was more than a little tension around this process. On one level, all this external interest emphasized the cultural centrality of the kaya for Mijikenda, and the listing and conservation of the kayas served as an assertion of col-

lective identity and rights, which could be scripted into a narrative of local resistance to external exploitation. The appropriation of land on the south coast by foreign hoteliers or a mining company could now be denounced as a threat to both cultural heritage and the environment: the mining concession was opposed by a body that called itself the Kaya Ecological and Cultural Organization.³⁸ The defense of biodiversity came to be implicitly associated with the wider sense that the political and economic rights of the Mijikenda were being constantly undermined by foreigners or by Kenya's up-country elite. Heritage and conservation might bind people together in defense of the kaya. It is unsurprising, perhaps, that a district officer said to me in 1996 that I should be careful in my work as the kayas were (in his words) "potentially explosive"; it is also unsurprising that so many of the rumors about the "raiders" of 1997 should keep returning to the idea of the kaya—the persistence of the rumors is evidence of the symbolic power of the "sacred forest."

But the same processes could pick apart collective identity, through undermining the singularity of the kaya that affirmed this identity. In material terms, CFCU brought modest rewards to those who worked with it: employment as "guards" for a small number, the provision of gifts and refreshments for groups of elders and sometimes animals for sacrifice, occasional access to vehicles, and casual employment as guides or informants for visitors.³⁹ And CFCU also offered a degree of status, as those who worked with it had their role as cultural experts affirmed by this external recognition. In 1995, one man proudly showed me a letter he had received from the CFCU, addressed to "The Kaya elder, Chonyi." The same man later spoke directly to my tape recorder in an interview: "I am Joel Gambo Mudungu, . . . I am the elder of Kaya Chonyi, who knows all the Chonyi customs which are in there, I know all the customs, and the [kaya] gates, and almost everything. Now these guests have come I want to explain to them the stories of the kaya."⁴⁰

In these circumstances, identifying additional kayas might be a useful way of accessing some modest additional resources. And it might offer a way of settling old arguments over who had the right to cultivate certain patches of land: areas that had been cultivated since the 1970s or even earlier were now identified by some as kayas, and those who farmed on them were accused of being interlopers.

And so, word that there were rather more than nine kayas came to the fore, as people presented their knowledge of the kayas to tell stories not of singularity and cohesion but of discord and tension. When another old Chonyi man told me that there were nine Chonyi kayas, Joel Gambo said "on the whole coast there are nine kayas." When the other man repeated the assertion to my tape recorder, Joel Gambo became quite agitated: "Don't say there are nine kayas here! You are confusing these people!" But then he

himself said that there were two other Chonyi kayas, Koyeni and Tsolokero, and he explained that Koyeni had been founded by one Nyamawi Gambo, “who was unable to manage that Chonyi custom . . . so he went and founded that kaya so he could make a custom which he could manage.”⁴¹ The custom in question, it was later explained to me, referred to the Chonyi practice of sacrificing a child to ensure that rain would fall. The creation of the Giriama Kaya Kidzini was, I was told, the work of “those who did not obey the laws of the kaya”; several informants linked it in particular to the larger clan-group that was itself known as Kidzini: “They divided. Kaya Kidzini came out, and went off separately. The Mwamkweha and Mwamweni are the people of Kaya Kidzini.”⁴² In Jibana, local accounts suggested that there were five kayas, at least two of which had been founded as a result of “jealousy” and were associated with particular clans: Rombo, founded by the Mwayura, and Kilulu, by the Mwachai.⁴³

It would be tempting to categorize at least some of these accounts as invention and to imply that these multiple sites were somehow not “really” kayas. But this may exaggerate the power of external agents to remake people’s knowledge of their past, and there is abundant evidence that this knowledge of additional kayas predates the work of the CFCU. What the processes of heritage and conservation did was to encourage the representation of this alternative layer of knowledge about the past, based on knowledge of local geography, of family movements, and of kinship and clan and based too on an awareness of local ritual practice. It revealed a settlement history that was more complex and a ritual landscape that was less centralized than the story of the single kaya for each group. How many people ever lived at one time in any of these kayas is questionable; nor can one tell how many were in use as ritual sites at any one time. But even though these accounts of kayas reaffirmed the linkage between identity and the kaya, they suggested also that the identification of particular kayas and their relationship to group identity were matters of debate: people were not restricted to one level of identity or one kaya. And these alternative histories also revealed a knowledge of a ritual world that was not solely defined by the kaya—notably among the many Giriama settled far to the north of Kaya Fungo, around Ganze and Marafa, where there were histories of alternative local ritual sites at which offerings for rain might be made.⁴⁴

