Expressing power and status through aesthetics in Mijikenda society

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ABSTRACT  This article pinpoints the dynamic interaction of aesthetics, power and status in ‘traditional’ society. The article adopts the functionalist approach as being the most appropriate in understanding the multi-functionality of aesthetics as it pertains to elders of privilege. The article postulates that certain aesthetic elements articulated and legitimized the political, economic and ritual power of privileged elders, and that they visually, contextually and perceptually marked out elders vested with authority from those individuals with no authority in the society. It argues that it was in the interest of privileged elders to appropriate certain aesthetic elements and imbue them with ritual and symbolic value in order to manipulate them to their advantage within the Council of Elders system which, though it is said to have been relatively egalitarian in its mode of operation, nonetheless was ruled by a small elite group.

1. Introduction

Today, traditional1 ritual practices and aesthetics continue to have important significance in rural communities, albeit in a vastly modified form because of the intervention of government policies, Western-style education, Christianity and Islam, and the encroachment of Westernization, all of which have had a profound effect on the Mijikenda. The importance of these ritual practices and aesthetics in Mijikenda communities largely manifests itself during times of crisis, when individuals or communities are under threat from such things as illness,

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1 By ‘traditional’ is meant the past and present ethos of communities which, despite the modernization process, still maintain their traditional lifestyles and beliefs. The Mijikenda comprise nine groups of related peoples: the Giriama, Duruma, Digo, Jibana, Kambe, Rabai, Ribe, Chonyi and Kauma. The Digo, Duruma and Jibana are predominantly Muslims, while the rest are a mixture of traditionalists, Christians and Muslims.

The functionalist approach adopted in this article recognizes that in some societies there is a multifunctionality of aesthetics and that aesthetics may satisfy the psychological, social or cultural needs of individuals, and that in such societies elders symbolically display power through the collection of certain valued items. See for example Anderson (1979: 26-51).

misfortune, or adverse government policies, and at funeral, memorial and healing ceremonies.

In many traditional African societies, status and power were expressed and legitimized through a variety of ritual practices, ritual artefacts and aesthetics which differentiated between ordinary members of the community and those vested with authority. The emphatic significance of these rituals, as a whole, is still evident in some contemporary African states where political leaders frequently evoke and appropriate them to express their political status and office and, more importantly, to legitimize their 'eldership' status within the political arena and at their constituency level. These traditional status symbols complement the status symbols of modernity – expensive houses, cars, Western-style apparel and so forth. These status accessories stand in sharp contrast to each other, but serve the purpose of enhancing the economic and political status of the user.

There are many examples of African leaders who evoke traditionality. For example, Mobutu of Zaire advocated African 'authenticity' by urging his people to use African names and to wear African dress. He himself carried an African walking stick and wore aquaticinspired costumes, and at the same time amassed expensive vehicles, castles and homes in Europe, and Western-style furniture, for example.

Another good example is President Moi of Kenya who is seldom seen without his horizontally-held ivory knob-ended short staff, a symbol of eldership and authority in Tugen society to which President Moi belongs. Similarly, the late Jomo Kenyatta, first President of independent Kenya, always carried a flywhisk and walking stick, both symbols of eldership and authority not only in his Kikuyu community but in other Kenya communities. Jomo Kenyatta also wore a colourful beaded cylindrical hat which, among the Luo of Kenya, is called ogut tigo and which traditionally expressed wealth, wisdom and authority. In addition to these symbolic artefacts, Kenyatta wore a colourful beaded belt, called kinyatti, over his Western trousers. It can be suggested that Kenyatta was expressing not only his eldership and economic status as an African elder, but a national pride and appreciation of African aesthetics in the immediate post-colonial era, a time when it was important to visually demonstrate one's liberated status and pride in Africanity.

When Members of Parliament in contemporary Kenya are elevated to cabinet ministerial positions, they invariably appropriate a traditional symbol of leadership peculiar to their own community as a means of expressing their new political and 'eldership' status because eldership is still a respected status in patriarchal Kenyan communities. These symbols can be said to play a key role in bridging the gap between a traditional ethos and a contemporary one.

Why is it so important for these contemporary leaders to identify themselves with symbols of authority that appear to have no real purpose in contemporary society which has become very Westernized? It is important to remember that despite Westernization there are still many pockets of communities which are very traditional in viewpoint and practice. In the traditional context, 'to speak without a stick is to talk like a woman' (Hodder 1982: 67). All legitimate elders
carry ritually-acquired ‘sticks’ (such as the knob-ended type carried by Moi) or ritual stools or other objects that denote the users’ eldership status which accords them the right to exercise authority. In Kenya, this is carried to the political arena where the politics of power reign supreme. Political leaders and aspirants without ‘legitimacy’ within the ruling elite are often referred to by their political opponents as ‘uncircumcized’ men who cannot lead a nation of people. These ‘uncircumcized’ men also lack symbols of authority. Political leaders who consider themselves ‘elders’ of status and as ‘circumcized’ men, often brandish their chosen symbolic artefacts in public rallies to demonstrate and reinforce their claim to eldership and leadership. During such rallies men who have fallen out of political favour or who are in opposition parties are publicly castigated by their ruling opponents as men who have no legitimacy nationally and at the constituency level. In other words, such men are attempting ‘to speak without sticks’ because they have no status within the prevailing political hierarchy where political patronage and allegiance to the incumbent President is paramount. Material artefacts therefore emphasize the differences between those individuals with power and those without (Hodder 1982: 121-22).

