CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521404665 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya
David Parkin
Excerpt
More information

Introduction

Space and religion

Quietly and undeclared as such, a loose assemblage of thinking has entered social science and the humanities. Perhaps it is pre-paradigmatic, to use Kuhn's now time-honoured expression (1956). It is the language and study of positions, stances, moves, panoptic views and close or distant gazes, in short, of spatial orientation and separation, and their effect and control in human society, and on theories about society.[1]

At the same time, religion, ritual, sacrifice and the sacred have again become objects of focused anthropological study, after a period, roughly from 1960 to 1980, when they were superseded either by semiological and structuralist studies of myth and of rites treated as myth, or by interpretative studies of symbolism. Numerous studies of ritual and religion as isolable, self-determining phenomena have appeared since about 1980.[2] Such studies appear to have freed

[1] It derives largely from Foucault (for example 1972a, 1972b, 1973, 1978; and see Hirst 1985), either directly, as in Rabinow's recent study of French colonial urban planning and architecture (1989), or indirectly as in such critiques and counter-critiques of anthropological method as Clifford and Marcus (1986) and Fardon (1990). A parallel view of how spatial metaphors and positions characterise anthropological language as well as being part of what anthropologists study, is found in such different studies as Salmond (1982, 1985), Ardener (1987, 1989: 142–54), and Needham (1987), and, for East African societies, Thornton (1980), Moore (1986), and Brandstrom (1990).

[2] This is evident from a count of 102 monographs listed and briefly summarised by Morris in his recent introductory text on the anthropology of religion (Morris 1987: 329–40). Since about 1980 there has been an extraordinary proliferation of ethnographic monographs focused on religion, ideas of the sacred, ritual, sacrifice and prayer, few of which claim theoretical adherence to either structuralism or methodologically self-conscious kinds of hermeneutic interpretivism. From about 1960 until 1980 such books are surprisingly few, with more on semiological and structuralist approaches to symbolism rather than specifically on religion and on such concepts as ritual and the sacred, which, as obvious 'odd-job words', are during this time used hesitantly, if at all, in such studies. Apart from that of Lévi-Strauss, it is possible that the influence of Edmund Leach may have been critical here, especially but not exclusively in Britain. His own work on Kachin ritual in 1954 re-defined this concept and also Durkheim's opposition between sacred and profane and, in effect, ushered in his own commitment to structuralist analyses of symbolism, myth and Biblical texts, which perhaps began in 1958 and 1961 with his essays on magical hair and on time, respectively, and continued at least until 1983, with a paper on Moses (Leach 1958, 1961 and 1983).

The period since 1980 appears to be one in which, following Needham (1975), the polythetic

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521404665 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya
David Parkin
Excerpt
More information

themselves, so to speak, from Lévi-Strauss's stricture that religion is no more than one of a number of systems of classification (1963) and of ritual as cognitively subsumed within and even inferior to myth (1966: 232–244).

Both developments, a discourse on and through spatial concepts, and the re-entry of sacred ritual and religion as phenomena for-themselves, are linked reactions. The treatment of constructed spaces as 'statements' is part of the post-modernist attempt to dissolve the kind of dichotomy that would separate the human observer as all-knowing and autonomous from spaces, landscapes and buildings, upon which he or she acts. Paralleling this, the renewed interest in ritual and religion is, as indicated, a post-structuralist dissatisfaction with the structuralist reduction of these phenomena to little more than systems of logical classification and transformation.

There are also two significant influences of a topical and pragmatic nature. The interest in space is an aspect of the wider interest in the global environment as polluted and polluting, while that in religion and ritual is part of the general attempt in Western society to understand how, in the face of allegedly the greatest ever secularising forces, ideologically supported until recently by Marxism, religious fundamentalism and its insistence on sacred and proper ritual have emerged as the most powerful method of popular persuasion in much of the world.

This book seeks to explore this relationship between space as statement and construction, and the sacred as defined and defining. It argues that to talk about the sacred is to think and talk about space, and to some extent vice versa: that when people speak and write about the sacred, they tend to essentialise it in terms of places occupied by it; and that discussion of human spaces is likely, eventually, to refer to a central point imbued with extra-human, or spiritual, significance.

The usage of the two terms space and sacred in anthropology denotes fluid genealogies, but it is necessary to retrace some early assumptions in order to reach present understandings of them. In this introduction I deal mainly with space. In the conclusion I turn more fully to the sacred. The reason for this separation will, I hope, become clear at that point, which will have been arrived at ethnographically.