But at the same time, as these historical representations laid new emphasis on the multiplicity of the kaya, other circumstances encouraged an entirely opposite process, in which historical representation came to assert a new singularity—that there was really only one significant kaya, Kaya Fungo, and this was the political focus for all Mijikenda. The increasingly febrile politics of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century encouraged this assertion. Coast politics have long been marked by a double marginalization: people from the

coast as a whole see themselves as left out of a national politics and economy that are dominated by up-country Kenyans, and Mijikenda also see themselves as victims of long-term exploitation by Arabs and Swahili.⁴⁵ The dynamics of coastal electoral politics have, since the 1960s, revolved partly around the ability of aspirant politicians to mobilize a Mijikenda vote, which is both suspicious of up-country influence and resentful of Swahili dominance. Since the advent of multipartyism, this has assumed new significance, as politicians are now not just trying to win particular seats for themselves but also seeking an overall majority in the province in both presidential and parliamentary election votes. A collective Mijikenda vote can swing the outcome in ten periurban and rural constituencies throughout the southern coast—almost half of the seats in the province.⁴⁶ As a result of their nineteenth- and twentieth-century process of ethnogenesis, the Giriama are more numerous and more widely dispersed than any other Mijikenda group except the Digo; however, the proliferation of kayas that was particularly marked in Digo society was much more limited among the Giriama. Perhaps for this reason, Kaya Fungo has apparently come to offer a focus for this idea of a collective Mijikenda political constituency, and politicians have vied to establish the authenticity of their linkage with a local cultural institution whose importance was now validated by the official custodians of heritage—hence, Maitha's enthusiasm for the kaya.

This strategy brought some success. Political figures from the Arab/Swahili community condemned the implication that the Mijikenda were the predominant group on the coast, but others hailed Maitha as “the symbol of the coast,” a man who would reverse the marginalization of the region.⁴⁷ Some had also tried to use the kaya as an assertion to authentic leadership of the community, though with less success; in 1996, one local KANU parliamentarian, hearing that I was a historian, rather self-consciously assured me that he was a kaya elder too, and the same man reportedly donated money for a sacrifice at Kaya Fungo in 1998.⁴⁸ In the months following Maitha's death, several of those who competed for his now-vacant seat sought similar ritual blessing, and further historical precedents for this were offered, as a collective Mijikenda political identity was projected further back into the past: “The first leader was Bambaulo, who was crowned in 1857.”⁴⁹ In September 2004, two such rivals became involved in a confrontation over control of Kaya Fungo itself, which raised questions over the very idea of the kaya elder.

HOW TO BE AN ELDER

Political leadership in modern Mijikenda society has not always sprung from a direct relationship with the kaya. The Mijikenda Union, the first formal organization that claimed to represent the Mijikenda as a group, was created in the mid-1940s by men who explicitly asserted that school education and

salaried employment rendered them fit for office: “It is up to us, the youth, to bring them [the elders] the good things which we have picked up from our education.”⁵⁰ The grand meeting that launched the union in December 1945 revolved around a perceived distinction between these young men and the so-called elders, who were summoned to the meeting to offer their approval for the union created by these young men. The support and approval of the elders were needed—but leadership was the prerogative of the men with typewriters and post office box addresses. The rather unhappy story of the Mijikenda Union—racked by allegations of financial impropriety—saw tensions repeatedly arise between elders and educated leaders, and in the 1960s, when some elders sought to take control of the union, they were denounced by the educated officeholders.⁵¹ One of the many striking aspects of Maitha’s bid for “kingship” is the contrast it implicitly offers with those debates over leadership. In the early twenty-first century, leaders cannot build their positions on their knowledge of the ways of government and seek the blessing of the elders as an adjunct to this—they must construct a legitimacy through themselves being elders.