The appropriation of traditional artefacts and evocation of ritual beliefs and practices by contemporary African leaders demonstrates to some extent the underlying retention and subtle continuity and transmission of cultural practices and beliefs, even though it is often done in an opportunistic manner and within the framework of a neo-traditional and neo-contextual ethos. The fact that these artefacts and practices are recognized by political leaders as relevant cultural legacies which can be appropriated and embraced when a socio-political need arises, manifests their pivotal role in both traditional and contemporary society. Furthermore, they reinforce the importance of traditions at a particular historical point in time as perceived by the leaders and the led.

In traditional Mijikenda society specifically, certain aesthetic elements and artefacts were exclusive to elders of status who had undergone the required ritual stages within the various ranks of the Council of Elders. Such elements and practices marked out the different social and ritual groups and enabled them to respect the limits imposed by the ruling elders of the Council. Some of the artefacts acquired aesthetic and ritual value as a result of their close association with privileged elders. Some of these elements were never seen, but could be described by members of the society and categorized as things belonging to elders. Some artefacts inspired awe and fear in people, and these were not readily talked about by non-ritual individuals. An example of such an artefact is the mwandza, the sacred drum of elders which was greatly feared by non-ritual individuals, who were not allowed to see it.

The substance and form of elements that are considered aesthetically pleasing in Mijikenda society can be examined within three loose categories, each of which functions in a specific way, though there is often an overlapping of these categories. The terms urembo and maridadi, denoting the aesthetics of the ‘beautiful’ and the ‘decorative’ respectively, apply to all three categories and are often used interchangeably.
In the first category of urembo / maridadi belong the decorative aspect of artefacts and the ornamentation of the human body which are not ritual. A good example of this is the aesthetic embellishment of the non-ritual, non-status human body ... a nicely oiled body, plucked eyebrows, attractive hairstyles, and attractive ornaments, all considered desirable elements intended to enhance one's natural beauty (udzo). This category allows people to express freely the pleasure they derive from each others' bodies and ornaments. There is no ritual prohibition connected with this embellishment which is functional in so far as it expresses a concept of good looks. The decorated non-status, non-ritual body can be described as a mobile aesthetic form which displays unrestricted non-ritual aesthetic elements which are for purely personal and public gratification and consumption.

The second category of urembo / maridadi concerns aesthetics associated with ritual status and political power. Aesthetics in this case defines, articulates and legitimizes the acquisition, use and control of status and power by ritual elders. In this category, certain aesthetic elements and artefacts are restricted to ritual elders with the ruling ranks of the Council of Elders.

The third category of urembo / maridadi involves the aesthetics of healing. In this category, aesthetics and artefacts are used to propitiate malevolent and benign spirits and their function is to induce these spirits to leave the human body they have invaded or afflicted.

As far as this article is concerned, it is the second category of ritual and status aesthetics that is being examined. (The aesthetics of healing is relevant in the case of representational memorials installed for deceased ritual elders.) Within this second category, there is a dynamic interplay of aesthetics, status and power as it exists in life, in death and after death. A hierarchy of aesthetics exists at the different social and ritual stages of life, and this hierarchy clearly delineates aesthetic elements associated with privileged elders. In order to appreciate this interplay, it is necessary to discuss the hierarchy as it exists in life, in death and after death.

2. Hierarchy of status and power in life

Traditional Mijikenda society was based on gerontocratic ascent through various grades of the Council of Elders called Kambi.2 The ultimate echelon of power was the Kambi mbere composed of relatively wealthy men who had fulfilled all the requisite ritual expectations and ordeals and had become ritual experts. This gerontocratic Council of Elders has been described as an egalitarian one since every individual could, in theory, acquire and exercise power (Brantley 1978 and 1981). In practice however, the Kambi mbere was composed of men who were economically able to proceed from one grade to the other, and who had the means ultimately to petition to enter the more prestigious and exclusive levels where fees became more and more prohibitive. Rituals pertaining to these levels

2 Kambi means Council of Elders. Refer to Spear (1978) and Brantley (1981) for a fuller discussion.
were characterized by lavish feasts hosted by the ritual candidates and their extended families.

Ritual status and power were acquired as men moved through the various ranks of the Kambi, from levels of virtual non-power to levels of real power. A man’s social and economic standing was important in the acquisition of status and power. At all levels of the ritual hierarchy, individuals were grouped into age-sets after circumcision rites and they remained in their respective sets until they were permitted to petition the ruling elders to be allowed to pay requisite fees to undergo initiation into a higher rank. The higher the rank, the more prohibitive the fees and the more demanding the ritual ordeals. These conditions effectively eliminated weaker individuals from advancing to the more exclusive ranks. This paved the way for smaller groups of powerful men to emerge at all levels of the hierarchy.3

The age-set or rank of the system at which individuals began to acquire real power was the nyere. This rank was composed of young men who were charged with the protection of the community and with entrepreneurial pursuits. It is this group that was later to initiate a breakaway from the system of Council of Elders and to establish their own power bases outside the confines and restrictions of the Kambi system.4

It can be said that a man’s real economic wealth was tested when he was ready to leave the nyere rank and enter the Kambi nyuma. The nyere candidates paid a fee consisting of maize in sufficient quantities to purchase seven bullocks for the ritual feasts and six bullocks for the privilege of becoming members of the Kambi nyuma, the junior rank of the Kambi. In addition, the petitioners were required to provide agricultural produce for the celebratory feast.5

The nyere candidates decorated their bodies with red ochre, donned palm-leaf skirts over which were tied strings of plant rattles, and around their ankles they wore borassus palm nut rattles. They performed a ritual dance called mung'aro.6 To mark the completion of the rituals, the initiates were anointed with castor oil. As members of the Kambi nyuma, the men were entitled to wear a coloured ritual cloth called kitambi (pl. vitambi) and were permitted to take part in the affairs of the rank as determined by the ruling elders.

