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LAND AND CULTURE AS SYMBOLS OF REMEMBRANCE, ANCESTRY, RITUALS AND INITIATIONS

The case of *Kihamba*, *Kyungu* and *Kifunyi* among the Chagga of Kilimanjaro, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Kyungu (sometimes known as Kiungu or Kyungu) and Kifunyi, (sometimes known as Mbuoni, Mbuonyi, Kifuunyi or Ukuunyi) are revered places for any Chagga family. It is located within a Chagga Kihamba and is believed to be the origin or first settlement of the clan, marked by the presence of a significant tree and traditional Chagga sacred plant—*isale*. Within the Kyungu and Kifunyi landscapes, one finds a scatter of material remains, including potsherds, bones, bottles and pieces of clothes. These material cultures and local narratives signify spiritual practices, rituals and remembrance ceremonies around the Kyungu and Kifunyi area. Elders and spiritual leaders meet under Kyungu to perform such rituals and other related ceremonies to remember clan ancestors and ask for ancestral interventions to resolve hunger, droughts and other natural calamities. Following these community—Kyungu and Kifunyi interactions, the landscape in which *isale* forms a part has acquired a special status serving as a medium through which the living communicates with the dead. Although there is a slight alteration in the performance and continuation of these practices due to the invention of modern religions such as Christianity, these activities continue to take place under and around these spots. The community still cherish and maintains these places as heritage and a connector between the dead and the living. Against this background, this paper seeks to show how land and culture among the Chagga of Kilimanjaro, NE Tanzania are markers of deep-time spirituality and human-environment interactions. This paper argues that land and culture are both symbols and means of identity creation in which social relations between ancestors, the living and even the environment are constructed and prosper. For consistency, this paper uses *Kyungu* and *Kifunyi*.

Key Words:

Land, Culture, Chagga, Isale Kyungu, Kifunyi

1. INTRODUCTION

1.2 The Chagga: History and Identity

The Chagga—an ethnic group long-standing—are found on the southern slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. Traditionally divided into many chiefdoms of different sizes, the Chagga is also well known due to their prominent leaders such as Horombo, Sina, Marealle I and Mandara. The Chagga chieftainship probably started around 1000 CE (Gray 1975). This community, favoured by the mountainous climate, developed what scholars have considered an urban standard of life or an urban standard of a social system (Moore 1986). The Chagga are well known for their economic and political enterprise and have a long history and reputation as ambitious, entrepreneurial and adaptable (Fisher 2012). Today, one may not be able to locate the settlement nucleus or centre, but the quality of the scattered settlements and their people has astonished many visitors. Although the Chagga have been a subject of various studies from different disciplines such as history, anthropology and ethnology; however, it has been difficult to name or classify their ethnic identity. More importantly, there has not been a study that looked specifically into the Chaggas' social complexity. The Chagga's oral history and material culture have helped to establish their social complexity and identity. The ability to adapt has been cited as the main characteristic that singles out the Chagga as the most prosperous community during the pre-colonial epoch and even to date (Silayo 2017)

1.3 Identity

Three things identify and signify the Chagga: 'Kihamba' (Land), 'Sale' Dracaena and 'Nginda' banana plant (Silayo 2017). Despite this, an attempt to trace and establish the identity of the Chagga people has been problematic. One may as well begin with the term 'Chagga', which is complex and sometimes perplexing. In written documents, the term appears as Mchagga, Wachagga, Chagga, Chaga, Waschagga, Jagga, WA-caga or Dschagga, all referring to the same people. Plausibly, the first uses of the term Chagga and, most especially, its appearance in written records connoted that it was a unifying word signifying a common identity to the Chagga people of Kilimanjaro (Bender 2013). It is clear that, from the time of European exploration of colonies by missionaries, explorers and traders and all the events at the beginning of the 1800s, the mountain's disparate residents had been referred to as a single people—the Chagga. "This designation argues Bender probably stemmed from their perception of the mountain as a single, unified landscape, as well as from the similarities of the various mountain communities in terms of agricultural and cultural practices" (Bender 2013, p. 200).