This developing relationship between elderhood and leadership has been rendered the more complex by the apparently abundant supply of *kaya* elders. The CFCU and other conservation projects proudly advertised their involvement with such elders, and a variety of elders were prominent in the public theater of Kibaki’s initiation and Maitha’s funeral, as well as Maitha’s secret initiation.⁵² And the rumors that had swirled around the events at Likoni in 1997 had also featured an elder, a man who administered oaths and encouraged the mysterious *kaya* raiders. Again and again, performance, public declaration, and rumor insisted that certain elders possessed and managed access to knowledge of the *kaya*. Yet these same events repeatedly raised a question: how did people achieve such knowledge?

The travails of Simba Wanje both before and after Maitha’s death suggest that the apparently assured collectivity of the category of elders is as uncertain as the singularity of the *kaya* itself.⁵³ In 2001, Wanje had reportedly been expelled from *Kaya Fungo* by a rival group of elders; reinstated in 2003 (perhaps partly because of his association with Maitha), he had been unable to bring the rain, despite his reputation for rainmaking.⁵⁴ The funeral of Maitha may have provided a temporary distraction from this failure, but he was soon challenged again. While busily engaged in *Kaya Fungo* performing a blessing on one of the rival candidates for Maitha’s now-vacant parliamentary seat, he was rudely interrupted by another group of elders, led by one Tayari Mwaringa, and ejected from the *kaya* itself with the help of two policemen.⁵⁵ Tayari Mwaringa had been seeking to establish himself as *kaya* elder for some years; in 1996, he told me, rather mournfully, that he “had no rank” in the *kaya*, but he was

acting as interlocutor for a group of other men whom he (and others) saw as elders.⁵⁶ At different times, both he and Simba Wanje had courted the staff of the National Museums as part of their assertion of this claim.⁵⁷ Simba Wanje asserted his status as an elder partly on the basis that he had been living in the *kaya*: “I am the one who has been spending nights inside Kaya Fungo . . . hence I am the only person entitled to proceeds from people coming to be blessed.”⁵⁸ But this factor was not the main basis of his claim, nor could it have been for most *kaya* elders, since there seems to be a general reluctance to live in any *kaya* for an extended period.⁵⁹ Residence did not make one an elder.

Neither, it would seem, did age. The historical literature, based on a careful synthesis of accounts given by Mijikenda and the reports of ethnographic observers, has argued that Mijikenda society was, in the past, characterized by two systems of male authority: one based on age and the other on wealth. Initiation into the age-based system took place through periodic collective ceremonies—three, in Spear’s account—through which boys eventually became *kambi* (elders), the group that collectively held authority over society. Men could also, however, seek membership in secret societies, which required payment of a fee; these societies controlled oaths that could be used to handle theft or judge disputes. The most exclusive of these societies was the *vaya*, which possessed the most powerful oath.⁶⁰ It has been suggested that age-grades and societies effectively converged in that the members of the *vaya* were all senior *kambi* and that the societies were simply an executive arm of the *kambi*; consequently, there was no tension between the collective male advance to authority and the individual authority some men acquired through the purchase of esoteric knowledge.⁶¹

The commentary at the time of Maitha’s funeral offers a slightly different vision, in which the collective events shrink into insignificance beside membership in the secret societies. A number of young Giriama men reportedly still go through a first initiation (though the form of this has almost certainly changed over time), but Simba Wanje suggested that real knowledge and authority in the *kaya* rested with the *vaya* and that achieving this status required an elaborate set of further rituals: “The road to becoming a *kaya* elder is long and intricate. It starts from teenage to adulthood. Though abandoned by many people, it is a life-long activity . . . Kwanza is usually the first and last rite for many youths as they forget Mijikenda culture after joining secondary school and college. There are 10 more rites before one becomes an elder.”⁶² Simba Wanje also announced that Maitha had not actually been made an elder, nor installed as the so-called king, though he had been close to both positions: “Mr Maitha was supposed to undergo two more rites before he could become king of the community. The rites included the handing over of the community’s unwritten constitution and Mr Maitha’s confirmation as a ‘*vaya*.’”⁶³ Clearly, not all

agreed with Simba Wanje's definition of elderhood or accepted his assumed right to award this status. But the emphasis on esoteric knowledge rather than age is clear. Other representations of history, collected in the 1990s, also suggest the tension between specialized knowledge and collective gerontocracy.

