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VIGANGO

ON THE TRAIL OF MIJIKENDA MEMORIAL STATUES

They have been treated and traded as art objects, but are no such thing. Vigango are memorial statues embodying the spirits of the dead and Denver Museum of Nature and Science is trying to repatriate the collection it has to their rightful owners and resting places. It has been a mixture of sleuthing and studying. The story starts here.

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In the face of fast encroaching major world religions, particularly Islam and Christianity, the Mijikenda still engage in some traditional religious practices. The worship of ancestral spirits remains particularly important, for the spirits are believed to retain strong influential powers over the lives of their descendants. It is here that the global market for African art has tragically intersected Mijikenda traditional practices, to devastating effect.

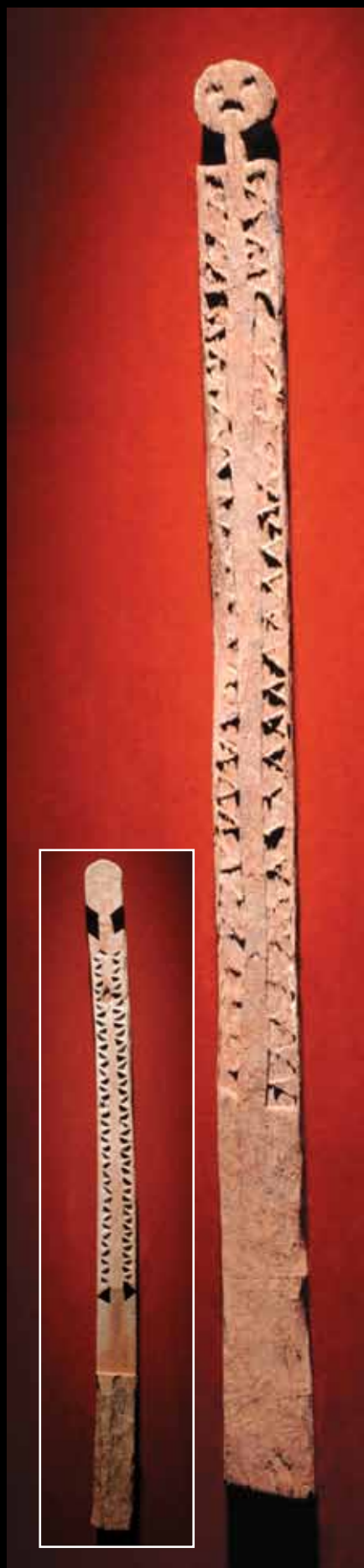
The northernmost Mijikenda, particularly the Giriama, Chonyi, and Kambe, worship their ancestors through the construction of memorial statues. Ordinary Giriama males are honored through the creation of short, minimalist statues called *koma* that are installed in family compounds.

Elite members of the Gohu society, a semi-secret fraternal organisation, are honored not with *koma*, but through the erection of remarkable memorial statues called *vigango* (singular: *kikango*). Carved out of local, termite-resistant hardwoods in the form of decorated and abstract human males, with long, rectangular bodies and circular heads, *vigango* are publicly held memorials erected on (or near) the graves of notable men in the community. Ranging in height from four to nine feet, their size is determined by the status of the Gohu society member being honored. The Mijikenda believe that



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Vigango are part of the culture of the Mijikenda (literally, “the nine tribes”), nine related ethnic sub-groups (the Giriama, Kauma, Jibana, Chonyi, Kambe, Ribe, Rabai, Duruma, and Digo) living on the eastern coast and in the hinterlands of Kenya and northern Tanzania. They typically earn a living through farming, animal husbandry and to a lesser degree cash-earning occupations, but economic distress is characteristic of the region.



vigango are living objects that actively embody the spirits of departed and honored elders. As such, one should not be tempted to compare vigango to headstones and other grave markers in the Western tradition, for the latter are not considered physical incarnations of the dead. The Mijikenda believe that unmolested vigango bring luck and prosperity to the whole community, particularly to the family of the man being honored, and that once erected vigango should not be moved or otherwise molested.

In the early 1980s, art dealers in the United States seeking to grow and expand their business “discovered” vigango and began to sell them as pieces of African “art” not as venerable objects of cultural patrimony and protective living spirits of the Mijikenda. Given the dire economic circumstances of much of eastern Kenya and Tanzania, unemployed young men were tragically enlisted to steal vigango from Mijikenda

TODAY, MORE THAN 400 VIGANGO ARE HELD IN AT LEAST 21 MUSEUMS AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES. ALTHOUGH THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET FOR VIGANGO HAS ABATED IN THE LAST DECADE, THEY ARE STILL AVAILABLE ON INTERNET- AND GALLERY-BASED ART MARKETS AROUND THE WORLD.

homesteads and graveyards, selling them to middlemen for as little as seven dollars each. Once the vigango reached the art market in Mombasa or Nairobi, they might fetch a price of several hundred dollars. By the time they reached the art market in the United States, asking prices and appraisals of up to \$10,000 were not uncommon.

By the 1990s, stolen vigango began to be donated to unsuspecting museums across the United States, including the Denver Museum of Nature & Science (where the authors work as curators). In a self-reinforcing feedback loop, museums benefited from the addition of exquisite objects to their collections, donors benefitted from the enhanced social prestige and non-trivial federal tax deductions they received in return for the act of donation, and art dealers profited handsomely from a newly created “hot” market that had not previously existed. But underlying all these economic transactions were a series of ethical blunders and spiritual affronts—the full effect of which are still being measured. Today, more than 400 vigango are held in at least 21 museums and private collections across the United States. Although the international market for vigango has abated in the last decade, they are still available in internet- and gallery-based art markets around the world.