Language is another aspect that scholars have been using to explain and relate the historical origins and identity of the Chagga. Derek Nurse has asserted that "numerous minor dialects of a single language are spoken on the mountain" (Nurse 1982, p. 200). The Chagga dialects fall into three groups defined geographically from west to east: West Kilimanjaro, East Kilimanjaro, and Rombo (Philipson & Montlahuc 2003). These, according to Bender, comprise a "dialect continuum, meaning that people in neighbouring areas could understand one another well while those at the far reaches would have found much of one another's speech unintelligible" (Bender 2013, p. 203). Nurse argues that, as languages pass through time, some communities split up while others come together. Therefore, communities are constantly in contact in various ways (Nurse 1982). Language does change significantly over a while. This change is due to multiple reasons, like exaggerating and emphasising slight differences in pronunciations or deliberately preferring certain lexical items over

others. Other factors could be social, economic, political or ideological. These factors may lead to particular vocabulary being more used in one community than another. Under such a circumstance, new words may be coined or new meanings given to old terms (Nurse 1982).

This account may fit the Chagga language, which falls under the Nurse's second classification group, Chagga-Taita. This group speaks various related dialects. The assumption here is that Chagga society was once one community on one ridge. Due to population increase, struggle for resources, and political motives where clans wanted to dominate larger areas, in due course, their language started acquiring new words, meanings, and interpretations. At the same time, most of the other customs remained unchanged. Again, this does not give us much light regarding the origin of the Chagga. However, it helps to refute the idea of different ethnic groups occupying the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro as advanced by historians.

Another crucial aspect and probably linked to this paper is the use of settlement patterns, also known as *Kihamba* on the mountain, which have not yet been developed to approach the origin and identity of the Chagga. Bailey (1968, p. 163) contends that the old settled part of Kilimanjaro, especially in the Marangu area, starts from 3800ft in an area of ridges and river ravines, which was once part of the forest. Campbell, Misana and Olson (2004) extend this to 6000 ft. (about 2000m asl), arguing that the Chagga were taking advantage of the fertile volcanic soil and reliable rainfall. Odner (1971a, p. 139) gives the earliest settlement dates from Kilimanjaro. Using a sample from the surface collection at Mwika, Odner dates the settlement to 250 -300 CE, the earliest Iron Age settlement (See also Spear 2011, p. 380). Looking critically at Chagga society, it is striking to note that they use a settlement pattern which defines their history to explain their identity. They distinguish themselves (internally and externally) using the physical places they populated (Bender 2013; Wimmelbücker 2002). Festo Mkenda and Mathew Bender, discussing Chagga identity, stress the "importance of geography" and settlement location and everyday culture in "building what Festo Mkenda describes as a 'largely unbounded identity. His analysis implies that Chagga identity is a natural development rather than something actively constructed" and influenced" (Bender 2013, p. 201). Scholars have argued that there is a strong link between ethnic identity and the society's livelihood and economic setup, which sparks collective identities (Colfer and Newton 1989; Crane and Ruebottom 2011; Mlozi 1997). Therefore, the Chagga livelihood, coupled with their daily activities, should be considered collectively as markers of their identity (Silayo 2017).