Among the Digo, the stories of the induction of the 1997 kaya raiders may well be exaggerated in their detail, but insofar as they draw on a local vision of kaya authority, they consistently point to the importance of oaths and specialized knowledge, rather than collective elderhood: it was one particular man, rather than elders in general, who was alleged to have administered oaths to the young raiders.⁶⁴ Among the Giriama and other northern Mijikenda, collective ceremonies of elderhood are remembered as part of a distant past: "There are no age-sets any more! We are just people," one man told me.⁶⁵ Though some recalled an ideal system of generational advancement similar to that set out in the literature—"To cut the age-set means going around finding out when people were born; they went round asking when people were born"—people's own experience was generally of a more exclusive kind of authority, in which the secret societies were central.⁶⁶ One man, asked about his grandfather's involvement with the kaya, made clear this exclusivity: "To the kaya? Ah, him, going there, he didn't go. Because the kaya has its owners, who go there, but the others were just elders. . . . Those who had the kaya, they would have a meeting, and call others to it, Come ye! Come ye! Something unusual will happen! People would go. They would go and listen at the meeting, and then go home. Those ones would be left at their place in the forest."⁶⁷ These personal recollections suggest that in living memory, individual knowledge, rather than collective ritual, has defined status. The performance with a friction drum, the *mwanza*, itself seems to have turned into a kind of local esoteric rite in the twentieth century. When, in the 1920s, British officials became anxious at the apparent lack of authority among the Giriama in particular, they tried to encourage the holding anew of a general initiation. The result was a series of local performances of dances, in which some took part and others did not: the ability to pay a fee and local circumstance dictated who went through this "initiation."⁶⁸ Some wealthy individuals had a *mwanza* made for them and offered knowledge of it to those who paid; it was not clear whether any of these local events were still taking place in the 1990s.⁶⁹ "The *mwanza* is like an oath," one man told me, and another compared "initiation" to the *mwanza* to joining two esoteric societies (to which he also belonged): "You pay the fee for the people of Gohu, you give it to them, you become a member of the society."⁷⁰ It was this kind of exclusive and specialized knowledge that Simba Wanje sought to draw on—and perpetuate—through the kaya.

Being old, then, has not been enough to make one a kaya elder. David Parkin has argued of Giriama society that it was (and is) the members of the

vaya secret society who really wield influence, being both feared and disliked in consequence of their magical association with the hyena, and he has implied that the existence of this society places some kind of restriction on claims to "eldership," for the Giriama at least.⁷¹ He has also captured something of the continuing tension between this specialized claim and that of collective elderhood, in his comment that *kaya elders* may be a term describing a "socially ageing process of political responsibility" rather than a particular group.⁷²

The rather uncertain visions of elderhood suggested in the press coverage of the Maitha affair suggest, then, not simply a forgetting—though there clearly has been a change in ritual practice—but the workings of a historical process that has changed the balance of power in a long-standing tension between a collective body of elder men as a group and individuals. Although the *kaya* may be presented as the embodiment of a collective gerontocracy, it can also be the location of specialized knowledge. These representations of historical tension are not novel; in the early twentieth century, Champion had already noted stories of the eponymous Fungo that suggested the ability of the *kaya* to serve as a tool of individual authority and "leadership."⁷³

REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING THE KAYA

Despite repeatedly expressed concerns over the decline and destruction of the *kayas*, the idea of the *kaya* still looms large in Mijikenda notions of authority and identity. Events since the 1980s have almost certainly enhanced the importance of the *kaya*. Already a powerful focus for local culture, it increasingly serves as a symbol of a distinctive Mijikenda political identity and as a point of contact with international organizations committed to conservation and heritage. It might be argued that, ironically, this process has in some ways been facilitated by the lack of regular involvement with, or detailed knowledge about, the *kaya*, which seems characteristic of most Mijikenda: perhaps it is this that allows the *kayas* to be cast, collectively, as the embodiment of a traditional commitment to conservation and one particular *kaya* to be represented as the seat of Mijikenda kingship?

Yet there are limits to invention, as Tom Spear has recently argued of Africa more generally. And there are limits to forgetting, too.⁷⁴ The way that Mijikenda talk to journalists or historians or conservationists has consistently been shaped by—and reinforced—an assumption that a group should share some physical space, defined by forest, that is its ritual and political focus, while revealing debate over what *kind* of group should be so defined. There is consistency, too, in the contours of debate over control of this space. Does it belong rightly with all elder men, as representatives of the community? Or is it the preserve of individuals with special knowledge? Histories of the *kaya* may express both models of authority. Although people are aware of a reality in which