It is from the nyere rank that aesthetics began to become elaborate, expensive and limited. Imported cloths were expensive to buy and the fact they began to

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3 According to informants, women had corresponding ritual associations through which ritual status was acquired. The power of women elders revolved around women’s issues.

4 In some cases, individuals from the nyere rank initiated a break-away from the central makaya and the kambi system and established their own village. See Parkin (1972) for an analysis of this phenomenon.

5 The contribution of foodstuffs for celebrations is something that still exists among the Mijikenda where members of the community all contribute to funeral, remembrance, healing and other ceremonies.

6 Mung’aro (or m’ngaro) literally means ‘shining’ and refers not only to the glistening effects of oil and ochre, but more importantly to the triumph of becoming a luvoo. The noun ungaro means triumph.
emerge from the nyere rank indicates to some extent that at this point the rituals were becoming more important and exclusive. The red ochre used to decorate the initiates’ bodies had ‘eldership’ ritual significance since below the nyere rank, initiates to be circumcized were smeared with white clay rather than with red ochre. (White clay was used to mark a transitory state from uncircumcized to circumcized.)

To advance from the Kambi nyuma to Kambi kahi, the candidates danced a short clapping dance called sayo and thereafter elders were elected from each clan as representatives in the Kambi. The Kambi kahi members petitioned to enter the Kambi mbere, the most senior rank of the Kambi. Candidates paid exorbitant fees and underwent much more rigorous ritual ordeals. The rituals were highly celebrated and there was a conspicuous consumption of palmwine, meat and maize meal. It is said that the rituals lasted seven days.

Candidates smeared their bodies with castor oil, and on their heads wore pieces of wood sharpened at one end and frayed at the other to resemble feathers. Around their necks they wore iron rings which were flattened on the inside like curved blades. On their upper arms were tied goat beards, symbols of eldership. They wore palm-leaf skirts and tied metal rattles around their ankles to dance the ritual dance called kiraho (‘oath’). The men carried wooden staves to which were tied pieces of wood and they stamped long bamboo poles on the ground to make a drum-like sound during the dance. At the end of the ritual, the frayed pieces of wood were thrown away in a secret place in the forest. To signify their new status, the elders were anointed with castor oil (see Adamson 1967: 285-309 and Kenya National Archives: DC/KFI/3/1: 1913).

As members of the Kambi mbere, the elders were permitted to wear a special black cloth, also called kitambi, tied at the waist with a red sash. The elders also wore a white cloth thrown over the shoulder. In addition the men carried forked staffs and medicine bags, all symbols of their ritual status and purified state as elders of the Kambi mbere.

In looking at the hierarchy of aesthetics, status and power in life, it can be seen that the aesthetics and aesthetic elements began to become more expensive and more exclusive at the higher levels of the gerontocratic Kambi system. This was even more evident as elders moved to three other prestigious associations which had certain status symbols that set the elder distinctly apart from others. According to Anderson (1979: 41) the collection of items that are not overtly utilitarian allow the relatively more powerful members of a society to use them as ‘status symbols’. In the case of Mijikenda privileged elders, certain imported artefacts and local organic materials were controlled by them and given ritual significance and exclusivity and made taboo to the rest of the members of the community, as a visual means of marking out their power and status.

Elders in the Kambi mbere could belong to three other exclusive associations: the luvoo (or gohu), the vava and the fisi. These associations were dominated

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7 The purification of initiates is an important step in Mijikenda rituals. This is done by ritual elders who anoint the person with castor oil. The term used is kuhasa (‘to purify / to bless’). Ochre, clay and millet flour were also used.
Status and aesthetics in Mijikenda society

by wealthy ritual elders who had status and power in the society. According to a luvoo informant, elders in the Kambi mbere, having proved themselves ritual experts, belonged to the luvoo association, and those who were experts in medicine, healing and oaths usually belonged to the vaya and fisi associations under whose control lay powerful medicine and oaths; the vaya and fisi regulated the use of these medicines and oaths. Given that status and power was articulated through membership of prestigious associations, or ritual ranks, the view that all elders of the Kambi mbere belonged to the luvoo association has merit.

Entry into the luvoo required the payment of an initial application fee referred to as mahendo ('palmwine for an act, or deed') which consisted of palmwine, money and a fowl. The second fee signified permission for petitioners to undergo rituals and was referred to as kushika mkono ('to hold the hand'). The fee consisted of one bullock, fourteen calabashes of palmwine, four cooking pots of maize meal, six coils of tobacco, thirty pishi (equivalent to about 4 lbs to 6 lbs) of castor oil seeds and agricultural produce from the petitioner's farm and from the farms of each of his brothers. His clan was also required to contribute to the celebratory feast.