Different approaches or aspects must be considered—land (*Kihamba*), Chagga lifeways and culture and, of course, their ancestries. Since the latter is the origin of all other aspects, I emphasise the former two elements as they bear marks that identify the latter. Each part cannot have satisfactory meaning without the other. The *Kihamba* system and the use of unique symbols or marks to identify essential landmarks in the Chagga society speak volumes about their shared identity. The land system in Kilimanjaro, together with its markers, is not found in any other ethnic group said to have migrated into the Chagga land. For example, we see the *Masale* (Fig 1) (*Isale* singular) all over the northern region, from Upare to the Meru and Maasai land and even other parts of the world. But the plant has never received the importance the Chagga put on it elsewhere. Moore (1986: 81- 82) argues that the *masale*, a plant of great importance for the Chagga, is known as the plant of peace and pardon and serves as the border mark of the *kihamba*. The *isale* forms part and parcel of the Chagga

culture; the in-cooperation and use of *masale* as border marks provided the "supernaturally protected legal right" to the *Kihamba*. Fisher (2012) avows that the Chagga *kihamba* as a 'bounded' system unifies the Chagga as an ethnic group. Lea Sébastien (2010), using a 4-dimensional method (A4D) to study the relationship between the Chagga and their environment, concluded that Chagga has a profound attachment to their environment. Such devotion gave life and meaning to almost all aspects of their lives (Hemp 1999). From this addon, the Chagga revere considerably their land of origin. The land is dotted with different sacred monuments, e.g. trees, groves, royal compounds, and graveyards. This paper discusses land and culture as markers of sacrifices and remembrance among the Chagga. Specifically, it presents *Kyungu* and *Kifunyi* as superimposed on the land as markers of deep-time spirituality and human-environment interactions. I argue that *Kyungu* and *Kifunyi* are both symbols and means of identity creation in which social relations between ancestors, the living and even the environment are constructed and prosper.



Figure 1: Isale Plant (*Dracaena afromontana*) Photo by the author

2. INITIATIONS, RITUALS AND ANCESTRY AMONG THE CHAGGA: THE CASE OF KYUNGU AND KIFUNYI

The Chagga, like any other pre-colonial African society, practised various initiations and rituals for different reasons. Apart from remedying the community's malady, the essential function of these activities was to preserve the community's knowledge and history and transfer vital traditions and culture to the younger generation as markers of transition from childhood to adulthood.

For the Chagga, such rituals and traditional activities took place in different locations, such as in the Kilimanjaro forest. For example, the 'mregho' and 'ngasi' initiation ceremony—rite-of-passage to mark the passing of youngsters into adulthood. This training took place in special secluded camps deep in the forest. According to oral accounts, the sessions of this group started with an oath and ended with an oath: they were taught the top secrets of their chiefdom and how to protect the chiefdom and the Mangi at all times (See also Marealle 2002 [1947]). The Chagga realised that preserving their traditions was the only way to pass their history and knowledge about their community to the youngsters. The "number one priority" argues Mosha was imparting knowledge to their children on how their community has been transforming from time to time (Mosha 1999, pp. 212-214). This course was crucial for the Chagga as it acted as a springboard to better their daily life from birth to death (Mosha 1999). Regardless of location, these activities. Interestingly, the Chagga pays special attention to the relationship between the ancestors, the environment and the living community. The Chagga life circle is tied to their daily life, and everyone must adhere to traditions and make it continue rolling so that harmony may prevail within the community (Silayo 2017).

According to Manongi (2012), Chagga tradition is mainly expressed through songs, ceremonies, food and drinks. It is believed that if this code is broken, the community is at risk unless the ancestors are appeased through a series of rituals and the pouring of libations. For the Chagga, everything surrounding their daily life is alive and has intrinsic meaning (Clack 2009). In Kilimanjaro, traditional beliefs and ritual ceremonies are living memories of their ancestors. They are still held by some families and clans, though the intensity of the thoughts and the excesses of many rituals have disappeared mainly or stopped. Interestingly, the places where such traditions and practices were being performed are still preserved and highly revered by the community as heritage.