“Of all the occupations in the world, why did [the art dealer] choose to trade in our ancestors?”

—Gohu Society elders, October 25, 2001

As anthropologists Monica L. Udvardy, Linda L. Giles, and John Mitsanze have well documented, the artificially created international market for vigango goes against every Mijikenda cultural and spiritual belief. Once erected, vigango are not to be moved, for fear that their power will be diluted, if not completely violated. Mijikenda elders document the cause-and-effect relationship between vigango theft and troubles affecting descendant families after such theft.

As reported by Mike Pflanz of the Christian Science Monitor (March 2, 2006; <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0302/p05s01-woaf.html>, accessed 26 December 2012), 86-year old widow Kache Kalume Mwakiru says her family has suffered tragedies including sickness, bad harvests, and the death of their family patriarch, all because two vigango were stolen from family graves: “Things now are very



bad; my grandchildren are always sick, 27 cows have died and even when there is good rain we find we have a very bad harvest. They have destroyed our happiness, our progress, and my family. [The thieves, dealers, and buyers] are murderers.” Such feelings are exacerbated by the economic expense of proper vigango construction and installation—it is not uncommon for Mijikenda to spend up to twice Kenya's average per capita annual income to make vigango for their dead relatives. Karisa Disi Ngowa spent most of his family's savings commissioning four vigango to commemorate the spirits of his father, grandfather, and two uncles. He now fears the vigango will be stolen: “I have heard some people from outside come here to steal these things. I'm very much afraid they will find mine and take them, and we will see troubles again.”

Strictly speaking, the sale of vigango on the international art market is not illegal, for laws prohibiting their sale and transfer do not exist. Kenya has not signed the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, under which, if ratified



by Kenya, the United States could be compelled to return the cultural property because it was exported without a permit. In the absence of such, the United States could enter into a bilateral treaty with Kenya to prohibit the vigango trade, but it has not yet done so.

In the parlance of Western legal and ethical traditions, we believe that vigango should be considered “inalienable possessions” or “objects of cultural patrimony”—things that belong to entire communities, not to specific individuals. Considered in this light, the primary breach of ethics (if not law)

under consideration is the original theft of vigango in their source communities. The sale of vigango thereafter, whether by the thief, by a dealer, or by a collector, should be considered null and void because those individuals do not have the right to own, much less sell, the objects in question. By extension, museums that have come to hold vigango in their collections do not have legal title to those objects. As such, they should be repatriated.

In a 2003 article in the *American Anthropologist*, the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association, Udvardy, Giles, and Mitsanze document their successful effort to repatriate two vigango to the Mijikenda. In 1985, while conducting anthropological fieldwork, Udvardy interviewed an elderly Giriama man named Katana (a pseudonym), who showed her a matching pair of vigango he had erected to commemorate his deceased brothers. Several weeks later, when she returned to see Katana, he tearfully noted that they had been stolen shortly after her first visit. In her attempts to locate the vigango he erected, she learned more and more about the destructive, extensive, and growing international market in vigango. In 1992, Giles discovered dozens of vigango in the collections of the recently closed museum at Illinois State University. She then enlisted Mitsanze’s help, for he was a Kenya-based anthropological colleague and is a member of the Giriama. Mitsanze began an extensive and systematic effort to document existing and stolen vigango in order to create a database of reliable knowledge about the problem. Since then, they have identified hundreds of vigango in more than a dozen museums in the United States alone, and argue that 90 percent of those vigango can be traced to the activities of a single dealer in Los Angeles.

In a remarkably serendipitous event, Giles organized a scholarly symposium on Mijikenda culture at the 1999 meeting of the African Studies Association in Houston, Texas, U.S.A., and invited Udvardy to participate. Udvardy presented a paper on the

Gohu Society, and in so doing included her 1985 photograph of Katana and the two (now missing) vigango. Giles next presented a paper on the vigango she had found in the Illinois State University museum collection. Showing images of each, Udvardy was amazed to see a photograph of one the vigango Katana had erected in honor of his brothers! After much further research, Udvardy and Giles determined that the other kikango Katana had commissioned was at Hampton University in Virginia, U.S.A.

Udvardy and Giles continued to conduct research on other vigango throughout the U.S.A. in the early 2000’s, but it was the publication of Pfantz’s article in the *Christian Science Monitor* on March 2, 2006 (see above) that finally pushed the museums to act. By February, 2007, both vigango had been sent to the National Museum in Kenya. On June 20, 2007, a public repatriation ceremony occurred in the village from which the vigango had been taken, with dozens of local and national dignitaries in attendance. Both vigango are now enclosed in a locked cage in order to ensure they are not again stolen.

Since then, other institutions have worked to repatriate vigango from their collections, but the process is often complicated, expensive, and never straightforward. Some museum administrators resist because, they argue, no laws have been broken in the acquisition process. Others would like to repatriate their vigango but cannot afford to do so. Others have entered into negotiations only to have them be derailed by changes in institutional administration. Still others would like to follow the example set by Udvardy, Giles, and Mitsanze and repatriate the vigango to the families that erected them, who can be difficult to identify. The Denver Museum of Nature & Science falls into this last category. We are currently working to identify the source communities for the vigango in our collections. The hope is that these may one day be returned to their rightful resting places. ●