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0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

David Parkin

Frontmatter

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‘Traditional religions’ have not always yielded to Christianity and Islam, nor become devalued by modern secular ideas and commoditisation. In describing the shifting boundaries between these phenomena, David Parkin shows how indigenous African rites and beliefs may be reworked to accommodate a variety of economic systems, new spatial and ecological relations between communities, and the locally variable influences of Islam and Christianity.

Among the Giriama people of Kenya, there are pastoralists living in the hinterland; farmers, who work land closer to the coast; and migrants, who earn money as labourers or fishermen on the coast itself. Wherever they live, they revere an ancient and formerly fortified capital, located in the pastoralist hinterland, which few of them ever see or visit. Those who live closest to the sacred place – the pastoralists – are commonly believed to share in its purity, while those engaged in wage labour are often thought to be furthest removed spiritually from the cultural essence of the Giriama. The idea of the sacred is here made up of these different spatial perspectives, which sometimes conflict. As the site of occasional large-scale ceremonies, however, the settlement becomes specially important at times of national crisis. It then acts as a moral core of Giriama society, and a defence against total domination and assimilation.

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80

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Cambridge University Press

0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

David Parkin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Kigango: a hardwood ancestral memorial standing in a maize field and dating back to about 1880.

Cambridge University Press

0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

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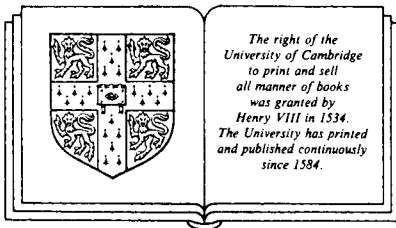
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SACRED VOID

*Spatial images of work and
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DAVID PARKIN



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Cambridge University Press

0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

David Parkin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For Nathan, Sasha and Andrew

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0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

David Parkin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> xii
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
Space and religion	1
Three responses to Durkheim	3
Three understandings of space	7
Pilgrims and their absence	10
Outline of the argument	12
1 Fantasies of the west	16
Contrasting spaces	16
Witch-hunter from nearby, elders from afar (Case history 1)	25
Witch-finder and elders compared	30
Case summary	34
Conclusion	36
2 Western Kaya, sacred centre	37
The Kaya as sacred centre	37
The myth of political centralisation	47
From centre to dispersal	49
Powerful manifestations	52
Conclusion	56
3 View from the west: cattle and co-operation	58
Hiding the cattle	58
Cattle and clans	68
A governmental view: 1964–1985 (Case history 2)	69
Case implications	72

Cambridge University Press

0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

David Parkin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)x *Contents*

Controlling the homestead	74
Surviving and thriving: the people of Miyani	76
Conclusion	82
4 From west to east: the works of marriage	84
The blessed and the unblessed	84
Moving east	87
Spreading the links	89
Centring the mother's brother	92
Shifting kin and fixed clans	97
Husbanding trade	99
Conclusion	103
5 Spanning west and east: dances of death	105
Scripting funerary rules	105
The homestead as spatial work	106
Affines and attendance	111
The burial and first funeral	112
The second funeral	127
Bad deaths	130
East–west differences	132
Conclusion	134
6 Alternative authorities: incest and fertility	136
Roaming signifiers and classificatory overlap	137
Case material	138
Summary of the case material	142
Setting up the tensions	144
Sheep	146
Hyena	151
Tyranny and tolerance: ideas of authority	156
Conclusion	158
7 Alternative selves: invasions and cures	160
Vulnerability	160
A medical hierarchy?	163
Invasions	168
Cures and government control	171
Doctors of seduction	173
Public formulae	175
Private poetry	177
Divinatory inventiveness	181

Cambridge University Press

0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

David Parkin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

	<i>Contents</i>	xi
The eastern fingers of Islam		187
Conclusion		189
8 Coastal desires and the person as centre		192
Coastal complexity		192
From gift to gain		195
Spirit of desire		201
Ancestral personhood		205
Physical and metaphysical personhood		211
Conclusion		215
Conclusion		218
Semantic chains and shapes		218
The sacred as cleansing, clearing and expulsion		220
The sacred as imaginary space		225
The sacred as deferred centrality		227
Appendix 1 Three ecological zones and demographic features of southern Kilifi District		232
Appendix 2 Giriama kinship and affinal terms		236
Appendix 3 Giriama cattle terms		239
Appendix 4 Giriama patri-clan structure		242
<i>Bibliography</i>		247
<i>Index</i>		254

Cambridge University Press

0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

David Parkin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Illustrations

Kigango: a hardwood ancestral memorial standing in a maize field and dating back to about 1880. Photograph by David Parkin. *frontispiece*

Maps

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|----------------|
| 1 | Giriamaland and the Kenya coast | <i>page</i> 17 |
| 2 | Gotani and Miyani | 79 |

Diagrams

- | | | |
|---|---------------------|-----|
| 1 | Two cattle brands | 73 |
| 2 | A Giriama homestead | 113 |
| 3 | Kinship terms | 237 |
| 4 | Affinal terms | 238 |

Cambridge University Press

0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

David Parkin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

This book, like one of its subjects, has accidental as well as intended beginnings, the tension between which constitutes its theme. It is relevant, therefore, to say how it came about.