Anthropological studies of space, often linked to the study of time, have reflected a constant interest. They are by no means recent. They have included analyses of bodily position, posture and the distinction between right and left,

nature of such terms is broadly accepted, but in which the perceptual phenomena to which they allude persistently recur as themes attracting analysis. For me, the study which classically sets this agenda is Lewis's analysis of initiation rites in Papua New Guinea which consistently asks what ritual is at the same time as it is constructed through description. Such concepts thus return in a sometimes curious amalgam of contestable and essentialist assumptions. Morris's survey, though extensive, cannot be complete and, in addition to works cited elsewhere in this and other chapters, we may add others not included, such as Bourdillon and Fortes (1980), Davis (1982), Heusch (1985), Sanday (1986), Bloch (1986), Caplan (1987) and Metcalf (1989).

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521404665 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya
David Parkin
Excerpt
More information

though more common concerns have been the symbolism of house architecture, homestead patterns and burial positions.

This eclectic view is in fact ethnographically fair, for it would be surprising if Western and non-Western models of spatial boundaries, position, and directionality were isomorphic. 'Space' is a broad enough category in Western scientific and lay thinking, despite having been the object of special study in physics and philosophy. Many non-Western languages have no specific term for an abstract concept of space, which is therefore treated by them as a more culturally embedded and so less isolable feature of thought and action. Traditionally in anthropology, however, the analytical drive has been to distinguish spatial categories as sometimes independent and sometimes dependent elements of social organisation.

Three responses to Durkheim

In the early pages of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim sets forward his view that peoples' ideas of time and space are socially derived (1915: 10–12). He draws here on his and Mauss's findings with regard to Zuni, Sioux and Chinese spatial and temporal concepts (1963 (1903): 43ff., 68–75), and on his analysis of Australian societies. With regard to space, Durkheim and Mauss in fact start out by showing that it is the geographical areas occupied by clans, families and moieties which are at the basis of all other systems of classification such as those of colour, totemic animals and divinatory powers. It was self-evident for Durkheim and Mauss that such social groups as clans were necessarily also territorially defined. While briefly acknowledged as in some way basic, this territorial aspect then becomes subordinated to the social, especially in Durkheim's opus. It is, for instance, the collective religious enthusiasm of a group occupying a particular area of land, in relation to other groups, which provides the model for other forms of classification, not the identification with the land itself.

At first, this seems unexceptionable. After all, it might be argued, territory can have no significance for humans unless it is in some way differentiated from other territories, whether or not through human settlement: people only identify areas in relation to other areas. The same kind of argument is earlier advanced by Durkheim with regard to the more abstract notion of space. He says that Kant was wrong to see it as a 'vague and indetermined medium . . . purely and absolutely homogeneous'. Durkheim argues that such an idea 'could not be grasped by the mind' and that we can only understand space by differentiating objects and areas as being either north, south, east or west, as right or left, or up or down, and so on. These distinctions, moreover, are seen as necessarily social in origin, being common to the people of a single civilisation. He provides what he sees as 'cases where this social character is made manifest' (implying that the earlier examples of orientation are therefore cognitively latent?) as in some Australian and North

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521404665 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya
David Parkin
Excerpt
More information

American societies 'where space is conceived in the form of an immense circle, because the camp has a circular form; and this spatial circle is divided up exactly like the tribal circle, and is in its image' (Durkheim 1915: 11).

Subsequently, anthropologists have talked in terms of a correspondence between spatial and social organisation, which may be regarded as a key feature of a so-called Durkheimian approach.[3] None, to my knowledge, has wished to challenge Durkheim on the extent to which an idea of space as indeterminate and homogeneous can in fact be grasped by the human mind and can, moreover, become a key element in social and religious organisation, as will be argued in this book.