2.1 Kyungu

Kyungu is an open space with a substantial tree and sometimes Masale plants. This is an area where clan members and their elders meet to discuss various community issues. These historical sites are found in almost every clan in Kilimanjaro, and despite the growing population on the southern slopes of Kilimanjaro, the *Kyungu* is still respected and revered today. There are two types of meetings at *Kyungu*—the ordinary annual meeting and an emergency meeting—under *Kyungu* deliberation of burning and myriad issues such as hunger, diseases, and different disputes like borders, land, water and water furrows as well as individual disagreement took place. Deliberations of issues at *Kyungu* involved offertory ceremonies to the fallen ancestors and clan deities. The sacrifices were offered to honour and invite the ancestors to partake and enlighten the discussion.

Ethnographic and archaeological survey in and around different *Kyungu* in Rombo, Moshi Rural and Hai districts shows that *Kyungu* sites are marked by a huge tree (Fig 2) and other sacred shrubs. Common tree species observed include Mkuyu (*Ficus sycomorus* & *Ficus sur*), Mruka (*Albizia schimperiana* var. *Amaniensis*), Mtembo/ mtembwe (*Ficus lutea* or *Ficus thonningii*) and Mringaranga (*Cordia africana*), Mchio (*Olea hochstetteri*). In addition, in some instances, the Isale plant (*Dracaena afromontana* (Fig 1) was also found at *Kyungu*.



Figure 2: The Wa-Mrema-waMkunde clan Kyungu in Mbokomu (Marked by a Mchio tree (*Olea hochstetteri*) (Photo by the author)

Kyungu connects the living and the Chagga ancestors and spirits. It is believed to be the first place ancestors/ early occupants settled and offered their sacrifices. An interview in Rombo revealed that the society used to offer sacrifices at the Kyungu, such as the slaughtering of a goat during the rainy season to request enough rain, while during the harvest season, the community used to take milk and Mbege to the Kyungu as a thanksgiving libation to ancestors¹.

The research shows that most of the issues deliberated at the Kyungu gathering include marriage and marriage-related disputes, mediation services for individuals and families and, most importantly, prayers offered for rain; this was held in September or October. Oral accounts² in the Rombo district explained that the rite to pray for rain and harvest was commissioned and carried under the permission of Mangi. Some of these rituals and ceremonies were for remembrance and honour of fallen Mangi and other honoured community individuals.

It was also established that the rain ritual and prayer carefully took place at the Kyungu to pray for enough rain and that which will not bring disasters like flooding and thus cause havoc in the

¹ An interview with Mrs Yustina John Laswayi.

² Interview with Mr Edward Masumbuko of Maharo village, Rombo.

community, but the rain give them least a good harvest. The prayer for rain often was answered immediately, sometimes even before the ritual was over. If the rain-delayed more than a week, they had to check if there was anyone who had violated the ritual rules either before or after the ritual. Therefore, it was astutely pointed out that most people walked home immediately after the ritual to avoid quarrelling or engaging in malicious activity that might defy and nullify the ritual and reject prayer.

There are other procedures to observe while the *Kyungu* gathering is in progress. Oral accounts³ in the research area indicate that it was prohibited to discuss or share anything that happened at the *Kyungu* with anyone who was not at the meeting. All the discussions and resolutions taken at the *Kyungu* were considered top secret. It was also regarded as taboo to partake in any marital related, particularly sexual intercourse or engage in disputes after any *Kyungu* meeting.

In the interviews, the interviewees agreed on the use of strict procedures throughout the research area. However, they differed on a few things, such as people who were allowed to participate in the *Kyungu* meeting, materials to take with and what prescribed orders were to be considered before and after the ceremony (ritual).

2.2 Kifunyi

The people of Kilimanjaro, just like all the other ethnic groups around the globe, have a way they explain their reason for being in the world. They have their traditional customs and traditions, practices and language to communicate with the external and the supernatural world. Kifunyi (Fig 3) is one of the practices and customs that define identity as a medium of communication for the Chagga. Kifunyi is a sacred place within the Chagga banana groves. Current research indicates that the Chagga had the custom of burying their loved ones inside the house—under the bed in a shallow grave—and after a while, mostly between three and four years, the remains are exhumed and kept at a particular place called Kifunyi. In this area, the remains of different family ancestors are stored after exhuming from the original grave. This process is the final resting place for the loved ones, and it symbolises reconnection with other family ancestors.