I have spent some thirty-four months among the Giriama over the period from 1966 until 1985 (with a further three weeks in 1988). The first thirteen months were spent in Kaloleni location, well within the Giriama agricultural and coconut palm-growing area, from August 1966 until September 1967 inclusive. Some of the findings of that study were published in Parkin (1972), in which I tried to show how peoples' adherence to what they believed to be customary beliefs and practices masked their increasing dependency on a cash-crop market determined by an international supply and demand for their produce. Despite the emergence of cash-crop farmers and entrepreneurs, the colonial and, later, the new independent central government administration had consistently called the Giriama, and other coastal peoples, economically unmotivated and backward, often addressing the people as such at rallies and meetings, many of which I attended. The point of my 1972 monograph was to indicate that this construction of the Giriama by outsiders did not in the least match their own perception of themselves as being already involved in modern economic changes and as including among them successful entrepreneurs, nor did it reflect any objective measures that could be taken: for generations, in fact, the Giriama had produced traders of great skill and wealth who mediated between Swahili and Arabs on the Kenya coast and the bulk of the Giriama and related peoples.

It became obvious to me that these external colonial and post-independence judgements of the Giriama people and their values were part of a more general negative evaluation of them as secondary in all respects to the Muslim coastal Arabs and Swahili, both of whom had received privileged status, some autonomy, and even admiration for their culture and literature, during the colonial and protectorate period of British government. To this was added the often unfavourable view of the Giriama held by missionaries of all denominations,

Cambridge University Press

0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

David Parkin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)xiv *Preface*

who despaired of the slow, almost non-existent conversion to Christianity among the Giriama, compared with such up-country peoples as the Kikuyu, Luo and Luhya, all of whom had converted in large number to Christianity, and to a wage-based work ethic, despite a later exposure to these phenomena. The Giriama became famous for their rebellion against British rule in 1914, and colonial and missionary records constantly refer to Giriama 'resistance', not only to wage labour, but also to Islam and Christianity, the latter of these two being regarded with regret but the former being seen as, at least, compensation.

Christianity has only in very recent years begun to make an impact on the Giriama. Islam has, however, been practised along the East African coast for almost as long as the religion itself. By trading produce from the interior, principally grain and ivory, and by fleeing into the vast hinterland whenever threatened, the Giriama hardly needed to labour for cash nor to embrace coastal Islam, except, indirectly, during occasional inland famines, when they might marry daughters to Muslims in exchange for scarce food grown at the more fertile and rain-fed coast. By itself, though, this did not result in large-scale conversion of Giriama to Islam. Later, Swahili-Arab wealth declined as the ban on slavery reduced the labour available for their coastal plantations.

This symbiotic relationship appears to have become especially precarious in recent decades, possibly as a result of population growth, and of the increasing dependency on the use of cash and on the means to acquire it, including cash-crop farming and wage-labour nearer the coast itself. As a result, more and more Giriama moved towards the eastern coastal area. During a thirteen-month period from August 1977 to September 1978, therefore, I carried out fieldwork with a view to understanding how coastal Muslims and inland Giriama interacted with and viewed each other, economically, politically and culturally. This time, however, I lived in a Muslim Swahili-speaking village, around whom were dotted migrant non-Muslim Giriama small homesteads. The experience was startling, for it seemed that, in many respects, each group viewed the other in mirror-image terms: what the one did and approved of, the other abhorred. Yet, there were common cultural elements which were also sometimes recognised as such by the two peoples, who would often stress their common coastal identity in opposition to up-country Kenyans and outsiders.

Whereas, during the first period of fieldwork, I used mainly the Giriama language, on this latter occasion I used Swahili (which I had learned years earlier) as well as the closely related Giriama. Much of the material collected on the coast during this latter period of fieldwork remains unpublished, and constitutes the basis of a projected third volume on the disparate origins and complex interplay of elements of local Islam. Between the two long periods of fieldwork (during 1968–69, while at Nairobi University, and for a few weeks in each of 1971 and 1972), I spent time in yet another area of Giriama country, the western

Cambridge University Press

0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

David Parkin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface* xv

bushland and near-savanna where cattle are herded, returning there for two periods of three and two months in 1984 and 1985.

This latter fieldwork provided a third ecological and cultural perspective, alongside that of the coast, dominated by Islam, small urban centres, and maritime activities, principally fishing, and that of the immediate hinterland of Giriama, characterised by cash-crop farming.