What, then, have been the anthropological responses to the Durkheimian claim that spatial derives from social differentiation? First, Lévi-Strauss turns Durkheim on his head and argues that the human differentiation of such elements of the landscape as rocks and mountains, as well as specific flora and fauna, can in fact be used to classify social groups, which, in turn, can return to the environment, so to speak, and differentiate it and themselves still further, and so on. In this two-way process of mutual classification, the 'mythogeographical' and the social become part of each other, with neither thereafter cognitively prior to the other (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 162–168). But even in this formulation, no consideration is given to the possibility that a people's idea of space as an undifferentiated void might be socially significant.[4]

Second, Eliade makes a distinction between sacred space which is recognised as such by 'religious man', having been consecrated as a human settlement, and profane space which is homogeneous and undifferentiated and, in this state of void, mirrors the emptiness of men without religion. Sacred space is heterogeneous in that it constitutes a break from the bleak outside, is a centre giving

[3] Mary Douglas's distinction between 'grid' and 'group' societies, or aspects of society, is the most celebrated modern example of such correspondence, in this case of bodily posture, cosmology and degree of social boundedness (Douglas 1970). Other studies, such as those of Cunningham (1973 (1964)), Hobart (1978) and Turton (1978) analyse indigenously recognised spatial directions, axes, concentricities and internal and external boundaries in, for example, the building, structure and organisation of houses, and show how spatial exclusions and positions legitimate social hierarchies by making them locally acceptable parts of the natural environment.

[4] A notable structuralist account is that of Christine Hugh-Jones, who outlines what she acknowledges is her own model of underlying socio-spatial correspondences among the Northwest Amazonian Pira-parana Indians of Colombia. But she notes also that, while the people themselves distinguish the fanned river system of western radial headwaters which feed the 'Milk River' as where evil spirits live, and the eastern mouth of the river as where human culture originates, there is an area on each side of the mouth which is geographically unmarked in their eyes. It is 'empty of significance' and is correspondingly absent in their ideology (Hugh-Jones 1979: 237–241). It is, in other words, clearly a notion of undifferentiated space, yet, in constituting a socio-geographic 'absence', may, I suggest, give 'presence' or essence to the other spaces. Littlejohn's study of the Temne house may also be regarded as structuralist. He shows how the directions taken by different parts of a house both disclose and resolve the 'light' and 'dark' sides of humanity (1967). More recently, as an exercise in regional comparison, Kuper outlines some transformations in the structure of South African Bantu homesteads (Kuper 1975, 1980), which result from the remarkable affinities underlying Bantu cultural ideas and assumptions.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521404665 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya
David Parkin
Excerpt
More information

mankind orientation or direction in the world, and consists of internal divisions which are examples of human creativity: the living spaces of the homes or village, and the arrangement of a church, temple or traditional city. Modern cities are characterised as unconsecrated, inhabited for the most part by desacralised man, and as therefore amorphous and lacking the centrality that gives moral and religious direction (Eliade 1959: 20–65, 1954: 6–21). Eliade, unlike Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss, does then take into account the role played in human understanding by an idea of space as homogeneous and undifferentiated, which is indeed at the basis of his definition of the profane. But its social significance is only ever negative, a state to be transcended and forsaken, and the broadness of Eliade's generalisations and his use of examples compare uncomfortably with the analytical finesse of Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss. That said, those broad ideas have in fact, directly and indirectly, helped spawn a distinctive and scholarly approach to the study of space in modern social anthropology.

This has principally taken the form of studies of religious pilgrimage to a sacred centre, which is held by the pilgrims to contrast with the ordinariness, profanity or wilderness of all other places. Since the work of the Turners (Turner 1974a, 1974b, and Turner and Turner 1978; see also Eickelman 1976), there has been an outpouring of analyses of journeys to shrines, holy cities and other sacred places (for example Sallnow 1987, Werbner 1977 and 1989, Gold 1988, Rasnake 1988 and Schlee (forthcoming), to take the most recent examples). Such sacred centres become focal points not only for a religion but often also for trade routes and political authority and boundaries. They provide the mobile populations that sustain such trade and polities and the spirituality enabling individual pilgrims to transcend them. Their key feature is that they are geographically fixed centres, constituting, in Eliade's terms, an absolute reality and touchstone to which pilgrims can refer to answers concerning their own origins and destinies.[5]

These movements of people to fixed centres thus presuppose a degree of predictability regarding the nature of place, journey and benefits. People set out to arrive and return within a reasonably specific period of time. Occasionally, in Yamba's study of Hausa pilgrims in the Sudan who have been claiming for a long time that they are bound for Mecca but who have in fact settled in mid-journey, this certainty is tempered by constraints (Yamba 1990). The sacred destination then has to be worked at as an ideal to be achieved against all odds.

