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EXCAVATIONS AT KAYA BATE: AN ANCIENT MIJIKENDA SETTLEMENT

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Kayas are forested hilltop settlements of the Bantu speaking Mijikenda of coastal Kenya. In their oral traditions, these groups claim that they settled in these areas from the mid 16th century. This paper is an attempt to trace archaeologically the establishment and settlement of these sacred places.

Les Kayas sont des établissements sur collines boisées des bantouphones Mijikenda de la côte kenyane. Dans leurs traditions orales, ces groupes affirment s'être établis dans ces régions depuis la moitié du 16e siècle. Cet article essaie de retracer à l'aide de l'archéologie la mise en place et l'établissement dans ces sites sacrés.

INTRODUCTION

Makaya (pl.) or Kaya (sing.) are the forested hilltop settlements found along the coast and the immediate hinterland of the Kenya coast. The historical development and location of the Kayas is intertwined with the beliefs and culture of the coastal Mijikenda ethnic groups (nine houses). These are groups that speak the same Bantu language with some diversity in dialect, and who claim descent from one ancestral area of Singwaya (Shungwaya). It would appear from both historical and archaeological evidence, that these groups who include the Agiriama, Akambe, Arihe, Aravai, Achonyi, Adigo, Aduruma, Adzihana and Akauma, may have migrated from this original homeland of Singwaya (thought to be in modern day southern Somalia), to settle in their present day land (Mutoro 1987; Willis 1996; Spear 1978; Morton 1973; Krapf 1860) Initially, the ancestors of these groups settled in six individually fortified hilltop villages or Kayas along the ridge behind the Kenyan coast. Three more Kayas were later added.

The settlement in these nine distinct Kayas defined each of the nine distinct groups who make up the Mijikenda. The siting of these Kayas on forested hilltops was a result of security concerns from marauding pastoral attackers. For instance, the Aravai claim that it was as a result of these attacks from the Akwavi Maasai that they settled in their Kaya. After this settlement, each of the nine groups is said to have remained within the Kaya for a long time until mid 19th century when as a result of enhanced security and population growth, the various groups left their forest refuges and began to clear and cultivate away from them (Spear 1978; Willis 1986; Brantley 1981).

The Kayas then were strategic and symbolic grounds, defined by the various