

## **Art, Objects and Belief Systems Among the Wangoni of Tanzania**

*Dominicus Zimanimoto Makukula\**

### **Abstract**

This article is from a study that investigated the interplay among art, ritual objects, and belief systems through which the Wangoni people worshipped their God prior to missionary and colonial interventions. The study focused on the significance and implication of art on paraphernalia such as household tools and personal belongings as ritual objects that were commonly evoked during worship or ritual activities of the Wangoni. The ritual theory informed the study's framework including its methodology, data collection, analysis and presentation, and the discussion of the findings. Using document analysis, interviews and observation to collect data, the study found that artistically-made objects or tools had a special place in the traditional religious practices and lore of the Wangoni. The Wangoni employed personal belongings and objects of deceased family members to establish contacts in the ancestral realm, as their intermediaries before God. It was also established that in the process of making religious-inspired tools or objects, most Wangoni patrons insisted on the artistic excellence of such objects and tools. It was believed that, firstly, art would increase the uniqueness of the object and signify the status and power it symbolized; and secondly, art would help to inculcate a sense of sanctity of the object or tool depending on its aesthetic outlook associated with the Wangoni's beliefs in the existence of God in their worship or ritual practices.

**Keywords:** *art, beliefs, objects, ritual, Wangoni*

### **Introduction**

This article focuses on the interplay of traditional religion practices, art and objects among the Wangoni people of south-western Ruvuma region in Tanzania. In his book, *Culture and Customs of Tanzania*, Otiso (2003) acknowledges the existence of indigenous African beliefs alongside Christianity and Islam as the top three religious practices among Tanzanians, an assertion that had previously been made by Westerlund (1982). Several publications have covered indigenous African beliefs from many ethnic groups in Tanzania. Tanner (1967), for example, covers the Wasukuma and the Wanyamwezi who dwell around Lake Victoria in the western zone of Tanzania; whereas Komba (1961) deals with the Wangoni, a dominant ethnic group in Ruvuma region renowned for their ancient and organized traditional belief systems and practices.

Like many other Africans, many Tanzanians uphold traditional beliefs. Mbiti (2003: 30) contends that "Africans are notoriously religious," a sentiment shared by Komba (1961) who describes *heathen* Wangoni as a religious polity. Before the

---

\* School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

advent of conventional belief systems such as Christianity and Islam, Africans south of the Sahara practised some form of animism (Kimmerle, 2006). Despite the changes that have occurred over centuries, many Africans have not completely abandoned this religious practice even after converting to Christianity or Islam (Mbiti, 2003). Tanner (1967) documents traditional belief practices and the idea on the presence of a supreme deity among the Wasukuma in Mwanza, Shinyanga, and Tabora. He confirms that these people identified themselves as believers in God with only slight variations to Christianity, to which they converted later (*ibid.*). Komba (1961) had presented an earlier similar scenario with the Wangoni.

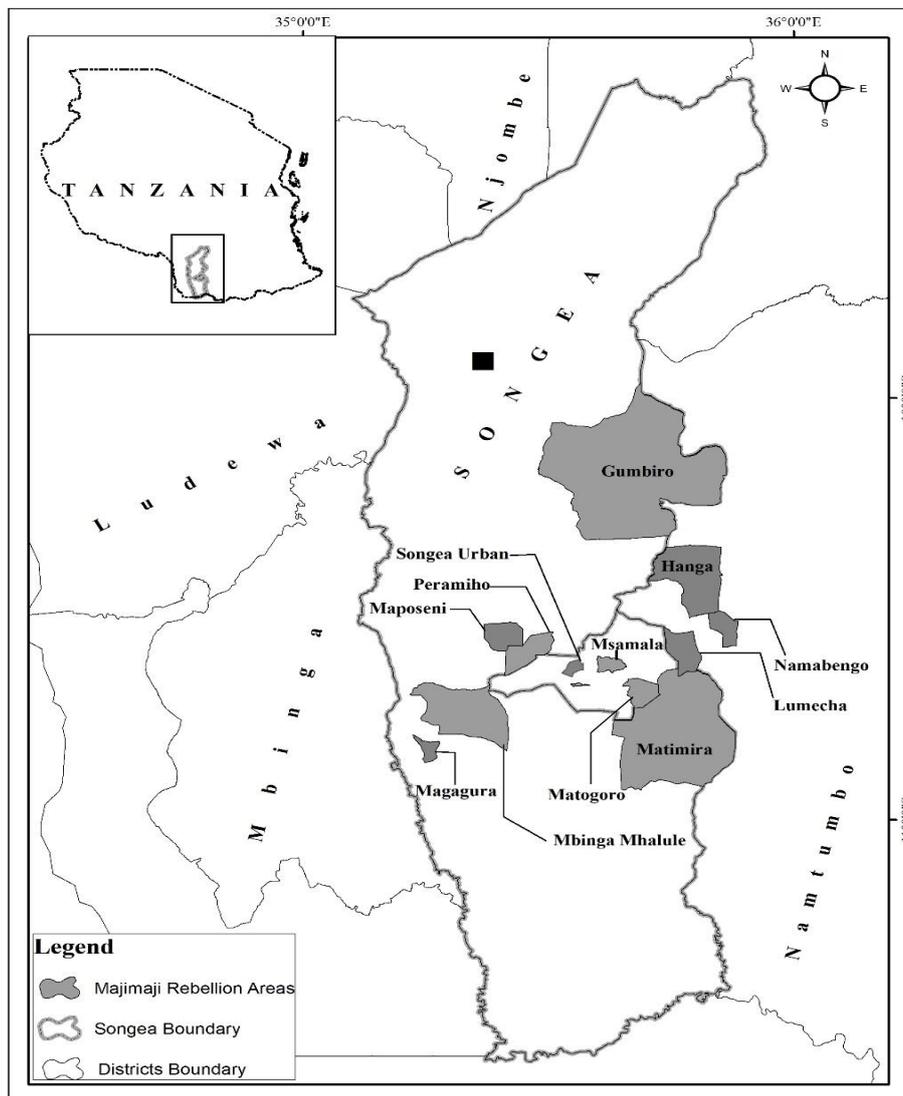
This research sought to find out why the olden Wangoni worship objects or tools via-a-vis the fact that their traditional belief practices are vanishing. Ebner (1987), Komba (1961) and Schmidt (2010) have traced such practices back to the early 1840s. Specifically, the research objectives were threefold: (i) to establish how the Wangoni, who had survived the massacre following the MajiMaji War, have maintained their African belief practices; (ii) to determine the kind of artworks or objects the Wangoni used as part of their traditional worship practices, and their significance; and (iii) to trace the location of the ancient ritual or religious objects the Wangoni had used before the MajiMaji War.

