



Marie-Aude Fouéré, Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle and Christian Thibon  
(dir.)

Kenya in Motion 2000-2020

Africae

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Focus no. 5

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DOI: 10.4000/books.africae.2630

Publisher: Africae

Place of publication: Paris & Nairobi

Year of publication: 2021

Published on OpenEdition Books: 8 June 2021

Series: Africae Studies

Electronic EAN: 9782957305889



<http://books.openedition.org>

### Electronic reference

BALLARIN, Marie Pierre. *The Aravai Peoples, the Site of Rabai and its Sacred Forests on the Kenyan Coast*  
In: *Kenya in Motion 2000-2020* [online]. Paris & Nairobi: Africae, 2021 (generated 23 juin 2021). Available  
on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/africae/2630>>. ISBN: 9782957305889. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.africae.2630>.

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# The Aravai Peoples, the Site of Rabai and its Sacred Forests on the Kenyan Coast

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Social science research on the Kenyan coast has largely emphasised Swahili culture—for which there exists a vast amount of academic literature—but has paid little attention to the Mijikenda. The Mijikenda, linguistically related to the Bantu populations, include the following subgroups: Agiriama, Akambe, Arike, Aravai, Achhonyi, Adigo, Aduruma, Adzihana and Akauma. According to oral tradition, they came from a mythical territory called Singwaya (in the southern part of present-day Somalia) and settled in hilltop villages that were “fortified” by very dense vegetation, known as the *kayas* (Kiriama 2013).<sup>1</sup> The Mijikenda formed a group of intermediaries between the coast and the hinterland, and they were very early on included in the economic and political exchange systems conducted by the Swahili (Thomas 1978; Brantley 1981). According to the historian Justin Willis (1993), the name “Mijikenda” does not identify a unified ethnic group but rather was created under British colonisation to designate the two demographically dominant coastal groups under the guise of a land access policy based on ethno-racial differences. From an anthropological viewpoint, research carried out in the 1970s by David Parkin on the Giriama, as well as more recent research by Linda Giles and Monica Udvardy (Udvardy 1992; Udvardy, Giles & Mitsanze 2004), made it possible to show the complexity of the Giriama’s social and ritual organisation in the broader context of Mijikenda culture (Giles & Gearhart 2014).<sup>2</sup> Since the 1990s and 2000s, a team from the National Museums of Kenya undertook archaeological and historical research on some of the primary sites formerly occupied by the

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1. Archaeological research recently conducted by the National Museums of Kenya showed that occupation of the *kayas* dates back even further to the beginning of the second millennium. See notably Kiriama (2013).

2. The recent introduction of Cynthia Brantley in the collective work edited by Linda Giles and Rebecca Gearhart, *Contesting Identities* (2014), appropriately places the Mijikenda studies in their historical and academic context since the 1970s. This book is a recent synthesis about the Mijikenda and relies on fieldwork conducted mainly with the Giriama people.

Mijikenda people. This research was part of a governmental policy aimed at the valorisation and protection of sacred forests. The scope of much of the research focused on the Aravai, the site of Rabai and its sacred forests; all of which will be presented in this paper.

Origin myths begin with the establishment of the Aravai in the *kayas* and, as Thomas Spear described, the creation of the nine ethnic groups that formed the Mijikenda identity. It is also widely accepted that in the nineteenth century, following the territory's pacification and due to demographic pressure, the Mijikenda began to settle outside their forest lands. The original settlements were maintained as sacred places and burial grounds, reinforcing the territorialisation of the group. The elders from these lineages formed a council with the intention of preserving these places. At the same time, strict rules were put in place to guarantee the sanctity of the forests: the cutting of wood and vegetation was prohibited, a particular dress code was required, various taboos were to be respected, access was reserved for elders—especially in places of high magical value where the community's protective talismans (*fingos*) are buried—and finally, specific paths of circulation were created within the *kaya* enclosure. The boundary between land for human use and sacred land was therefore reinforced. Today, the *kayas* are still central to ceremonies such as social harmony rituals and rain rituals held under the elders' authority. These elders play a dominant role regarding social regulations and control and organise weekly meetings designed to resolve community problems. In this regard, these forests are “by the ritual acts that occur there, a place within the village where the social and territorial ties from various social groups of diverse origins are created” (Liberski-Bagnoud, Fournier & Nignan 2010).

In Rabai, resorting to a *longue durée* approach makes it possible to understand the evolution of Mijikenda groups and their guardianship over the *kayas* until today. Rabai is an extremely rich site of varying facets, and its study is part of a broader reflection on the role of history and memory in the process of valorisation of heritage resources. It raises questions about the preservation and sustainable management of heritage sites by the communities concerned, all while the sacred forests of Rabai are being threatened by reckless deforestation.

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

the Amwezi and the Achiza. The plantations can be accessed by following a path leading to two to three entrances.

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

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

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

The current affirmation of Mijikenda identity through a cultural revival marked by festivals, the creation of ecomuseums and ritual effervescence is part of a larger search for legitimisation and social recognition. This affirmation aims to cope with external pressures: solicitation by political movements, pressure on land access and resources, and other requests related to tourism development. The 2009 public opening of the Mudzi Muvya *kaya*, funded by the French Embassy in Kenya, is indicative of the diversity of interests and issues involved, whether local (the Rabai group

of elders, villagers, elders of the surrounding *kayas*, local authorities, etc.), national (governmental authorities, National Museums of Kenya, political parties, etc.) or international (Unesco, NGOs and research institutions). In 2013, this project was self-directed with real investment from the groups involved. But the tensions between its members are constant, both within the elders' councils and between the elders and the women's groups who challenge the power of the latter—who are always men—and demand a more equitable share of the benefits. On the other hand, the site does not receive enough visitors, and to overcome this problem, some members of the association approach Mombasa hotels with a significant international clientele. Thus, on July 13, 2013, a delegation of tourism professionals visited Rabai where a new portion of forest was being prepared as a tourist village to promote the site. Dances and songs from different villages were abound, and ceremonial practices and daily activities were presented. Yet, one of the new members of the association had invited some political leaders from the opposition party, and the day ended up becoming a political meeting... In fact, questions arise concerning the different levels of power and the scale game at play which the situation of heritage-making in Rabai reveals. Today's Mijikenda society is caught up in these contradictions and the elders of the Aravai and Giriama *kayas* are at the heart of the socio-political issues encompassing the whole of contemporary Kenyan society.

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