In most cases—especial during pre-colonial—the original grave was dug in the Chagga traditional house. This area acts as a holy altar for various Chagga rituals and sacrifices. Until the early 1980s, this culture was one of the most important milestones that signified the completion of the Chagga life cycle. It is considered a complete reunion with the ancestor and essence of the Chagga and a link between the living and the dead. In addition, the Chagga have had a unique and special connection with nature.

Oral interviews conducted in three districts in Kilimanjaro—Moshi rural, Hai and Rombo districts—revealed that Kifunyi is an extraordinary and holy place owned by any Chagga family. But due to the spread of Christianity in Kilimanjaro in early 1800, this arrangement began to decline. However, the study also found that some families continued to practice this tradition even after the independence of Tanzania despite the spread of religion. It is also evident that with globalisation and Wachagga

³ See interviews with Mr Rafael Sarikoki Mushi, Tobias Milioni Mushi, Anasa Mrema, Angelina Mark Laswayi and Elias Sebastian Ngoiya Laswayi

migration to different locations inside and outside the country to pursue professional vocations and commerce, the practice of burying inside and exhuming has halted. However, the Kifunyi still exist and are widely respected and preserved.



Figure 3: The WaMrema Kifunyi in Mbokomu (Photo by the author)

2.3 Kyungu and Kifunyi: A place of deep remembrance, prayer and reconciliation

By reflecting upon nature, they could give possible answers to the questions which intrigue their minds. One of the questions is about the afterlife and the presence of higher beings. The answers, although not philosophical, helped to shed light on the quest of their thinking. This is expressed in myths, legends, rituals, proverbs and stories (Silayo 2017). The Chagga believed that there is life after death and the presence of a supreme being which they called *Ruwa*. For the Chagga, reality and nature are not about philosophy but religion (Mbiti 1969 p.27), as they consider everything sacred. This relationship places *Ruwa* as the most sacred, followed by ancestors, human beings, plants and animals, and then last are the inanimate beings, soil and stones (Tempels 1971, p. 60).

In the Chagga world, the past refers to the events which are remembered in the present life. Such proceedings include famine, rainy events, wars and the ancestors. For the Chagga, according to Mr Elias Sebastian Ngoiya Laswayi, ancestors still play a vital role in their daily life since they are closer to *Ruwa* and hence act as guides and directors of the living. "The ancestors are the dead who have gone close to *Ruwa* and are marked as unblemished and therefore considered to have more life force and power to mediate. *Ruwa* communicates to the living through the ancestors in the present time since *Ruwa* is so transcendent. He uses the ancestors to reach his message to the living. The present is a bridge to ancestral life, to *Ruwa* and the future," argues Mr Elias. This communication is facilitated through the offertory of different sacrifices, which may be done at the Kifunyi or Kyungu

depending on the nature and intention of the intercede. In this case, the Kifunyi act as a final resting house for the family ancestors and shows a continuation of their life. This means that the dead are not forgotten but transformed into a higher form—with more life force—interacting more close with *Ruwa*. This gave them a moral authority to act as a bridge between the living and the Supreme Being. Consanguineous clans or family members (Figure) regularly would hold meetings and offer sacrifices imploring ancestors when the community or individuals faced life difficulties and needed the intervention of supernatural beings since primordial.