To achieve its set objectives, the study employed Émile Durkheim's ritual theory (1912) to guide the investigation of the relationship between the Wangoni, their traditional religious beliefs, and the paraphernalia used in their worship activities or communication with their God. The theory describes a rite or ritual-based action on its three premises: (i) the sacred/profane dichotomy; (ii) the concept of collective representations, which establishes a substantial continuity between religious and scientific thought; and (iii) the 'practical' and performative interpretation of rites understood as the basis for social bond (D'orsi & Dei, 2018). In reviewing the vanishing traditional worship practices and ritual objects as reasons behind the disintegration of the Wangoni polity or social bond – which was very strong before German colonialism and the MajiMaji War – the study attempted to exploit the sacred/profane dichotomy aspect in the analysis of the nature and significance of the paraphernalia used in the Wangoni ritual, while engaging the 'practical' and performative interpretation of ritual activity as a basis for social bond. The ritual theory, in this context, provides a magnifying glass to clearly see the interplay between artworks or crafts, objects, and ritual arrangements as the Wangoni undertake their worship activities to their God.

### **Wangoni Polity of Tanzania**

The Wangoni, who inhabit Songea district, in Ruvuma region (Figure 1), are originally natives of modern South Africa. Ebner (1987) and Giblin and Monson (2010) assert that three groups of the Wangoni that occupied Songea district were offshoots of the Mfecane, a forced dispersion that followed Shaka's brutal rise to

power and the expansion of the Zulu Kingdom in Southern Africa. The first group of the Wangoni, trekking northwards, reached Songea in the 1840s. It was led by Mputa Maseko, popularly known by his nickname *Mchecherere*; whereas in Songea he was commonly known as Mputa (Ebner, 1987). Upon arrival in Songea, the Mputa Maseko group settled at Hanga in a newly-established territory called *Mngongoma*, a village neighbouring Gumbiro, surrounded by the Hanga and Ruhuhu rivers (Ebner, 1987) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Areas Inhibited by the Wangoni in Ruvuma Region, Tanzania**  
 Source: Cartographic Unit, University of Dar es Salaam

Erdtsieck (2003) proclaims that the second group of the Wangoni to arrive in Songea district is insufficiently described by its 'clan' as the *Tuta*, which later split into two upon arrival in Songea in the early 1850s. The newly-formed groups were known as the Njelu, led by Zulu Gama; and the Mshope Angoni under Mbonane Tawete (Erdtsieck, 2003; Schmidt, 2010). The Wangoni group's fame in the history of Tanzania and the East Africa region emerged following their active participation in a bloodshed resistance famously known as the 'MajiMaji uprising' during the German period in Tanganyika between 1885 and 1907.

### **Culture of the Wangoni of Tanzania**

According to Abner (1959), not much of the Wangoni culture and customs have changed since their arrival in Songea from South Africa. Redmond (1975) argues that it was the Wangoni's political structure and organization of rule by royal families, aspects of the military structure, their name and certain aspects of their culture and economy (which they had practised for long), that prevented the them from adapting to new cultures in East Africa. Schmidt (2010) further contends that stringent ethnicity could have sustained the Wangoni culture for so many years after their arrival in Tanganyika. Like the Nguni of the KwaZulu Natal, the Wangoni practised mixed farming (Redmond, 1975; Schmidt, 2010). Among the Wangoni, a family's wealth depends on the size of its cattle herd and annual grain harvest (Komba, 1961).

### **God in the Wangoni Beliefs**

The Wangoni's belief in God is derived from their conception of the supramundane world (Komba, 1961). According to Emmanuel Gama, the Wangoni paramount chief, the Wangoni's idea of life before and after death is best narrated in their folklore (Interview with Nkosi Emmanuel at Songea, 23 June, 2021). Mapunda's collection of the Wangoni folktales – *Humu za Kadeni na Chavotamii Vangoni: Hadithi za Zamani na Maisha ya Wangoni* published in 2016 – contains several stories confirming Wangoni's belief in the existence of a God who has powers beyond their small comprehension of the universe. Such a belief is also very common among other societies in Tanzania (Mulokozi, 2001). For example, Tanner (1967) attests to the belief of the existence of a supreme being among the Wasukuma, around Lake Victoria. Wangoni rituals and ceremonies attribute their strong beliefs to the presence of God. The Wangoni consult their God for help whenever they face a problem such as sickness, drought, bad-luck, poor harvest and mischief: the source of which cannot be identified (Komba, 1961).

Unlike most of their Bantu counterparts in some parts of Central and West Africa, the Wangoni believe in only one God; and treat all other powerful spirits and entities as mere aides or messengers (Komba, 1961). In the Wangoni folklore, this God is not represented in any tangible form, as reported by Mulokozi (2001). The Wangoni call God *Umkhulumkundi*, meaning the oldest

and supreme being. They also address God as *Chapanga* or *Mulungu* to acknowledge his status as the creator, organizer, and architect of man and everything around him (Komba, 1961). Wangoni mythology has it that in the past, *Umkhulumkundi* used to live with people on earth but hated smoke. So, when fire was discovered for cooking, lighting, or clearing farms, the smoke irritated *Umkhulumkundi*; so, he left for *Mbinguni*, where He has resided since then (ibid.). Since leaving earth, the Wangoni could only meet or see Him when they died and entered the afterlife (*kwa vyangu*). A dead Mngoni is believed to continue living in the afterlife as a transformed discarnate spirit, known in Kingoni as *lihoka* or *lishodzi* (Willoughby, 1932; Smith, 1943). However, only those who had reached puberty by the time of death could become *mahoka* (Komba, 1961). The Wangoni also believe that those who live well and die peacefully at old age could make the most effective and reliable *mahoka*, or discarnate spirits in the service of their living relations. The *mahoka* are supposed to establish a link between God and man, as well as between the living and the dead. The *mahoka* are likened to Catholic saints. The Wangoni perceive the *mahoka* as immortal messengers who live and work within the court of *Umkhulumkundi*, which is located far away from the earth in a place they call *kwa lihuma lilanga*, or the 'place from which the sun rises' (Komba, 1961). The Wangoni are forbidden to consult their God directly: they can do this only through their departed blood relations, the *mahoka* (ibid.).