This possibility of unpredictability in peoples' movements, whether or not as pilgrims, introduces the third and remaining response to Durkheim that I identify. It is already evident in the Chinese geomancers' view of their environ-

[5] Although concerned more with territorial cults than with sacred centres visited by pilgrims, the studies edited by Werbner (1977) and Schoffeleers (1979) show the extent to which features of the landscape become not only ecological but also spiritual markers in the boundaries and relationships between peoples.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521404665 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya
David Parkin
Excerpt
More information

ments, including compass directions and features of landscape, as being either benign or malignant depending on a range of factors which have to be diagnosed, and which will determine where and how a building should be erected or a grave placed and positioned (Freedman 1969). It is given a theoretical guise in the approach, for instance, of the archaeologist, Ian Hodder (1986), and in the anthropological work of Bourdieu (1973, 1977, 1981) and of Moore (1986). Here, spatial categories do not, or do not necessarily, correspond with social distinctions nor encode themes, but are actually worked at and constantly reinterpreted by the people of a culture, sometimes being changed in the process. Their constant reinterpretation is part of the work of everyday practice.

Moore provides a full ethnographic exemplar of the approach. She studies spatial notions and directionality among the Marakwet of Kenya through the metaphor of a cultural text which can be read and 'worked at' by members of the society who move through and act in spaces. She argues that such spatial texts represent ideology, such as men's superiority over women, but that this ideology is itself produced within the material conditions of history. She also says that people can in practice choose how to respond to that ideology. Moore's ambitious attempt to bring together history and human agency, and people's interpretative use of ideology as represented in spatial texts, is to be applauded. Another use for the metaphor of text which can also be explored is the idea of space as a clean or blank sheet, of indeterminate size, and ready to be written on. Over-reliance on such metaphors in analysis is notoriously dangerous. I introduce this one simply to make the point that, among the people who are the subject of this book, the Giriama of Kenya, there are times when they appear to regard their own sacred centre in this way, as a place periodically to be cleaned, made blank and re-written without respect to previously existing boundaries of space and time. These are moments when such space is indeed rendered amorphous, homogeneous and indeterminate, a deliberate void. They are times, too, when the space stands liminally, betwixt and between what we may for the moment translate as sacred and profane states.

This liminal state is not that between two phases of a rite of passage. It is rather an intermediary perception of space, set between two others. On the one hand there is the centre, a former fortified settlement, in its sacred state. On the other hand, there is the area outside it, which is made up of the contrasting ecological zones of cattle-herders, farmers and fishermen, and of labour migratory routes and longer term population shifts. For reasons which I shall explain, this spatial complexity is often seen by Giriama as contaminating the purity of the sacred centre, pushing it in the direction of desacralisation. The Giriama response to this threat is, so to speak, to hold the centre, and to re-imagine it anew, cleansing it and re-working it back into its sacredness.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521404665 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya
David Parkin
Excerpt
More information

Three understandings of space

I do not wish to use the terms sacred and profane in a mutually exclusive sense, nor do I start from this opposition. As a starting point, I incline more to Van Gennep's view of the sacred as only ever relational and 'pivotal' as he calls it (1960: 12–13). In fact, beyond this introduction I do not use the term profane again in this book, except briefly in the final chapter. Nor is the idea of the sacred held to have fixed boundaries. What is contrasted by the Giriama with the sacred centre is not profanity, but greater or lesser amounts of sacredness depending on circumstances, relationships, and stances. There is constant semantic spillage. Thus, the western ecological zone of cattle-keepers around the sacred centre is itself often contrasted with the eastern areas of farmers and fishermen as being closer to tradition and a sense of 'pure' Giriama identity. Sometimes, though less often, it is a northern area which is regarded in this way, much less so than in the past. At the same time, practical considerations and competition characterise relations between people of the west and east, and other regions. My use of the term sacred, as is evident from its own history, therefore ranges over ideas of the pure, the autochthonous and the customary as well as the absolute and holy. This is, as best as one can, to translate Giriama usage, in which terms like 'clean/pure' (*-eri*), 'wholesome/adult' (*-zima*) and 'earth/origin' (*tsi*) commonly presuppose each other.