kayas multiply, and esoteric knowledge is paramount, people can still talk about the kaya in a way that evokes an ideal of a united, benevolent gerontocracy controlling all aspects of life: “[Grandfather] would go to the kaya because every tribe of the Giriama was there in the kaya. They would go, at the time when the long rains were coming, all the elders would call one another, there inside the kaya. They would consult, ‘now the rain is here, and people want to plant, what shall we do?’ They would have that meeting, and say ‘the day after tomorrow, we will start to plant.’”⁷⁵ This is, then, fundamentally a local history—or rather, multiple fragments of local historical knowledge—instead of the imaginative consequence of alien interventions. Maitha’s installation as “king” was not such an extraordinary piece of innovation; like the burgeoning of kayas (and perhaps, even, like the rumors of raiders), this reflected a good deal of remembering, as well as some forgetting. It is a remembering that continues: when one of Maitha’s political protégés announced his intention to stand for the presidency in 2007, as a “Coast flag-bearer,” he had a kaya elder on hand to endorse him.⁷⁶ Perhaps Maitha will not be the last king of the Mijikenda.

NOTES

1. “Kibaki on Easter Tour of Coast Province,” *Daily Nation*, 18 April 2003.
2. “Kibaki’s Warning to Negligent Parents,” *Sunday Nation*, 20 April 2003.
3. See, for example, “Biwott, Sajjad ‘Funded Likoni Clashes,’” *Daily Nation*, 29 September 1998. Several publications have compiled these allegations: see Alamin Mazrui (for Kenya Human Rights Commission), *Kayas of Deprivation, Kayas of Blood: Violence, Ethnicity and the State in Coastal Kenya* (Nairobi: Kenya Human Rights Commission, 1997); Mazrui, *Kayas Revisited: A Post-election Balance Sheet* (Nairobi: Kenya Human Rights Commission, 1998); Peter Kagwanja, *Killing the Vote: State Sponsored Violence and Flawed Elections in Kenya* (Nairobi: Kenya Human Rights Commission, 1998); Human Rights Watch, *Playing with Fire: Weapons Proliferation, Political Violence and Human Rights in Kenya* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002), 39–106.
4. For the lack of convictions and continued uncertainty over the raiders, see “Effects of Likoni Violence Linger on as Survivors Struggle to Cope,” *Daily Nation*, 8 November 2005.
5. Mazrui, *Kayas of Deprivation*, ii–iii.
6. *Ibid.*, passim; “Act on Akiwumi Report, Urge Victims of Violence,” *Daily Nation*, 13 August 2004.
7. “Maitha Moves to Reconcile with Khamisi,” *Daily Nation*, 6 October 2003.
8. “How Maitha Chose Place He Wanted to Be Buried,” *Daily Nation*, 29 August 2004.
9. “Send-Off Fit for a King,” *Daily Nation*, 10 September 2004.
10. “Long Line of Visionaries,” *Daily Nation*, 20 June 2005.