### **Art and Objects in the Wangoni Beliefs**

Art is one of the most complex concepts to comprehend, especially its association with religious practices or rituals. Even though artworks provide momentous adornments during the Wangoni traditional worship rituals, there is no single indigenous name for it. Besides, there are no distinctive overall name(s) for any artwork(s) or object(s), which are regularly used during *mahoka* ritual activities. In fact, there are not many translations of the word *art* in most of the local tongues in Tanzania, but in Kiswahili (Bishota & Kandoro, 1985). Only a few ethnic languages, mostly from West African societies such as the Yoruba and the Igbo, the Arabian groups in the North, the Amharic in the Eastern Africa, and the Central African areas have words or names like object(s) or thing(s) associated with art as described by some western art historians and anthropologists on African art (Okpewho, 1977). An excerpt from Margaret Rose Vendryes may help explain this ambiguity:

Though the term 'art' as defined in the West may not exist in the majority of Africa's myriad and diverse languages, the appreciation of beauty in this as in other sub-Saharan contexts was (and remains) a fundamental concern (Vendryes, 1999: 40).

Blier (2012) presents an appealing textual and visual list of Yoruba gods and intermediaries who are central entities in traditional worship practices. Figurative representations of Olorun (the greatest of Yoruba gods), and his aides

such as Obatala and Oduduwa, are imperative in Yoruba shrines and rituals. Similarly, Luyaluka (2017) acknowledges the Congolese belief whose figurines, heads and busts are common among the Mbuti, Mayombe and Zande peoples. Rabie (2011) exploits rich ancient Egyptian sculptural representations of their indigenous gods such as Osiris, Isis, Anubis, and Seth. The significance of the interplay between art, object and God in this context is clear. Benedict (2013: 21) quotes Ekpo (1977) to explain this aspect:

It is because the Supreme Being is too far away for His influence to be readily felt, that for one to gain access to Him, intermediary forces are used. Yet it is still difficult to localize the energy of these forces before they can be harnessed in the service of man. An interesting study of Kalabari religion by Robin Horton reveals how sculpture is so important as a vehicle for bringing down the spirits to the level of the worshippers. Here, the sculpture is regarded as the 'forehead' of the spirit and before blessings are requested, the spirits must be induced to take their dwelling in the sculpture. Once these spirits are thus localized, communication becomes possible.

Among the Wangoni, art is more closely linked to its conceptual beauty than to the fineness of its form properties and qualities. Thus, the Wangoni art is largely expressionist (Mulokozi, 2001); and the mysteriousness or uniqueness of the concept(s) it embodies constitute(s) intangible beauty (Abiodun, 2014). Beauty is defined variously in Kiswahili than in any other African language, including Kingoni. According to Bishota and Kandoro (1985: 57–58), the Kiswahili word *sanaa* is derived from the root word *sana* or "to do more than needed," "exaggeration" or a "splendid presentation." This meaning of art is also shared among the Wangoni (Komba, 1961).

Art in this context is perceived as an intangible quality that is difficult to explain outside a tangible or visual form. Still, art is an integral ingredient in the communication process. Eke (2020: 391–92) provides a compelling explanation of how art should be perceived or understood in relation to African religious worship activities like *kuteta mahoka* by the Wangoni as follows:

... signs, symbols, and art can communicate in an unusual manner. They are non-verbal, so they awaken the conscience and give message/meaning in an extraordinary manner...

The artistically designed weaving motifs on the basket (Figure 5), or its general form as a refined utilitarian household object purposely and skilfully created to show both exquisiteness, as well as uniqueness to their respective patrons, are integral aspects of what an artist intends to produce. A good example that explains the complex elements of beauty among the Wangoni is the *nkosi* (Chabruma's headrest, Figure 2). Despite its lack of visual beauty relative to other headrests collected among Wangoni patrons, the unique structure of the *nkosi* headrest leaves unresolved wonder to its onlookers.

As said, the meaning and perceptions of art among the Wangoni are a little complicated to comprehend. In fact, one ought to look at it as a creative way

aimed to accentuate any creative production and add to its mysterious or unique qualities for its value to the owner and audiences (Nkosi Emmanuel Zulu Gama, personal interview, 2020). A creative product that lacks this intangible beauty among the Wangoni is considered *madangi* ('amateurish') (ibid.). Motifs and patterns that are unique to the owner—and later become sacred to the descendants of the owner—subsequently emerge. On this aspect, the objects used in the ritual ceremony or worship such as *kuteta* must be good, well-made, and clean (Komba, 1961). Among the Yoruba, motifs or patterns on the cult-objects that are made or created as referent to a particular ancestor are never a mere artist's creation: they are believed to be co-created between the spirit of the deceased ancestor to be represented and the carver.

The spirit to be represented enters the head of his medium and dictates to the carver the motifs he wishes to see on his cult-object. The carver may have a little latitude in his arrangement of the motif, but by and large the process is closely guided by the medium. Moreover, the motifs selected by the medium are nearly always drawn from among the limited alternatives (i.e., the type-motifs) traditionally associated with the category of spirit to which the owner of the cult belongs (Williams, 1974: 25).