Lvoo initiation, like all ritual ceremonies, took place secretly in the forest and non-initiates were forbidden to go anywhere near the place. The sacred ritual drum, the Mwanda, a vibrating drum which produced a roar-like sound, warned people that a ritual ceremony was taking place. In the secret place of ritual, the candidates decorated their bodies with red ochre over which they printed star-like patterns using shaped midribs of the castor oil leaf. The initiatives wore palm-leaf skirts over the black kitambi cloth wrapped around the waist and tied with red and white sashes. On their heads the men wore conical or cylindrical crowns made from millet flour. Sometimes the crowns were smeared with red ochre over which were painted black and white patterns. Palm leaves were notched to resemble feathers and were stuck into the crowns. (Ritually, a palm-leaf, called lukansa, was a symbol that an initiate was being prepared for luvoo-ship and at this stage of the ceremony was called mondo, a term which roughly translates as 'apprentice' or 'junior' of the luvoo association.) Finally, the candidates tied palm-nut rattles around their ankles to perform the nyambura dance.

The most important aspect of the luvoo ceremony was the investiture of the initiates with an undecorated buffalo horn bracelet called luvoo. (It is interesting to note that among the Maasai of Kenya, only privileged elders with large herds of cattle and many children were permitted to wear a buffalo horn bracelet called Ol-Masangus to symbolize this wealth and status, see Hollis 1905: 284.) The investiture of the luvoo initiate was a public event, witnessed by the society at

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8 Luvoo elder, Mulai wa Kabao; a ritual expert and maker of mikoma and vigango. (Shariani, Mombasa, 1985 / 1986).

9 Nyambura dance: it is interesting that the Kikuyu of Kenya used to hold a feast and dance similar in description to this one. It was called mambura and for the dance the initiates smeared their bodies with red ochre and in some cases decorated their bodies with star-like patterns (Hobley 1922: 80).
large, held at a central place ritually purified by sprinkling castor oil and millet flour over it.

The initiates were led in procession by officiating elders to the place of ceremony in a single file and under cover of a large sheet called *lidegwani*. Walking very slowly and solemnly in the manner of a funeral procession, they were led to the ceremonial place. When the *lidegwani* was removed the men were seen to be wearing 'beautiful clothes made of fibre'. The women danced and sang, ululating joyfully because their 'little human beings' were to be elevated to *luvoo*-ship.10

The investiture involved the calling out of initiates by names they had acquired during the secret rituals; names said to have attested to the men's strength, attributes and idiosyncrasies during the rituals.11 As each initiate stepped forward, the officiating elder slipped the *luvoo* bracelet onto the initiate's arm just below the elbow. After all the initiates had received their bracelets, the *nyambura* feast was consumed.

The climax of the ritual was carried out in privacy between the initiate and his wife during sexual intercourse at which point she slipped the *luvoo* bracelet to her husband's upper arm. *Luvoo* informants said that this act proved the virility of the *luvoo* initiate who had earned the right to become a member of the *luvoo* association.12

*Luvoo*-ship entitled the elders to wear the buffalo horn bracelet, to carry their forked staffs and medicine bags, and after death, to have decorative memorial sculptures (vigango) installed to house their spirits. These status symbols were the visual expression of their status and power as elders of the coveted *luvoo* association. The purified status, symbolized by the artefacts, is the most significant aspect of *luvoo*-ship. The crowning honours relating to this state are called *thura*, a word meaning the 'elevation' of the elder. The word which denotes purification is *kuhasa* which means 'to bless' and *kutaswa*, a word which means 'to purify'. Another word related to this purified state is *kueza* which means 'to purify'; 'to hoist'; and 'to elevate'. The attainment of a purified state was the anointing of the elder with castor oil. (See Krapf & Rebmann 1887: 197 and 360; Taylor 1891: 16.)

As far as the vaya and *fisi* associations were concerned, elders in these associations were already *wenye luvoo* ('owners of the *luvoo*').

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10 These 'beautiful clothes made of fibres' were full, kilt-like (or tutti-like) skirts made from fronds of the wild date palm. The skirts were the same style as the hando skirts still used today by Mijikenda women. Even today, male dancers wear these palm-leaf skirts at funerals and remembrance ceremonies. 'Little human beings' describes the men prior to becoming *luvoo* members.

11 Two examples of such names are *Liwali* (Swahili word for 'local provincial administrator' during the colonial era) and *Haji* ('someone who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca').

12 The word *luvoo* is used to refer both to the buffalo horn bracelet and to the wearer. Among the Giriama, the word *gohu* is also used. Another word, which is rarely heard, is *lau*. *Lumfo* is sometimes heard as a dialect variant. The word *lau* is used among the Digo. *Malau* refers to the proceedings in trials, judicial debates etc. among the Digo.
membership fee for the vaya consisted of 14 lengths of cotton cloth (which was equivalent at one time to 14 rupees), ten calabashes of palmwine, seven cooking pots of maize meal, four measures (about 14 lbs to 16 lbs) of castor oil seeds, one brand new axe and one bullock (or in some cases one large, bearded goat).

The fisi association, named after the hyena, was composed of elders called azhera a fisi who controlled and administered the powerful and feared oaths. One of the most powerful oaths was the kiraho cha fisi (‘oath of the hyena’) which was used in the detection of evil medicine (uchawi) and in resolving and settling serious disputes between the accuser and the accused in direct accusations. The oath was the final appeal for justice (see Parkin 1972; Brantley 1981 and 1979).

Ritual elders of the luvoo, vaya and fisi met in secret places in the forest forbidden to the rest of the community. Anyone inadvertently breaking this taboo was subject to severe punishment and penalties. Even animals straying anywhere near these places were confiscated and consumed by the elders.