11. "Coast MPs Accuse Maitha of Arrogance," *Daily Nation*, 24 April 2003.
12. "Judge Blocks Maitha Ruling on Councils," *Daily Nation*, 13 March 2004; "For Maitha, It's the Rightful Use of Power Bestowed on Him by Law," *Daily Nation*, 30 May 2004; "Go by the Rules, Mr Maitha!" *Daily Nation*, 7 June 2003; "Maitha Summoned to Defend 'Roadside Transfers' of Bosses," *Sunday Nation*, 19 July 2003.
13. "Will Mwakwere Eclipse Maitha?" *Daily Nation*, 4 July 2004.
14. Axel Harneit-Sievers, "New Local Historiographies from Africa and South Asia: Approaches and Issues," in *A Place in the World: New Local Historiographies from Africa and South Asia*, ed. A. Harneit-Sievers (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2002), 1–27.
15. *Ibid.*, 17.
16. "How Maitha Chose Place."
17. Interviews conducted by University of Nairobi/British Institute in Eastern Africa team, 1993–97. Transcripts held at BIEA, Nairobi. Kil 63a, Kazungu wa Masha, Marafa, 14 September 1995.
18. "Send-Off Fit for a King."
19. "Kaya Curse for Whoever 'Killed' the Minister," *Daily Nation*, 12 September 2004.
20. "Over 800 at Final Rite for Maitha" and "Maitha Family Given Death Report," *Daily Nation*, 19 and 20 September 2004.
21. Kaingu Tinga, "The Presentation and Interpretation of Ritual Sites: The Mijikenda Kaya Case," *Museum International* 56 (2004): 8–14.
22. J. L. Krapf, "Excursions to the Country of the Wanika Tribe at Rabbay, and Visit of the Wakamba People at Endila," entry for 29 January 1845, Church Missionary Society archives, Birmingham, UK (hereafter cited as CMS), CA 5 o 16; H. B. Johnstone, "Notes on the Customs of the Tribes Occupying Mombasa Sub-district, British East Africa," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 32 (1902): 263–72.
23. J. L. Krapf, *A Dictionary of the Suahili Language* (London: Trubner, 1882), entry for "Mutzi Muiro."
24. A. Werner, "The Bantu Coast Tribes of the East Africa Protectorate," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 45 (1915): 326–54; A. Champion, *The AGiryama of Kenya* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute, 1967), 5.
25. J. B. Griffiths, "Glimpses of a Nyika Tribe (Waduruma)," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society* 65 (1935): 267–95; T. H. R. Cashmore, "A Note on the Chronology of the Wanyika of the Kenya Coast," *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 57 (1961): 153–72.
26. C. Brantley, "Gerontocratic Government: Age-Sets in Pre-colonial Giriama," *Africa* 48 (1978): 248–63; T. Spear, *The Kaya Complex: A History of the Mijikenda Peoples of the Kenya Coast to 1900* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978), 4 and 28; T. Spear, *Traditions of Origin and Their Interpretation: The Mijikenda of Kenya* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982).
27. W. Hawthorne, K. Hunt, A Jones, and A. Russell, *Kaya: An Ethnobotanical Perspective: The Report of the Oxford Ethnobotanical Expedition to Kenya* (privately published, 1981), foreword and p. 91.

28. UNEP, *Eastern African Atlas of Coastal Resources: Kenya* (Nairobi: UNEP, 1998), 88–91.
29. See, for example, Johnstone, “Notes on the Customs,” 264.
30. “Kaya Guard Programme,” available at <http://www.colobustrust.org>; “Eastern Africa Coastal Forests Programme,” available at <http://www.panda.org>.
31. “The Kaya Forests,” Sacred Land Film Project, www.sacredland.org.
32. “Kaya Guard Programme.”
33. S. A. Robertson and Q. A. Luke, *Kenya Coastal Forests: The Report of the NMK/WWF Coast Forest Survey* (Nairobi: National Museum of Kenya, 1993).
34. A. Githitho, “The Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests of Coastal Kenya and Biodiversity Conservation,” in *The Importance of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation* (Beijing: UNESCO, 2003), 27–35.
35. UNEP, *Eastern African Atlas*, 88.
36. Githitho, “Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests”; Tinga, “Presentation and Interpretation”; Letter, “This Is the Correct Method to Protect Kaya Forests,” *Daily Nation*, 22 May 2002.
37. J. Willis, “The Kayas of the Northern Mijikenda: A Gazetteer, and an Historical Reassessment,” *Azania* 31 (1996): 75–98.
38. “Kwale Villagers Oppose Mining of Titanium,” *Daily Nation*, 10 July 2004.
39. “Fighting to the Bitter End,” available at <http://safariweb.com>, n.d. (apparently c. 2001).
40. Kil 57a, Joel Gambo Mudungu, Chonyi, 31 July 1995.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Kil 34a, Mwagona wa Charo, Dulukiza, 3 March 1993; Kil 60a, Reuben Kombe, Kaloleni, 2 August 1995.
43. Kil 54a, Chai Mwanyiro, Maandani, 27 July 1995; Kil 55a, Tsuma Mwangovi, Maandani, 27 July 1995; also Kil 58a, Wanje Mwagosha, Uugha, 1 August 1995.
44. Kil 63a, Kazungu wa Masha, Marafa, 14 September 1995; Kil 64a, Yakubu Kombe, Marafa, 14 September 1995; Kil 66a, Ali Mwavuo, Marafa, 14 September 1995.
45. A. I. Salim, “The Movement for Mwambao or Coast Autonomy in Kenya, 1956–63,” in *Hadith* 2, ed. Bethwell Ogot (Nairobi: East Africa Publishing House, 1970), 212–28; R. Stren, “Factional Politics and Central Control in Mombasa,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 4 (1970): 33–56, at 37–39. R. Mambo, “Nascent Political Activities among the Mijikenda of Kenya’s Coast during the Colonial Era,” *Transafrican Journal of History* 16 (1987): 92–120, stresses Mijikenda hostility to Arab/Swahili political agendas. For a recent restatement of these multiple tensions, see “KANU Feels the Heat at the Coast,” *Daily Nation*, 7 May 2002.
46. The constituencies in question being Kisauni, Likoni, Msambweni, Matuga, Kinango, Bahari, Kaloleni, Ganze, Magarini, and Malindi. There are twenty-one constituencies in Coast Province.
47. “Official in Maitha Saga Named,” *Daily Nation*, 6 September 2003; “Muslim Leaders Back Maitha,” *Sunday Nation*, 7 September 2003; for Maitha’s claim to