Similarly, religious rituals among the Wangoni include privately-owned and used objects such as headrests, wallets, smoking pipes, cooking pots, cups, walking staffs, stools, combs, baskets, garments and hats. These are used during rituals such as the *kuteta mahoka*, translated into English as incarnation; or *mbuyisu* – 'to return the departed spirit to the homestead' (Komba, 1961: 28). This helps to explain the commissioning of the production of personal objects such as uniquely decorated shields, smoking pipes (Figure 4), walking sticks, and headrests (Figure 2) marked with unique motifs and patterns as preferred by the commissioning patron, to be kept for later ritual use as spiritual referents of deceased patrons (Nkosi Emmanuel Zulu Gama - personal interview, January 2021; Komba, 1961). This practice resembles that of the Beni (Williams, 1974). During the study, only a few objects (probably currently commissioned by the curator for display purposes) were observed at the MajiMaji Memorial Museum, as hundreds of the original objects or artefacts of the Wangoni were looted and taken to the Ethnological Museum of Berlin (EMB) as a collection by Karl Weule and Friedrich Fülleborn during and before the MajiMaji War in the Songea in the early 1900s (Nkosi Emmanuel Zulu Gama, personal interview, January, 2021). Fülleborn (1906) also mentions that the making of domestic objects is a highly respected skill or creative activity among the Wangoni.

### **Objects and Artworks as Ritual Paraphernalia**

According to Komba (1961), Catholics refer to a person's soul as the breath of life from God, whereas the Wangoni refer to it as a shadow (*muhwili*) that follows the person wherever s/he goes. From this notion, the Wangoni believed that if a person kept a certain object or artwork as an amulet, then it was possible that

his/her 'shadow' would be cast on that object (Nkosi Emmanuel Zulu Gama, personal interview, January, 2021). Thus, when the owner dies, his/her shadow or spirit would possess that object (Tanner, 1959; Komba, 1961; Hechter-Schulz, 1966). Ritual objects are kept in a shrine or altar for worship. The Wangoni use the eldest wife's compound as a shrine, which is formally established after the *mbuyisu* rite has been performed. The *mbuyisu* rite is aimed to bring home the spirit of the departed member of the family that was wandering in the wilderness after death (Komba, 1961).

As the Wangoni seek to communicate with a departed family member, the spirit of the intended departed ancestor is evoked from the afterlife through an intense recitation that involves calling the name of the departed in a fashion like that of necromancers. When contact is established, it is believed that the evoked spirit is reincarnated into one of his/her beloved objects presented at the ritual scene (*ibid.*). A similar practice is described by Giles (1999) among the Waswahili along the coastline of East Africa. The confirmation of contact is sometimes signalled by several paranormal events that include things falling around the ritual place whenever an evoked spirit commands a strong presence. At this moment, a *mtani*—the person in charge of the ritual—will directly present the intended message to the spirit. The *mtani* is either a friend, neighbour, or a close relative who was present at the deceased's last moments. The *kuteta mahoka* rite is normally conducted in the house of the *lihoka's* wife or mother.

The operative objects during this process have inspired replica productions, although the Wangoni share little iconography or symbolism pertaining to their traditional worship (*ibid.*). Cases of haunted objects, houses and farms were common among Wangoni households: another indication that the departed spirits watched over the objects they had left behind (Nkosi Emmanuel Zulu Gama, personal interview, January 2021). For a long time now, it has been very rare to encounter the *mahoka* rites communally organized among the Wangoni. According to Ebner (1987), the German destruction and looting of thousands of Wangoni ritual objects during the MajiMaji War of 1905–1907 is the reason behind the disappearance of this mysterious African belief system. The dominant Wangoni's *mahoka* shrine, comprising several ritual objects belonging to Nkosi Mputa Gwazerapasi Gama's ancestors, was burned down in 1903 by Franziskus Leuthner (1866–1905) (Giblin & Monson, 2010). In the same year, several personal objects belonging to Nkosi Chabruma Gama of Matimira were collected by Dr. Friedrich Fülleborn on his controversial expedition in Tanganyika during the early 1900s. The Ethnological Museum's collection of the Wangoni objects does not include detailed information on how the objects such as those discussed in this article were collected from their original owners. However, considering Chabruma's bitter resentment against the German's colonial ambitions within his territory (Iliffe, 1979), it is still questionable whether the objects were willingly surrendered; or were merely plundered from their owners.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The analysis of data collected through interviews, document analysis, and observation resulted into four thematic areas, as the key findings of the study: dominance of symbolic art production and use, Christianity proselytization effects on traditional Wangoni beliefs, German looting expeditions and colonialism in Tanganyika since the 1880s, and inconsistencies in cultural restoration and preservation programmes.

#### ***Dominance of Symbolic Art Production and Use***

This study found that, like other African ethnic groups south of the Sahara, the olden Wangoni in Songea produced arts and crafts for various purposes other than religious functions. The findings confirm Okpewho's (1977) view that art production and usage in traditional African settings is diverse and dynamic. Dorman (1938) accounts for the Wangoni's advanced skills on clay works, particularly in pottery and its refinement in firing and painting; whilst Komba (1961) provides an unprecedented account of Wangoni's production and use of ritual and spiritual art, particularly the symbolic art that is dominant in the Wangoni matrimonial union rituals. It was revealed during the current research that the Wangoni objects, particularly the personal belongings collected by Friedrich Füllerborn and Karl Weule during their colonial looting expeditions in the early 1900s, were mainly symbolic artworks that were closely linked to their patron's representations for ritual and spiritual purposes. Upon seeing some photographs of the Wangoni collection of objects for the first time in the EMB in September 2017, Nkosi Emmanuel Zulu Gama confessed: "...I felt a strange power of my ancestors in my entire body..." (Nkosi Emmanuel Zulu Gama, personal interview, November, 2021).

In this study, the Wangoni art tradition is largely categorized as more production of crafts than of proper artworks such as figurines, masks, and portraits; except for only a few items found in the Berlin and Leipzig's ethnological museums' object lists. Objects number III E 14176 labelled *Menschliche Skulptur* (Human Sculpture), made of wood and glass, and collected by Karl Weule in the early 1900s; and object number III E 8911 labelled *Kopfstütze* (Headrest) serve as examples. In fact, both were donated to the EMB, where they are preserved at the East Africa Depot, in the Tanzania section.