3. **Hierarchy of aesthetics, status and power in death and after death**

Among the Mijikenda, status and power of elders did not and does not end upon death. Mijikenda ontology recognizes the existence of the physical and the spiritual worlds, including the supernatural. Ancestors, including the ‘unknown ones’ of long ago whose names have long since been forgotten, are ‘brought home’, revered, fed, talked to, housed, clothed, and beseeched in times of trouble. They are recognized as living members of the community. Ancestors are ‘brought home’ by offering them befitting feasts, representational memorials, brand new clothes, and shelter within the homestead compound in order that they may be benevolent to their descendants.

After the death of an elder of status, the body is ritually washed by ritual elders and the body decorated with red, white and black pattems in the same manner as was done during the luvoo rituals. The body is dressed in a black kitambi tied at the waist with red and white sashes. After the body is anointed with castor oil, it is wrapped in a white shroud and then wrapped in a brand new plaited mat and buried in a secret place in the forest. Bodies of ritual elders are never put into coffins. After the body, is buried the ground is completely flattened during the funeral dances by elders mourning their compatriot.

Under normal circumstances, the mourning period among the Mijikenda lasts three months after which a remembrance ceremony is held during which time family property is distributed and a new head of the homestead named. If the family is financially unable to host a remembrance feast, it can be deferred to a later date. It is beholden upon family members of the deceased to provide a befitting remembrance feast, otherwise the community may judge them as having no regard for their dead. More importantly, a negligent family which fails to provide a feast for deceased elders may be stricken by misfortunes brought about by the unhappy spirits of the deceased who complain of ‘being left out in the cold’ without clothes, food and shelter.

In the case of a luvoo elder, a remembrance feast is highly necessary as a way of signifying and extolling his prestigious status. In addition, an embellished
memorial sculpture (kigango, pl: vigango) must be installed. The remembrance and installation feasts for a deceased luvoo are usually extravagant and there is a conspicuous consumption of palmwine, meat and food (Parkin 1982: 5).

It is important to note that memorial sculptures are not necessarily installed after the three months’ mourning period, but usually when the spirit of the deceased appears in dreams to his direct descendant who is the head of the homestead. In many cases installation ceremonies are held years after the death of elders. The important thing is that at one time or another a family will be troubled by the spirits of their ancestors (makoma), who want to be brought home. It is often the case that when misfortunes strike a family and they consult healers (waanga), it will be discovered through the mediation of the healers that the family has neglected to install ancestral memorials.

As indicated earlier, ancestral spirits (makoma) are recognized as living entities which continue to exercise their rights as elders of the homestead and the community according to their ritual status during their lifetime. The material representations make it possible for the spirits to be located within the compound so that they become part and parcel of the homestead. The shelter provided for the spirits is usually placed close to the elders’ meeting house (or ‘conversation hut’) in order that the ancestor may not be forgotten.

In the same way that a hierarchy of aesthetics, status and power is maintained in life and in death, it is maintained after death when ancestral spirits are brought home through the installation of sculptural memorials. In death all appropriate rites and feasts must be accorded to the deceased in line with their ritual status. After death the status of elders is articulated through their representational memorials which are different for luvoo and non-luvoo elders.

The ceremony for the making and installation of ancestral memorials takes the same form as the initiation and burial ceremonies for status elders. When memorials are made for luvoo ancestors, memorials for other ancestors are made and installed at the same time. The hierarchy of seniority is maintained so that memorials for junior ancestors are not installed before those for senior ancestors. The memorials are installed side by side in lineal descent and the status of the ancestors is distinguished by the form and decoration of the memorials.

The memorials are made secretly in the forest by ritual experts from durable, termite-resistant wood such as mahogany, teak and wild fig. The wild fig, mukone, is used for female ancestors who had attained the mbono (‘castor oil’) age; that is, they had been ritually anointed with castor oil to become elders.

Once the memorials have been made, they are brought during late evening to a bush close to the place of installation and laid down in a ‘sleeping’ position. The elders keep vigil until cockrow. The head of the homestead provides them with food and four calabashes of palmwine; two are referred to as tembo la kulalalia (‘palmwine for laying down’) and two are referred to as tembo la kukita (‘palmwine for the installation’).

At cockrow, the elders bring ‘their people’ to the place of installation which is purified by sprinkling castor oil and millet flour over it. The memorials are carried in the manner of a corpse carried shoulder high in a horizontal position. The elders place the memorials into dug holes, referred to as ‘graves’, and the
soil is packed tightly around them to stand them firmly upright. The memorials are then dressed in brand new strips of red, black (or dark blue) and white cloths. The memorials belonging to female ancestors are dressed by a female ritual elder of the mbono age. Once dressed, the memorials are drenched with castor oil and a sacrificial animal is slaughtered close by so that the blood splatters on to the memorials and runs into the ground. Once this has been done, the memorials are said to ‘wake up’ (kuramuka) and to become living members of the homestead and community of descendants and compatriots. A shelter is constructed over the memorials, and in some cases the memorials are installed in a house where elders will sleep. Coconut shells are embedded in the ground in front of each memorial to hold food, palmwine and water for the spirits (see further Parkin 1986).

Ancestral memorials are never removed from their original installation site. The Mijikenda say that to do so would be like opening up a grave and exhuming the body. If a family relocates to a new site, the memorials are left behind and replicas are installed at the new homestead when the need arises; that is, when ancestors appear in dreams to trouble the head of the homestead. Memorials left behind in an old homestead also act as markers and reminders of the original homestead and the cultivation rights of the original owners. This is important in a society where land is still largely communal and where trees or landmarks are used to indicate an individual’s or family cultivation rights.