Focusing in this way on what I translate as Giriama ideas of the sacred is not a narrow exercise in cultural relativism. On the contrary, the intention is to question English usage of the concept through Giriama ideas, and so to broaden comparative understanding. This seems to me to be the original sense in which a reflexive anthropology was proposed: constantly to recast cultural ideas and analytical concepts in terms of the light they may throw on each other, rather than to document the personal self-understanding that may be gained from fieldwork, as seems to have become the general sense of the term in anthropology.

It follows from this that my view of Giriama society must overlap to some extent with those commonly expressed by Giriama themselves. Thus, in this study I see space as understood in three ways: as a fixed centre amenable to being regarded as absolutely sacred; as a relational pattern of ecological zones and human movements; and as an indeterminately regarded amorphism, without centre, boundary or even content. I could dub these centrist, relational and amorphist respectively, and see them as arising from the above interrogation of Eliade, Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, Moore and others. No doubt they have been honed by such interrogation and by other influences both before and after field-work. At the same time it has to be emphasised that it was Giriama themselves who also contributed to making such distinctions, as far as I can judge, whilst I did fieldwork. This perennial question of relative influence is insoluble but not pointless, for it obliges us at least to record what we think were the original

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521404665 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya
David Parkin
Excerpt
More information

inspirations for an analysis drawn from the fieldwork itself. Whether what we record did so inspire is yet another question.

In the case of the Giriama, at least, I constantly met the following views. On the one hand, they say, their traditional capital or centre, called the Kaya, is a fixed, central place with inviolable boundaries and unquestionable sacredness. Rather like Newton's void having existence without objects in it, it does not need persons in it for it to remain sacred and central, and indeed it is often empty or almost empty for long periods. On the other hand, Giriama speak of the western part of Giriama country in which the Kaya stands in terms of its contrast with the eastern part. The west is 'traditional' and the east 'modern'. The west comprises the Giriama sacred centre while the east merges and mixes boundaries and peoples and lacks a definitive centre. The Kaya is a centre while the east and west are defined relationally, just as, internally, the east comprises different peoples and places standing in cross-cutting relationships to each other. As with Leibniz's view, such spaces only have existence and meaning through the relationships of people and objects within them, relations which are always liable to change. The Giriama thus juxtapose an absolutist or centrist with a relational view of the spaces they occupy.

How, then, do I add to this binary distinction commonly made by Giriama the third idea of a spatial category as amorphous and indeterminate? No such category is explicit in Giriama conversation, and I justify it as a part of Giriama thinking on the following grounds. In referring to the Kaya as not needing people to live in it, Giriama sometimes speak of it as their 'earth' (*tsi*) and as consubstantive with their whole country (using the term *-zima*). Giriamaland itself is still regarded by Giriama as having clear administrative boundaries, being made up of specific locations and sub-locations in Kenya's coast province, despite the fact that increasing numbers of the 350,000 Giriama spend much or all of their time outside and that more and more non-Giriama now live among them within their boundaries. The Kaya is physically demarcated by a large ring of forest, but in its consubstantive sense of 'being' all of Giriama country, and therefore as partaking in its welfare, the Kaya has unbounded significance. It is believed to affect and be affected by what goes on in Giriama country and among all Giriama, whether or not they are currently living in Giriamaland. Evils afflicting or incurred by Giriama contaminate the Kaya, while abuse of the Kaya damages the fertility of Giriama farms, cattle and married couples. The Giriama, their country and their Kaya undergo unpremeditated cleansing from time to time. This may take the form of a large-scale witch-hunt, the sacking and replacement of Kaya elders, or the ritual and physical clearing and cleansing of the Kaya, as well as through homestead rites involving washing and sweeping carried out under the auspices, or with the authority, of the Kaya.

Many of these activities, which are organised or led by Kaya elders and others associated with them, in fact often occur outside the Kaya and take the form of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521404665 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya
David Parkin
Excerpt
More information

journeys undertaken by individuals or, as in the case of a witch-hunter, he and his team, who pass through one locality after another, beyond Giriamaland itself. The journeys and activities draw their legitimacy from the Kaya but at the same time rewrite its significance, just as they in effect redefine the boundaries of Giriama society by drawing attention to the continuing dispersal and mixture of its population. At such times, which are never predictable, it is difficult for me to call the Kaya an absolute and set sacred centre, since so many other forces are currently at work challenging its status. Its fate seems to hang in the balance, and it seems about to become just another important but desacralised item of the western landscape and so to derive its distinctiveness from its contrast with the east rather than from any intrinsic sacredness. But such times of doubt may be superseded, and seem historically to have been superseded, by a reassertion of its centrality and sacredness. It then partly continues as before, but it also partly assumes a new identity: its last triumph or miracle is the one most easily remembered and differs from preceding ones. Let me return for the last time to the metaphor. The sacred Kaya as spatial text, having been wiped clean, is rewritten to include earlier lines but also at least a few innovative ones. It is a liminal idea of homogeneous space positioned between a centre and an uncentred complexity, whose interrelationship is always in the making.