Among the most important objects reviewed include a figurative wooden headrest (Figure 2). During this research, several looted Wangoni headrests were discovered to be in the possession of some German individuals (Krieger, 1990) and institutions (Nettleton, 2007). Artefacts numbered III E 8911, III E 8912, and III E 8913—all labelled in German as *Kopfstütze*, a German name for headrest—were collected from Nkosi Chabruma's compound at Matimira, in Songea district. Wangoni headrests were made of wood carved as cattle or cow figures. Most of the Wangoni headrests analysed were decorated with

geometrical patterns and motif stamped, burnished, or engraved onto the sides of the whole figure and its supports or legs, particularly when the headrest took a cow-carved figure as seen in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** *Headrest (III E 8911, 'Kopfstütze')* Collected by Dr Steirling  
Source: Courtesy of Ethnological Museum of Berlin, September, 2016

Headrests are common household items in Wangoni compounds (Vendryes, 1999): these are primarily made to be used as pillows by both men and women. Besides, Vendryes (1999) and Nettleton (2007) inform that, among the Tsonga, Nguni and Zulu, the headrest was used as a medium through which people communicated with their ancestors through dreams. Nettleton (2007) asserts that the essence and functions of headrests found in Songea resembled those of the Bantu speakers in Southern Africa. The following information, found on an online art sales site called Gallery Antique, with a grabber reading *Ngoni Headrest Tanzania (LHRT 042)*, summarises perfectly the functions of a headrest among the Wangoni in Tanzania:

They are also used as a comfort to help protect ceremonial coiffure. On some occasions, headrests are used as stools. As a personal object, the headrest has become part of the individual. Usually, when a person died, he was buried with his headrest. Sometimes the headrest was passed on to his heir, who would treat it with respect because this wooden piece embodied the spirit of the deceased person (Ndyanabangi, 2020).

The current research endorses that, apart from their aesthetical value as products of creative arts, the Wangoni headrests were among powerful objects used for ritual and spiritual purposes during propitiation or worship through ancestor spirits. Unlike some Bantu speaking ethnic groups of Ghana and Nigeria, the Wangoni ritual objects are not premeditated by the community as a religious authority, heads of clan or diviners, but as individual clansmen who primarily commission the creation of a particular object or artwork for their personal or utilitarian purposes (Mbiti, 2003).

During data collection at the MajiMaji War Memorial Mausoleum at Songea, no headrest was found among the salvaged olden objects that are in the permanent exhibition's collection. The Mausoleum's conservator, furiously commented on the triviality of his collection to the story and history they were supposed to preserve and promote by saying that "... the original olden Wangoni artefacts are in Germany, where they are stashed in huge storage chambers underground. We have nothing to show you here..." (Baltazar Nyamusya, personal interview, February 2021). This remark is rightly confirmed in Anitra Nettleton's publication titled *African Dream Machines: Style, Identity and Meaning of African Headrests*, in which she is not only acknowledging that quantities of plundered Wangoni headrests are relocated in Berlin, Germany; but also that their authenticity is violated through uncensored reproduction:

A number of Ngoni headrests from Tanzania in Berlin are reproduced by Krieger (1990), but no others by Bantu speakers with a longer history of settlement there (Nettleton, 2007: 188).

The current researcher concurs with Nettleton's disclosure of the location of Wangoni headrests collected by different colonial agents during several punitive expeditions facilitated by Germany's colonial government, as well as looting sprees during the MajiMaji War of 1905–1907, through actual observations made during data collection visits in the EMB underground storage chambers in the years 2015 and 2016.

Another artistic object that was found among the Wangoni creativities before cultural production disruptions since German colonialism, is a snuff-box/container (Figure 3), known as *ligwati* in Kingoni. Snuff containers were made and used by Wangoni as a symbol of prestige to the chief or his advisors and warriors; and also as gifts exchanged between lovers, friends, and relatives. They were also among important components of bride price the groom's father gave to the father of his daughter in law (*ndundu za uyemba*), during the *mtimba* (matrimonial union) ritual (Komba, 1961). Regardless of the scarcity of snuff-boxes in ordinary places such as market places or in households, and in the MajiMaji Memorial Mausoleum in Songea town where some data for this study were collected, images of a number of snuff-boxes collected from Songea in the early 1900s and during the time of the MajiMaji War in the Wangoni areas were seen in two Ngoni object-list documents supplied to the present researcher by the curator for the African collections at the Ethnological Museum, around the Dahlem Dorf in Berlin during data collection in September 2015. On the list, objects number III E 9464 and III E 14174 a,b – labelled in German as *Tabakbeutel* and *Pulvermaß* – are among the sampled Wangoni snuff containers in a long list of the same. The former was collected by Dr Fr. Stierling from Nkosi Chabruma's compound, whereas the latter were collected by Karl Weule; thus, the slight difference in their names is probably due to the collectors' records.

The containers have a cylindrical shape with round caped-head tops. Figure 3 shows an ideal Wangoni snuff container with a mixture of engraved geometrical motifs, and those created by wrapped cotton-thread on its upper part. A half-open round caped-top is also visible. The cross-hatched and parallel-lines patterns are characteristic of the decoration genre on most of the Wangoni wood artworks.



**Figure 3: Snuff-box (*Pulvermaß III E 14174a*) Collected by Karl Weule, 1900s**  
Source: Courtesy of Ethnological Museum of Berlin, September, 2016

Some of the reviewed literature showed that snuff-boxes/containers were common utilitarian artefacts among the Wangoni men and women who used tobacco for leisure and medicinal purposes. Vendryes (1999), Krieger (1990) and Nettleton (2007) attest to a tradition of the making and use of snuff-containers among the Wangoni and their neighbouring groups in the entire Southern Africa areas. However, not a single ancient snuff-box was available for review either in the MajiMaji Memorial Mausoleum's collection, the National Museum of Tanzania in Dar es Salaam, or in the collection of the living Wangoni paramount Chief, Emmanuel Zulu Gama. These were found in the EMB, its object-lists, catalogues and several other publications that took photographs. As such, the current research ascertains that Germany colonialism, its funded expeditions, and the MajiMaji War occasioned the existing scarcity of the Wangoni cultural products, e.g., the *vigwati* or snuff-boxes, and the traditional smoke pipes. The object number III E 7089, labelled *Pfeife (Viehzucht)* in the EMB's East Africa collections is, indeed, a smoke pipe, called the *chi'bemu* or *chikololo* in Kingoni. It is made of ivory with several wooden others. Their complex forms reflect their use which is like the Middle East's hookers (Nkosi Emmanuel Zulu Gama, personal interview, February, 2022). This artistic item was probably looted by Friedrich Füllerborn during his 'scientific' expedition in Songea. Like the *ligwati*, smoke pipes were among the special gifts a bride would give to his prospective husband during their courtship, and on the day of their marriage. However, these artworks, which are also vital ritual objects, are non-existent both in Songea and in the MajiMaji Memorial Mausoleum's permanent exhibition.