As far as aesthetics, status and power are concerned, there is a distinct difference between memorials for luvoo ancestors and those for non-luvoo ones. The memorials for luvoo ancestors are called vigango (sg: kigango / kigangu), while those for non-luvoo are called mikoma (sg: koma). The word kigango implies both likeness or representation and healing. The word may come from the root words nga ‘resemble’ and angu ‘mine’ with the prefix ki which denotes an inanimate object. The meaning of the word would then be something that resembles / represents a person. However, the word more likely comes from the root word uganga (‘medicine’) and the prefix ki so that the meaning is an object that heals or mediates in healing as indeed the memorials are said to do.13

Broadly then, the meaning of kigango is that it is a schematic representation of a human being, employed in a ritual and a healing context in relation to a particular individual and decorated in a way that is partly representational of the human form, partly representational of the patterns placed on the body of the individual at the time of installation as a luvoo, and which exhibits aesthetic qualities necessary to please the ancestral spirits. A kigango can be described as a representation of a particular sequence of events in which claims by the deceased, revealed through dreams and afflictions, are met and resolved by the making of the object, and by the ritual process which infuses it with life and renders it a living entity, and by the installation ceremony through which the ancestor is finally brought home. It is here at the homestead that the kigango

13 The word kigango might also be derived from the verb ganga which is associated with cures, healing, charms, or appeasement of spirits, with the implication ‘something to appease spirits with’. See Parkin (1982: 16).
provides a representation of the status system by which people acquired ritual and political authority.

In order to fully appreciate the ritual and political authority of luvoo elders, it is important to look at the difference in the memorials for luvoo ancestors, which stand in clear contrast to those for non-lyouo elders. The meaning of koma (pl: makoma) is ‘ancestral spirit’. Memorials for non-lyuoo ancestors are simply called ‘sticks for ancestor’ (vigango za makoma (sg: kigongo cha koma). The word koma is used to refer both to ancestors and memorial stick. The plural mikoma refers to inanimate things which represent or house ancestral spirits. Of course, once the memorials have been ritually installed they are considered living entities who are part of the homestead. (It is important to note that malevolent spirits are called pepo (pl: mapepo) and these are appeased by offering them gifts, including representational sculpture in some cases, to induce them to leave their afflicted host and to drive them away from the homestead.)

Aesthetics and form are used to delineate the status of ancestors. In the case of non-lyuoo ancestors, their short memorials are cut from branches of durable wood. The bark is left on the wood and the top end is cut in a slant for male elders, and straight across for female ones. Memorials for male ancestors are thinner than those for female ones. It is these slight differences which distinguish between male and female ancestors, and it is the undecorated, simple forms which distinguish mikoma from vigango, and makoma from each other.

In the case of vigango for luvoo ancestors, the sculptures have a distinctive schematic form which has a head, a neck, a torso, a waist and a lower section which is embedded in the ground. The form is a rectangular plane which is smoothed and incised with patterns arranged in many variations; indeed, no two vigango are ever alike in the arrangement of patterns, though the pattern shapes may be the same or similar in style. The variety of pattern layouts includes series of lines, zigzags, semi-circles, circles, rows of diamonds, triangles and star-shaped patterns. The triangle is a dominant shape. The basic form is painted with red pigment and the incisions are filled with black and white pigments. The pigments are bound with latex tapped from the euphorbia plant.

The heads of vigango are carved in various styles, sometimes particular to the Mijikenda subgroups to which the luvoo ancestors belong. The heads can be circular, rectangular or oval. It is rare to find vigango with realistic faces and arms, but these types used to be made among the Kambe subgroup (Adamson 1967: 43-5). The features of vigango faces are either well-defined or a mere suggestion of the eyes, nose and mouth.

Replicas of vigango are called vibao (sg: kibao) which literally means ‘planks of wood’. These replicas are schematically the same as vigango, but they are usually smaller in size and height (standing about three feet high and much narrower in width) in contrast to vigango which are usually about six inches wide and anything to eight feet high. Replicas are not usually decorated.

The visual difference between memorials for luvoo elders and those for non-luvoo makes it possible for the status of elders to be maintained even after death. The aesthetic form of the vigango is distinctly different from the simple, undecorated mikoma. The aesthetic patterns and colours used on vigango are said
to resemble those used on the luvoо ancestors’ bodies during luvoо initiations, and are said to express the ‘youthfulness’ (uvulana) and happiness (raha) of the luvoо spirits. They say that when ancestral spirits are delighted with their vigango, they will be generous and benevolent to their descendants who will be ‘fanned by a good breeze’ and will reap good harvests and be happy.

As far as mikoma for non-luvoо ancestors are concerned, it is important that they too please the spirits which will inhabit them. When newly installed mikoma sprout leaves this is a sign that the ancestors are pleased and happy and that the descendants will be blessed.

The object which entitles luvoо elders to vigango after death is their undecorated buffalo horn bracelet, the luvoо. Though the bracelet is simple undecorated it is viewed as an aesthetic object and is described as ‘a thing of beauty’ because it designates an elder’s purified / blessed ritual state. The bracelet is also a statement about the fearsome status of luvoо elders. There is an underlying implication that the ferocity of the buffalo is analogous to luvoо elders, so that when members of the community talk about it they do so with reverence and awe because it is not the bracelet per se they are discussing but the awesome attributes, status and power of luvoо elders. The bracelet acquires its aesthetic value from its association with luvoо elders. It is the visual expression of the authority invested in luvoо elders.

4. The aesthetics of status and power

Taken as a whole, ritual aesthetics among the Mijikenda is the articulation of the legitimate acquisition and maintenance of status and power of ritual elders.