Contrary to Durkheim's assertion cited above, it is only by mentally grasping such an idea of undifferentiated spatial amorphousness that the Giriama could redefine the relationship between their sacred centre and the shifting movements and relationships occurring within and beyond their country. The centre and the country have, so to speak, to be brought into line with each other, that is to say, made mutually consistent and not absurd. There is, after all, considerable potential absurdity in the claim that a virtually uninhabited central place in a remote area surrounded by primeval forest can govern the lives of 350,000 people variously engaged in different rural and urban livelihoods. It is through the idea of the centre as having become undifferentiated and without shape that it can be refashioned to meet current Giriama needs, just as social and ecological complexities in other areas have to be reconciled with their view of a common origin, and hence shared identity, in the unfathomable knowledge and secrets of the Kaya.

There are many ethnic groups throughout the world who define themselves by reference to a fixed centre which only a minority of them live in or have ever visited. If such centres do not exist, it becomes imperative that at some stage they have to be invented. This cultivation or invention of a central place is likely to contrast with the fact that the group's members are in reality widely dispersed. The result is that there will be two understandings of space, as I have suggested is explicitly the case among the Giriama: of a fixity giving essence to the central place; and of cross-cutting and merging boundaries that never settle. The idea of spatial fixity lends itself to neat correlations and correspondence which

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521404665 - Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya
David Parkin
Excerpt
More information

nevertheless come under threat, such as the idea that the Kaya stands for purity and tradition. Spatial restlessness defies tautologous parallels and demands constant re-interpretation. As with the idea of spatial fixity, it must always be worked at. It is during this process of working-at that a once internally ordered but now cluttered space becomes cleared and then redifferentiated.

Pilgrims and their absence

It is of course commonly the case that the shrines and sacred places that are the objects of pilgrimage occasionally undergo clearing and cleansing and, although I know of no such reports, may need to be redefined periodically in conformity with peoples' changing expectations. But the Giriama sacred Kaya stands in a different relationship to population movement from that of pilgrims and their centres. While pilgrims move towards a shrine, the Giriama have over the years moved away from the Kaya. As I explain in chapter two, it was once highly populated, but now it and the surrounding area are seen over the years as having lost their population to other, more distant areas. Nor do Giriama in the least subscribe to a hope or myth of return. It is enough that the place itself, its forest, and its medicines and knowledge, remain in an uncontaminated state. There is yet another difference. The presuppositions of pilgrims are that they follow and seek relatively predictable voyages, marked routes, manageable time-scales and spiritual benefits. However, the character and destiny of the Kaya is always regarded as hedged around with uncertainty, so mirroring the doubts expressed by Giriama themselves concerning their own future both as individuals trying to wrest a livelihood from diminishing land and resources and as a group confronted by a burgeoning of alien culture, religions and ideology near and among them. When people visit the Kaya, perhaps to take an oath or participate in a trial by ordeal, to acquire medical knowledge, to be blessed, or as one of a number summoned to cleanse it, it is always in a crisis occurring without warning.

None of this is to deny the possibility of the Kaya becoming at some future stage a shrine for Giriama pilgrims to visit. The leader of a new indigenous Christian sect tried in fact to capture the Kaya for his church in the late 1980s (Thompson 1990: 117–144). Had he been successful, and had his sect in time become sufficiently widespread among the Giriama that they identified it as exclusively their own, treating it as their most salient expression of ethnic identity, we could certainly speculate that the Kaya might have become a sacred centre attracting pilgrims drawn from a by now vastly dispersed Giriama population, forced to live far afield as a result of extensive labour migration. While this is pure speculation, it is a reasonable inference to be drawn from the current status of the Kaya and of the political economy of Kenya. The uninhabited and even abandoned sacred centre is, then, the flip-side of the pilgrims' shrine or holy city. Historically the two may be transformations of each under, say, some alternating conditions of economic expansion, contraction, and population

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org