**Figure 4: Snuff Pipe Made of Cow-bone**

**Source:** Courtesy of Ethnological Museum of Berlin, September, 2016

A set of three baskets (Figure 5) labelled as objects number III E, 2131a-c, with a German name *Körbe*, is another artwork discussed as one of the Wangoni ritual paraphernalia. These are special Wangoni baskets, popularly known as the *ki'heneku* (singular), and *vi'heneku* (plural). They were very common in Songea district areas identified in Figure 1. During an interview with Herberta Nyoni, a resident of Lusonga Street in Magagula ward, it emerged that the baskets were made of wild millet grass (*Panicum miliaceum*), traditionally known as *ngwinyu* in Kingoni (Personal interview with Herberta Nyoni, February, 2021). Through the *vi'heneku* one sees exceptional Wangoni grass-weaving art, which is a common skill among Africans (Cunningham, 2006).



**Figure 5: 'Vi'heneku' ('Körbe' III E 2131 a-c,) Collected by Hermann von Wissmann in The early 1900s**

**Source:** Courtesy of Ethnological Museum of Berlin, September, 2016

Of all the artworks in the ongoing discussion, the baskets are directly linked to religious worships of the Wangoni. During the *kuteta mahoka* ritual (Komba, 1961)—a worship associated with asking God for prosperity and favours in

harvests, animal breeding and good health for family members—the *vi'heneku* were the only objects used for presentation of foodstuffs—e.g., milk, beer, meat or grains—before the ancestors' shrines (Herberta Nyoni, personal interview, February, 2021). The present research associates the intensely detailed and finely-woven grass and consistency on the hue, fine texture and patterns of materials used in the weaving of the three *vi'heneku* with the *kuteta* ritual function for which the baskets were made.

Presently, the *vi'heneku* are not among the commonly used baskets in Wangoni households. As they were objects of religious activities, these objects were prohibited by Catholic authorities in the entire Songea District during the introduction of German colonialism, immediately after the MajiMaji War (Ebner, 1987). They were in turn looted by colonial officials, individual Western collectors, and anthropologists (Wright, 1968). The baskets in Figure 5 were collected and donated to the EMB by Major Herman von Wissmann between 1899 and early 1900s. Wright (ibid.) accounts for some cultural objects looted from Tanganyika, a task coordinated and supervised by German colonial troops (*schutztruppe*) within the same years of Major von Wissmann's operations in Songea.

During the research of this study, none of the baskets were found in any Wangoni households or public places such as marketplaces; not even in the MajiMaji Memorial Mausoleum at Songea, or in the NMT in Dar es Salaam. The looters collected almost all the pieces available; as such there was not even one left to help in their duplication by the Wangoni who survived the MajiMaji War after 1907. Most of these objects are stored in the basement of several ethnological museums in Germany.

#### ***Christianity Proselytization Effects on the Traditional Wangoni Beliefs***

Early Catholic missionary activities, particularly Christianity proselytization in Songea, are some of the major factors for the paucity of ritual objects and artefacts used by the Wangoni in their traditional religious practices. Besides, Christianization campaigns were responsible for the complete decline of the production and use of such traditional belief artifacts and practices (Ebner, 1987). Iliffe (1979) and Ebner (1987) describe several incidents that involved German missionaries during the destruction of traditional religious shrines and altars by demolition and burning of the debris and all worship tools—particularly ritual objects—therein. Of all the incidents, the demolition and burning of the Wangoni paramount chief's traditional worship shrine at his Maposeni compound in May of 1903 marked the acme of the forced Christianization campaign (Redmond, 1975; Ebner, 1987). The incident unveiled mandatory Christianization, which involved violence and coercion to ensure complete annihilation of the Wangoni culture (Dorman, 1938).

Gama (1992) asserts that Nkosi Mputa's worship hut accommodated objects that were believed to possess spiritual powers of his ancestors who had

migrated to Songea from South Africa. Thus, its demolition symbolized a disconnection between the Wangoni of Songea and their original ancestors. Redmond (1975), Iliffe (1979), and Ebner (1987) show that Franciscus Leuthner's act of burning the shrines of the Wangoni's paramount chiefs resulted in two historical events: first the breakout of the MajiMaji War in 1905, and later the massive conversion of the surviving Wangoni population into Christianity (see Figure 1). Iliffe (1979) records massive conversion into Christianity in the 1900s, which impacted the gradual disintegration of traditional beliefs in many parts of Tanganyika. This study found that coerced Christianization had detrimental effects on the traditional belief systems of the Wangoni, whose practices involved arts and crafts/objects that also served as agents of cultural preservation. Had it not been for the looting, demolition, and burning of these shrines and their contents, it could have been easy to study and preserve a lot of Wangoni's traditional ways of worship and related practices. However, most of the Wangoni who converted to Christianity continued to embrace their traditional ways of life such as performing rituals, as well as worshipping their departed family members (*mahoka* or *mashodzi*).