My intention all along was to write a book about the interrelationship between these three ecological and cultural areas, and, indeed, this book partially fulfils that aim. Increasingly, however, another theme persistently presented itself. In the hinterland of Giriama country, there is a traditional capital, located away from large population clusters. For generations it has been almost uninhabited. Outside observers had tended to regard it as little more than an anachronism, and Giriama themselves were divided between the majority who revered it but had little to do with it and who insisted that only a few special elders could talk about it, and these latter who stressed its importance but kept their visits to, and links with it, rather quiet. Over the years, I saw the relationship between peoples living in the three ecological zones as a kind of statement: the transition from the interior cattle zone, through the farming area, to the coast itself, was the direction many Giriama saw themselves taking as a people, namely, from an ideal of rural, pastoral independence uninfluenced by Islam and Christianity, to coastal economic dependency framed by adherence both to the two world religions and to a newly burgeoning consumerist culture drawn indirectly from tourism. During Giriama national crises, the silent majority would join the elders and point to their traditional capital as the source of their cultural essence and the moral safeguard against complete politico-economic encapsulation. Through the accident of crisis, then, they, like myself, would find it hard to ignore the ontological power of this largely unvisited and distant place. The choices and intentions induced by ecological constraints were, then, periodically rephrased in the idiom of this almost empty national site, whose significance simply would not go away.

One way of discussing the recent concern in anthropology with ethnographic writing, is to admit not necessarily to 'distortion' in our representations of other societies but to the implicit theory contained in our ethnographies. We can never, of course, ever faithfully represent how other peoples act and think, and it is true that our accounts may sometimes consolidate the authority of the writers to the possible detriment of those written about. Such ethical considerations are not to be dismissed lightly and deserve continuing debate. In general, however, we are impressionists whose depictions strike chords in each others' works, and who periodically stand back and compare. The work of explicit comparison usually amounts to a theoretical stock-taking and clarification of the subject, as we seek to account for our respective stances, and it is to such conclusions that we turn when we seek a state-of-the-art statement. Yet such statements are always

Cambridge University Press

0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

David Parkin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)xvi *Preface*

prefigured in the ethnographies which inform them, and which I regard, therefore, as implicitly and not simply *pre*-theoretical. It seems necessary to make this claim at a time when the writing of intensively acquired ethnographic data has been severely questioned and when major fund-awarding bodies need constant reassurance that what anthropologists do in the field cannot possibly be shortened or standardised. The theory implicit in the present book turns on the idea that, in trying to resolve the existential dilemmas that make up their personal and social worlds, people constantly re-order their justifications, a common enough activity among us all, whether writing or speaking.

This book does not reproduce previously published material, except for a few passages from Parkin 1982b, and either introduces Giriama beliefs and practices for the first time, or elaborates on those mentioned briefly elsewhere. It is definitely not, then, the book of the articles. I have placed vernacular noun terms in the singular, denoted therefore by such familiar Bantu prefixes as *mu-*, *ki-*, *ka-*, *dzi-*, *lu-*, and *(n)*, except where a plural was the appropriate form.

Formal thanks must first go to the President's Office, Republic of Kenya, for permission to carry out the fieldwork for this study, and to the Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi, for affiliation. I am grateful, also, to the School of Oriental and African Studies, the Social Science Research Council (as it was), the British Academy, and the Nuffield Foundation, who have each made generous contributions to the research on which the study is based. Of those in whose homes I have lived, I would especially like again to acknowledge my debt to the late Johnstone Muramba, and to thank Charo Mboro, Charo Mugandi, Raphael Menza Charo, Joseph Karisa, Anthony Kazungu, Juma Athmani, and his mother, Fatuma. I also acknowledge my debt to his now deceased father, Athmani Juma. It has been a long time, and I hope that they, or theirs, will regard this work as worth their many efforts and encouragement. I thank Monica Parkin, both for having shared most of the fieldwork with me, and for having read this book meticulously from cover to cover and for commenting most valuably on it. One or two people have commented on a chapter, but I have mostly benefited from conversations in which I have sounded out colleagues and friends on ideas. Thus recalled are, at least, Bill Arens, Pierre Bonte, Michael Bourdillon, Cynthia Brantley, Abner Cohen, Elisabeth Copet-Rougier, Lisa Croll, Richard Fardon, Mark Hobart, Ivan Karp, Katama Mkangi, Brian Morris, Fred Morton, John Peel, Aidan Southall, Tom Spear, Paul Spencer, and Martha Wenger. I have especially benefited from the publications of Brantley and Spear, while Mkangi has not only shared his sociological knowledge of coastal peoples during our long association, but has made me painfully aware of the extraordinary price of political courage that people like him are prepared to pay. Two unknown readers for the Press also deserve thanks for their insightful suggestions, as does Jessica Kuper, the publishing editor, for her courteous advice and help. John Middleton also generously made available to me the papers and notes on which he based his

Cambridge University Press

0521024986 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya

David Parkin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface xvii

edited version of the district officer, Champion's interpretation of Giriama society (Champion 1967). Finally, I single out those of my students who, over the years, have worked in the Kenya coastal area, and whose unflagging enthusiasm was an inspiration. It is not always recognised how much so-called supervisors are, in fact, indebted in their own research to their research students. Let me, therefore, return thanks to Robert Peake, Susan Beckerleg and Gaye Thompson, who, with Monica Udvardy of Uppsala University, have significantly advanced our understanding of Kenya coastal society. As well as commenting on some of the draft chapters, the latter two have produced studies concentrating on the study of Giriama women, which I regard as complementing this book in many respects.