3. GENERAL DISCUSSION

Ritual and traditional religious spots qualify as archaeological sites (Insoll 2009, Insoll, Kankpeyeng, and MacLean 2005). For example, Kifunyi and Kyungunyi are archaeological sites with tangible and intangible characteristics. These areas are marked with different archaeological remains, both ecofacts and artefacts. Such archaeological material includes but is not limited to bones, potsherds, sacred trees and other shrubs. Such material culture, embedded intangibility, and religious ritual practices can explain ethnicity's identity, particularly in problematic ethnic groups like the Chagga. There is ample literature (See Insoll 2004; Kyriakidis 2007) on practices and material culture relating to ritual sites to describe ethnic identities. For example, Fennell (2000:282) underscores the importance of considering "whether the artefacts of past religious practices can be interpreted as having been meaningful to members of an array of ethnic groups." Chris Manning (2014) argues that studies into historical archaeology of magic, religion and ritual-related sites help to broaden discussions regarding ethnicity and race as inscribed in the material culture and related area. To represent such sites, McCauley and Lawson (2007) may argue that the material culture reflected in ritual sites could be understood in the triangular framework—mental representation, artefactual/ecofactual/structural and the practice. All three aspects must be equally examined to understand the connection between society and these material cultures.

Anthropologist Susan Gillespie moves away from the processual interpretation of person and material in mortuary archaeology. Instead, she redefines the anthropological analysis of the "person"—as a socially shaped construct—to better understand social relationships and recognise the collective aspects of agency" (Gillespie 2001 p.73). Anthropological analysis of the case study from the classic Maya civilisation illustrates how the emphasis on the individual, as represented in mortuary events, artistic depictions, and texts, has resulted in interpretive difficulties that can be avoided by viewing these data from the perspective of the social collectivism from which personhood was derived. Maya corporate kin-based groups, known as "houses," were a significant source of the social identities expressed in political action and represented in mortuary rituals and monumental imagery.

The organisation, function and daily practice of Kyungu and Kifunyi fall under what one would call shared arrangements of the ritual activities. The group who occupied this space acquires what Hendon (1999) calls collective identity. This is mainly because these sites contain recognisable shrines that are shared by the group identity for localised religious focus. It is interesting to note that, although such places are shared, not everybody was allowed to oversee the space. Only the clan elder or a chosen trusted righteous man was allowed to maintain the site.

In most cases, the tree marking the Kyungu or the Isale shrub marking the Kifunyi was not cut or trimmed. These allowed them to grow big and become living monuments. These compounds became alive and connected to the community such that nobody dared to graze an animal underneath it, farm, collect firewood, or even rest and enjoy the enormous cool shade and breeze provided by this structure. It was considered an abomination to violate this taboo. Even when a branch accidentally falls, the responsible person will be asked to remove the extension and place it at the tree trunk, and the branches are left to decay and decompose. If the fallen branch was huge, stresses one interviewee in Kibosho⁴. It warranted an animal sacrifice as it was interpreted as a sign that ancestors and the community spirits wanted to speak to deliver a message to the living community. Occasionally, if there is a need, this caretaker might be asked to clean the area. This might include slight trimming of some of the small overhanging branches.

It can be argued that some of these trees grew very, becoming the community's revered monument and developing a symbiotic relationship. This means that the interdependent nature between structures found at Kyunguni and at Kifunyi is eminent from the fact that the *Isale* and the tree stand in the position of the community ancestors—a connector to understanding and communicating with Supreme Being—a fundamental element of life for any Mchagga. These structures grew and became monuments representing sharing heritage and identity of the community. The Kyungu tree, for example, has acquired a status of a living ancestral spirit. The Kyungu tree receives as much respect as the fallen ancestors. It cares with great honour and respect as much as one would do the living elders and seniors.

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⁴ Interview with Mr Rafael Sarikoki Mushi and Mr Tobias Milioni Mushi

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7. KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Kyungu: Kyungu is an open space with a substantial tree and sometimes Masale plants. This is an area where clan members and their elders meet to discuss various community issues.

Kifunyi: Kifunyi is a sacred place within the Chagga banana groves. In this area, the remains of different family ancestors are stored after exhuming from the original grave. This process marks the final resting place for the loved ones, and it symbolises reconnection with other family ancestors.