The acquisition of a body of aesthetics connected with status and power was a continuous process before the breakdown of the Kambi system. The most dramatic change in the Kambi system can be said to have occurred from the beginning of colonialism (1895), and in particular, with the imposition of various colonial administrative devices such as the Headmen’s Ordinance of 1902 which transferred power from the elders of the Kambi to Chiefs appointed by the colonial administration. From 1913-1914 there was constant conflict between the Mijikenda and the British, who imposed more and more demands on the Mijikenda. The British even destroyed Mijikenda centres of rituals as a way of forcing the people to abandon the traditional system. In some cases, the British tried to subvert the traditional system by imposing British-orchestrated rituals which would work to the benefit of the British administration. For example, in 1913 the British administration imposed a kiraho ceremony as a way of stopping insurrection among the Mijikenda who were opposed to paying taxes and supplying units for the war. (The last major kiraho ceremony is said to have been held in 1870.)

Though the kambi system deteriorated considerably, it did not altogether die out. Smaller rituals were held, and even today, the Mijikenda continue to observe some of the age-old traditions such as funerals, remembrance and memorial.

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installation ceremonies. However, the Council of Elders (kambi) as an institution of government no longer exists.

When the kambi system existed, aesthetic elements which expressed the elders’ privileged status became significant from the nyere rank of the hierarchy. It is from this rank that aesthetics became more elaborate, expensive and exclusive. Deceptive acquisition and illegal use of these ritual aesthetics called for severe penalties and punishment and cleansing ceremonies to prevent illness and misfortune from afflicting the culprit’s family and clan. The wrong-doer was usually required to wear an ornament which identified him as an offender.15

As indicated earlier, certain aesthetic elements became exclusive to elders of status as they advanced up the hierarchical ladder of the kambi. These elements included castor oil, red, black and white pigments and fabrics, the luvoo bracelet, ritual head dresses, medicine bags, long forked staffs and memorial sculptures. Each of these items expressed the ritual, economic and political power of the elders.

It is worth looking at each of these elements to appreciate their function as symbols of status and power. Castor oil was and is used in all Mijikenda ritual ceremonies. Elders, both male and female, who have reached eldership status are referred to as elders of the ‘mbono’ age, mbono being the name of the castor oil plant. Castor oil is a substance which signifies the attainment of a purified or a blessed state. When used in marriage it marks the couple’s move from an ‘irresponsible’ state to a ‘responsible’ social status which recognizes and sanctions the couple’s right to exercise their procreative powers. In healing, castor oil signifies the attainment of a healthy state of being, and where one was possessed, castor oil signifies that the malevolent spirits have been exorcized.

At funerals, remembrance and installation ceremonies, castor oil is used to purify the elders and the bereaved family. In the case of memorial sculptures, castor oil is used to anoint the ancestral spirits embodied in the memorials. In itself, castor oil is not aesthetic, but it acquires a perceived aesthetic value because of its ritual functions.

The use of red, black (or dark blue) and white pigments and fabrics, and patterns denotes a temporary, or transitory, or permanent state of being when used singly or in combination in ritual contexts. These colours, fabrics and patterns all express the ‘youthfulness’ (uvulana) and ‘happiness’ (raha) of elders during their lifetime, in death and after death when their spirits return to the community. These aesthetic elements, together with the luvoo bracelet and the embellished vigango reinforce the ritual and celebratory function of aesthetics. Without the luvoo bracelet, the elders are not entitled to the embellished vigango. The luvoo bracelet is a powerful status symbol which does not require surface embellishment to render it aesthetic; its function as a symbol of the wearer’s social, economic, ritual status and power gives it aesthetic value.

15 Among the Kambe subgroup, this ornament was an iron bangle called chitsuvi (Shariani informants, 1985).
Long, forked staffs, ritual fibre costumes and ornaments, head-dresses and medicine bags similarly articulated the social and ritual status of elders. When the kambi system existed, these were powerful symbols. Forked staffs signified that elders had reached a level which gave them the right to exercise authority. Medicine bags expressed their right to deal with matters concerning the practice, control and dispensing of medicine and oaths. Head-dresses and costumes were / are usually worn during ritual ceremonies and are a visible statement of the elders’ authority to conduct and be a part of the rituals.

The aesthetic elements relating to status and power can be put into two categories, each of which falls into the urembo / maridadi category of ritual function. In the first category can be listed those concerned with secrecy, with rituals which take place in the forest. These elements are produced from local organic materials and include castor oil, pigments, fibre costumes and ornaments (such as rattles), head-dresses, wooden staffs, the sacred drum, the luvoo bracelet and memorial sculptures.

I would like to suggest that these organic materials were / are important in highlighting the essential link and identification with the environment; that the organic objects made / make statements about Mijikenda ontology and cosmology, and are an expression of the preservation and continuity of Mijikenda traditions.

On the other hand, aesthetic elements which were used openly tend to be those made from imported materials, such as fabrics and beads. The limited availability and cost of these imported items in the 1800s and 1900s meant that only the well-to-do could afford them. It can be argued that because of this fact, privileged elders were able to control and manipulate them as ritual items which expressed social, economic and ritual status and power. It can also be suggested that these imported items made statements about the changing environment of the Mijikenda, and the acceptance of foreign items which came to have ritual significance as integral components within Mijikenda aesthetics.