#### ***German Looting Expeditions and Colonialism in Tanganyika Since the 1880s***

The work by the Humboldt Lab Tanzania, *Objects from the Colonial Wars in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin – Tanzanian-German Perspectives*, a latest 'provenance research' and publication on the artefacts and cultural objects from Tanganyika, was sponsored by the *Kulturstiftung des Bundes* (German Federal Cultural Foundation). The TURN—a Fund for Artistic Co-operation of Germany—revealed that the present scarcity of the cultural objects such as artefacts and ritual or worship tools, was caused by careless and violent looting and plundering expeditions systematically planned, administered and sponsored by the German colonial government (Reyels et al., 2018). Among others, this study found that most of the Wangoni objects in several ethnological museums in Germany had been plundered from the colonies. A specific example that clearly illustrates the case of plundered artefacts and cultural objects from the Wangoni is drawn from the expeditions of Friedrich Fülleborn and Karl Weule in the present-day Ruvuma Region from late 1890s until 1906 (Fülleborn, 1906; Weule, 1908). Paula Ivanov (the Curator of the East/Northeast/Central/South Africa collections at the Ethnological Museum, State Museums in Berlin) asserted that the exact number of objects collected from East African colonies and 'donated' to the EMB by several collectors is unknown, although they are estimated to be about 22,600 in total. She said that the collection from Tanganyika alone, the biggest of all German colonies, is estimated at 12,000 objects (Paula Ivanov, personal interview, 2015, Berlin). Upon visiting the EMB during data collection, the curator made available two copies of detailed inventories of objects collected from the Wangoni of Songea, confirming that most of the objects and artworks were from Friedrich Fülleborn and Karl Weule expeditions.

Furthermore, it emerged that some objects in the EMB's collection had been snatched and plundered from their owners during the MajiMaji War and considered to be 'spoils of war'. It is from such revelation one realizes how the Germans got hold of dear personal belongings such as Chief Chabruma's headrest (Figure 2), and other useful household tools such as medicine and foodstuff containers (Figure 5) from their owners. Clearly, this study finds German's systemic looting and plundering of the artefacts and other cultural objects for their museums, coupled with its harsh colonial administration in their newly acquired territory of the Wangoni areas, account for the disappearing of artworks and objects that the Wangoni had used in their worshipping practices.

#### *Inconsistencies in Cultural Restoration and Preservation Programmes*

The vanishing Wangoni traditional beliefs, together with the extinction of the paraphernalia involved in such rituals, indicate that there is an absence of clearly stated and implemented restoration and preservation policies of indigenous cultures. Although for more than five decades several political statements have been made by the government, alongside numerous local culture promotion projects and programmes, the status quo has not improved much. During his presidential inaugural speech on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1962, the former President of Tanzania, the late Mwl. Julius Nyerere, exhibited his political will to restore and promote indigenous cultural practices that had been condemned by colonial governments. The speech was positively received, with some public officials in his government mistakenly interpreting it as a cultural policy in itself (Makukula, 2019). It was during the delivery of this speech that President Nyerere created the Ministry of National Culture and Youth, under which several guidelines, rules, and regulations regarding national culture were designed, developed, and promoted. However, not much of the indigenous culture was properly restored and promoted (ibid.). The abolition of chieftainship after the enactment of the Chiefs Act (1963) (Abolition of Office: Consequential Provisions) was another contradictory step by the government in the quest for restoring indigenous culture.

The supposedly buried agenda keeps resurfacing with seemingly little success due to the government's dodgy responses and contradictory statements. This was evident in the statement of the previous Tanzania Foreign Affairs Minister, the late Augustine Maiga, who admitted that when he met Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas in April 2018, he made it clear that Tanzania was neither seeking reparations for the killing of the MajiMaji War participants, nor claiming back cultural objects and artefacts plundered by German officials and missionaries during the colonial period (Zeit Online, 2018). Since the early 2000s, through the initiative of organizations by Tanzanians living in Berlin and other parts of Germany (UWATAB)—with their partners such as the Berlin Postcolonial e.V., and the Tanzania-Network.de e.V.—have ceaselessly demanded that Germany should declare the records on cultural objects, human remains and artefacts they keep in ethnological museums through dialogue,

meetings, and several letters. They have also called for reparations to compensate for atrocities committed by the Germans during the colonial era. However, initiatives by such organizations lack full support from the government of Tanzania, particularly the Tanzania Embassy in Germany (UWATAB representative in Berlin, personal interview, February, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

This study has established the fact that art, artistic decorations, and production of utilitarian objects among the olden Wangoni were inspired by their general culture, and directly linked to their strong belief in God. It has also confirmed that culture lives in things such as artworks or objects; thus, when there is nobody to narrate nor books to document people's history and their olden ways of life, art and objects can provide the best that could have possibly perished. The supposedly perished traditional Wangoni religion and the paraphernalia used in religious practices have been precisely traced, resurrected, analysed, and documented with the help of only a few artworks and objects that were accessed in two museums in Germany. Before the present study, the overriding narrative was that the extermination of the large number of the Wangoni population during the MajiMaji War of 1905 to 1907, as well as Franziskus Leuthner's move to burn down Nkosi Mputa's *Ng'anda ya Nyasele* in 1903, ignited intensive Christian proselytization of the Wangoni polity at Peramiho, and the entire Songea territory. These, as well as the looting and destruction of thousands of ritual objects during the events, marked the end of Wangoni traditional beliefs. Wrongful labelling and inappropriate descriptions of artworks and objects' media and names on several objects observed in the EMB's collection lists attest to one-sided and improperly conducted provenance research, such as the one administered by the Humboldt Lab Tanzania in 2015 and 2016. Besides calling for proper provenance research on Wangoni objects stashed in almost all ethnological museums in Germany, the study findings call for a serious collaboration among scholars to ensure the restoration and preservation of Tanzanian culture from surviving material cultures: yet to be collected, or already collected and kept in different parts of the world.

### **References**

- Abiodun, R. (2014). *Yoruba art, and language: Seeking the African in African art*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Benedict, A. O. (2013). Art, religion and symbolic beliefs in traditional African context: A case for sculpture, review of history and political science. *American Research Institute for Policy Development*, 1(1): 18-25. Retrieved from [www.aripd.org/rhpson](http://www.aripd.org/rhpson) January 9, 2022.