represent the Mijikenda and the coast, see "Mijikenda Lack Papers for Key Jobs, Says Minister," *East African Standard*, 25 February 2003; for hostile comment on the claims of kaya elders, see "Mungatana Interest on Presidency Supported," *Daily Nation*, 18 August 2005.

48. "The Trials of Wanje the Rainmaker," *Daily Nation*, 9 July 2004.

49. "Kisauni Winner Faces New Cases," *Daily Nation*, 19 January 2005; "Long Line of Visionaries" and "Chaos in the Kaya over Fake Leaders," *Daily Nation*, 20 June 2005.

50. Edward Binns, in the Minutes of the Mijikenda Union General Meeting, 28–29 December 1945, Kenya National Archives, Nairobi (hereafter cited as KNA), CC 1/49.

51. For the allegations of impropriety, see Kaya Duruma Association to DC Kwale, 13 December 1948, KNA, CC 1/49; for the dispute between the officers (led by Robert Matano) and elders who linked themselves directly to the kaya, see Matano to PC Coast, 3 February 1968, and Kenga Choge to PC Coast, 5 April 1968, KNA, CB 11/47.

52. "Kaya Guard Programme"; "Fighting to the Bitter End"; "Kaya Forests."

53. David Parkin, *Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 42.

54. "Trials of Wanje, the Rainmaker."

55. "Clash in Kaya over Kisauni Poll Blessings," *Daily Nation*, 28 September 2004.

56. Kil 106a, Kaya Fungo group, 21 November 1996.

57. Personal observation and "Trials of Wanje, the Rainmaker."

58. "Clash in Kayas over Kisauni Poll Blessing."

59. In the early 1990s, the elder of Kaya Kauma was a most reluctant inmate who eventually escaped, and one man explained to me that in later life, his unwilling father had been prevailed upon by community pressure to stay in the Jibana kaya at Kivara hill: Kil 51a, Riziki Mung'ware, 3 August 1994.

60. Spear, *Kaya Complex*, 58–65.

61. Brantley, "Gerontocratic Government."

62. "Chaos in the Kaya."

63. "Maitha Was Not Mijikenda King Yet, Says Top Elder," *Daily Nation*, 30 August 2004.

64. Human Rights Watch, *Playing with Fire*, 50–52. Rumors of oaths in the kaya continue to circulate; see "Impact on Politics and Social Life," *Standard*, 15 January 2006.

65. Kil 12a, Mae Nguno Kadhuwa, 23 July 1992.

66. Kil a1a, Kirao wa Kayaa, 16 July 1992.

67. Kil 33a, Kibwala Biwanguma, 3 March 1993.

68. Kilifi station diary, 1925, KNA, DC KFI 4/1.

69. Kil 46a, Yaa bin Mangi, 8 March 1993; Kil 64a, Yakubu Kombe, 14 September 1995; Kil 66a, Ali Mwavuo, 14 September; cf. Kil 63a, Kazungu wa Masha, 14 September 1995.

70. Kil 101a, Samuel Kumbatha, 23 September 1995; Kil 104a, Kadenge Mweri, 21 September 1995.
71. Parkin, *Sacred Void*, 151–59.
72. *Ibid.*, 34.
73. Champion, *The AGiryama*, 5.
74. T. Spear, “Neo-traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa,” *Journal of African History* 44 (2003): 3–27.
75. Kil 46a, Yaa bin Mangi, 8 March 1993.
76. “Police Kill 3 Youths in Forest Ambush,” *Daily Nation*, 18 March 2005; “Mungatana Interest on Presidency Supported,” *Daily Nation*, 18 August 2005.