The power of Mijikenda aesthetics lies in its inherent functionality to express pleasure, delineate status and to legitimize the authority of status elders. According to Geertz (1973: 127)

Sacred symbols thus relate an ontology and cosmology to an aesthetics and a morality: their peculiar power comes from their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level, to give to what is otherwise merely actual, a comprehensive normative import.

This is true of Mijikenda symbols.

5. Aesthetics and the changing environment

Major changes begun to take place in society in the 1800s when population increase, and changing perceptions, led to the dispersal of people from the central makaya (sg: kaya), fortified settlements set on relatively inaccessible ridges. Makaya were not only settlements but centres of ontology and cosmology. Even today, some of the sacred makaya continue to function as ritual places where
important ceremonies take place, particularly in times of crisis, as mentioned below.

By the late 1900s when more and more explorers, missionaries and colonizers arrived, Mijikenda society had undergone considerable change. In the forefront of those changes were enterprising young men who had become wealthy through trading activities and who could no longer fit comfortably within the traditional society. In many cases, they established their own villages outside the confines of the kambi system and they were able to attract non-Mijikenda into their villages. Within these settlements, these new leaders could define their own line of descent and establish their power base and system of governance.

After the imposition of British colonialism, major changes occurred as stated earlier. Today, in post-colonial Kenya, the Mijikenda continue to hold funeral and remembrance and installation ceremonies, but the kambi system no longer functions as it did traditionally. However, its ethos is still felt throughout the society. Elders sometimes perform rituals in the makaya which are protected by the government as national sanctuaries where rich varieties of fauna and flora are found.

In October 1993, in Rabai, elders met in the Kaya to usher in the new Mijikenda year and to pray and seek God’s grace. They then slaughtered chickens, goats and cows offered to their ancestors. They also offered gifts and gave food to passers-by. Houses and venues were decorated with flowers. Men, women and children danced a traditional dance called nzunga. The celebrations were held on kwisa, jumwa and rima phiri, the first three days of the week. The celebrants performed their duties before resting on the fourth day. The fifth day was marked by thanksgiving prayers offered by the elders (Daily Nation, Thursday 15th October 1993).

Like many traditional communities in Kenya, Mijikenda society has undergone many changes. Despite the fact that pockets of Mijikenda still observe their traditions, the socio-political and economic fabric of the society has inevitably had to adjust and adapt to the ‘modernization’ process as a consequence of trade, colonialism, postcolonialism and the enroachment of Westernization on all spheres of the society. The aesthetics of status and power have necessarily been affected by these circumstances. Elders in particular lament the fact that the society has undergone such tremendous change. In 1985 / 1986, a luwoo elder, Mulai wa Kabao, expressed this, saying

there aren’t many people of the luwoo and vaya left. The remaining ones have no work. Things have changed very much. As I told you the other day, how will you pour oil on ‘people of the trouser’? They refuse to be oiled. These days if a luwoo elder dies and there aren’t members of the luwoo to bury him, others will have to bury him, won’t they?

Mulai wa Kabao was commenting on the consequences of modernity and education. In referring to ‘people of the trouser’ who refuse to be oiled, Mulai was commenting on the educated and Westernized Mijikenda who no longer see the relevance of traditional rituals and who refuse to participate in them, even at funeral and remembrance ceremonies where bereaved family members are
supposed to be shaved and oiled as an integral part of the ‘unclean’ and ‘clean’ stages of the rituals.16

Christianity and Islam have also had a major impact on traditions. People who profess Christianity or Islam no longer practise the traditional rituals. For example, such people would not install memorial sculptures to their ancestors, nor would they participate in ‘pagan’ practices such as evocation of ancestors and so forth.

Education and government policies also have had a profound impact on the Mijikenda. There is constant pressure on the people to send their children to school and to discard traditional practices which are said to impede ‘development’. People are encouraged to embrace modernity as a way to social advancement and development. Certain government policies have, in some cases, led consequently to the suppression of traditional practices, and thus to their demise.

The changing environment of the Mijikenda through education, religion and exposure to a Western type of lifestyle is therefore having an effect on the traditional aesthetics of status and power. However, it is important to note that this change is not one that totally discards the traditional ways of life, but rather one in which there is constant overlapping and flux, where ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ meet and interact and where the two modes are not overtly antagonistic to each other; rather, there is an interplay of acceptance and rejection, depending on the occasion. Thus, a cultural symbiosis can be said to exist in today’s society. There is no clear-cut discontinuity of the traditional ethos. That ethos persists, permeating the entire society, a society which is, in essence, composed of an intermingling of three cultures; to borrow Ali Mazrui’s term, it is a ‘triple heritage’ of culture in which traditional beliefs, Christianity and Islam, all interact and interrelate, each bringing with it its own peculiarities and ethos.

As far as the future of the aesthetics of status and power of elders is concerned, a new body of aesthetics, reflecting the historical moment, is evolving, and new aesthetic objects which mark out prestigious ‘men of influence’ (Parkin 1968) within the society may include such things as luxurious cars, houses, television sets, modes of dress, and so forth. Already in the wider Kenyan contemporary society, such objects mark out the economic status of the users. It can be suggested that in time these new ‘foreign’ status symbols will be imbued with ritual functionality and acquire intrinsic value as ‘ritual’ objects exclusive to a small group of economically strong people within the society; thus yet again leading to the acquisition and manipulation of such symbols and aesthetics by a small elite group to express and legitimize its status and power. In time, the Mijikenda society and its traditional system will have evolved into the class distinctions of modern society.

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16 During the bereavement stage, the family is considered ‘unclean’. After the mourning period, the family is ritually cleansed to allow them to re-enter the community.
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