- Blier, S. P. (2012). Art in ancient Ife, birthplace of the Yoruba. *African Arts*, 45(4): 70–85.
- Bishota, C. F. K. & Kandoro, S. A. (1985). Maana ya sanaa na msanii. *Falsafa ya Sanaa Tanzania*, 57–62, Dar es Salaam, BASATA.
- Cunningham, A. B. (2006). *African basketry: Grassroots art from Southern Africa*. University of Michigan: Fernwood Press.
- Dorman, M. H. (1938). Pottery among the Wangoni and Wandendehule, Southern Tanganyika. *Man*, 38, 97–102. Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/29782311> on Feb. 15, 2022.
- D’Orsi, L. & Dei, F. (2018). What is a rite? Émile Durkheim, a hundred years later. *Open Information Science*, 2 115–126. De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opis-2018-0009>.
- Ebner, E. (1987). *The history of the Wangoni and their origin in the South African Bantu tribes*. Peramiho: Benedictine Publications.
- Eke, J. M. A. (2020). Language and symbolic arts: Religious adornments, arts and meaning in the Catholic Church liturgy. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 10(4): 390–403. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2020.104023>.
- Ekpo, E. (1977). *Two thousand years, Nigerian art*. Lagos: Federal Department of Antiquities.
- Erdtsieck, J. (2003). *In the spirit of uganga - Inspired healing in Tanzania*. Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam/AGIDS.
- Fülleborn, F. (1906). Das deutsche Njassa - und Ruwuma-gebiet, land und leute, nebst bemerkungen über die Schire-Länder: Mit benutzung von ergebnissen der Njassa- und Kingagebirgs-expedition der Hermann und Elise geb. Berlin, Heckmann Wentzel-Stiftung.
- Giblin, J. & Monson, J. (2010). MajiMaji: Lifting the fog of war. *African Studies Series*, 20. Amsterdam, Brill.
- Giles, L. L. (1999). *Spirit possession and the symbolic construction of Swahili society*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Hechter-Schulz, K. (1966). Fertility dolls: Cults of the Nguni and other tribes of the Southern Bantu. *Anthropos*, Bd.61, (H.3./6): 516–528, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH.
- Illiffe, J. (1979). *A modern history of Tanganyika*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kimmerle, H. (2006). The world of spirits and the respect for nature: Towards a new appreciation of animism. *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, 2(2): 249–263.
- Komba, J. J. (1961). *GOD and MAN: Religious elements of the Ngoni of Southeast Tanganyika viewed in the light of Christian faith*. Rome, Pont: Universitas de Propaganda Fide.
- Krieger, K. (1990). *Ostafrikanische Plastik*. Berlin: Museum für Völkerkunde.
- Luyaluka, L. K. (2017). African indigenous religion and its ancient model reflections of Kongo hierarchical monotheism. *Journal of Black Studies*, 165–189, Sage Publications, Inc.

- Makukula, D. Z. (2019). The development of visual arts in Tanzania from 1961 to 2015: A focus on the national cultural policy and institutions' influences. Ph.D. Thesis. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-4095>. Freie Universität Berlin, Germany.
- Mbiti, J. (2003). *African religions and philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann.
- Mulokozi, M. M. (2001). Some thoughts on African traditional religion and sculpture. In Ewel, M. & Outwater, A. (Eds). *From ritual to modern art: Traditional and modernity in Tanzanian sculpture*, pp. 29–42. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers.
- Nettleton, A. (2007). *African dream machines: Style, identity and meaning of African headrests*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Ndyanabangi, J. N. (2020). *Ngoni headrests in Tanzania*. (LHRT 042-Description): Gallery ANTIQUE UGANDA LTD. Retrieved from: <https://www.Africagalleryantique.com/product/ngoni-sudan-headrest-lhrt-042/>. Accessed on February 22, 2022)
- Okpewho, I. (1977). Principles of traditional African art. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 35(3): 301–313. Wiley on behalf of The American Society for Aesthetics.
- Otiso, K. (2013). *Culture and customs of Tanzania*. New York: Greenwood.
- Rabie, R. (2011). *Egyptian art: The Amarna revolution*. Retrieved from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327436931\\_Egyptian\\_Art\\_The\\_Amarna\\_Revolution](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327436931_Egyptian_Art_The_Amarna_Revolution). Doi: 10.13140/RG.2.2.23798.65600.
- Redmond, P. M. (1975). Majimaji in Ungoni: A reappraisal of existing historiography. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 8(3): 407–424. Boston University: African Studies Centre.
- Reyels, L., Ivanov, P. & Weber-Sinn, C. (2018). Humboldt Lab Tanzania: Objects from the colonial wars in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin–Tanzanian–German perspectives. Berlin, Dietrich Reimer Verlag GmbH.
- Schmidt, H. (2010). Re-negotiating marginality: The MajiMaji War and its aftermath in Southwestern Tanzania, ca. 1905–1916. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 43(1): 27–62. Boston University: African Studies Centre.
- Smith, E. W. (1943). *African beliefs and Christian faith*. London: United Society for Christians.
- Tanner, R. E. S. (1959). The Spirits of the dead: An introduction to the ancestor worship of the Sukuma of Tanganyika. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 32(2): 108–124. The George Washington University Institute for Ethnographic Research. Retrieved from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3316504> on February 17, 2022.
- Tanner, R. E. S. (1967). *Transition in African beliefs - Traditional religion and Christian change: A study in Sukumaland, Tanzania, East Africa*. New York: Maryknoll Publications.
- United Republic of Tanzania (URT) (2012). *Tanzania population census 2012*. Dar es Salaam: National Bureau of Statistics.
- Vendryes, M. R. (1999). Africa in repose: Stools and headrests. *Record of the Art Museum*, 58(1/2): 38–53. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3774790> on February 21, 2022.

- Weule, K. (1908). *Negerleben in Ostafrika. Ergebnisse einer ethnologischen Forschungsreise*. Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus.
- Westerlund, D. (1982). Freedom of religion under socialist rule in Tanzania, 1961–1977. *Journal of Church and State*, 24(1): 87–103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23916530>.
- Williams, D. (1974). *Icon and image: A study of sacred and secular forms of African classical art*. London: Allen Lane.
- Willoughby, W. C. (1932). *Nature-worship and taboo*. Connecticut, Hartford.
- Wright, M. (1968). Local roots of policy in German East Africa. *The Journal of African History*, 9(4): 621–630. Cambridge University Press. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700009075>.
- Zeit Online (2018). *Tansania will keine Entschädigung von Deutschland*, 4. Mai 2018, 8: 43 Uhr Quelle: ZEITONLINE, dpa, vk103 Kommentare. Retrieved from: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2018-05/afrikareise-heiko-maas-tansania-entschaedigung-kolonialherrschaft>, on February 11, 2022.