Looted memorial statues returned to Kenyan family

by MONICA UDVARDY AND LINDA GILES

Ancestral memorial statues (vigango) erected by the Mijikenda peoples of Kenya are frequently stolen and sold to international art dealers. During the summer of 2007, the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) returned two vigango, which had been in the collections of two American museums, to a Mijikenda family in a rural Kenyan village. We give the history of these two stolen statues, including their theft and rediscovery, the efforts leading to their repatriation, and the joyful return ceremony. We also describe how this case inspired the return of nine more vigango from an American family to the NMK, and examine the current status of efforts to protect vigango.

On June 20, 2007, much celebration accompanied the National Museums of Kenya's (NMK) return of two stolen ancestral memorial statues (vigango, singular kigango, Kigiriama) to a Giriama family near Kaloleni, in the Kenyan coastal hinterland. Returned by two American museums, the two vigango were, according to the NMK Director General Dr. Idle Omar Farah, the first stolen artifacts ever returned to Kenya from the United States. The ceremony drew hundreds of local celebrants and included speeches, performances by local dance troupes, and feasting. The Minister of Tourism and Wildlife, the Honorable Morris Dzoro, delivered the keynote speech. Other dignitaries attending included the NMK Board Chairman, Mr. Issa Timamy, and Ambassador Husein Dado, Senior Deputy Secretary of the Ministry of State for National Heritage. The NMK's Mombasa branch, under the direction of Mr. Philip Jimbi Katana, made elaborate preparations for the ceremony, including building a steel enclosure in the homestead to protect the returned vigango from further theft.

The ceremony concluded a long and concerted effort by ourselves and our Kenyan colleague, John Baya Mitsanze (a Giriama and senior curator with the NMK) to have the two statues repatriated and to heighten global awareness of the theft of vigango and other non-Western cultural property.

Vigango are carved and erected to incarnate the spirits of deceased members of Gohu, a male semi-secret society, and are considered sacred by the Giriama and other northern Mijikenda peoples.

The two returned vigango were stolen more than twenty years ago, in 1985. By sheer coincidence, Monica Udvardy had photographed them at the Giriama homestead of Kalume Mwakiru shortly before their theft while she was conducting research on Mijikenda gendered secret societies. We (Udvardy and Linda Giles) discovered the vigango fifteen years later in the African collections of the Illinois State University Museum (later transferred to the Illinois State Museum in Springfield) and the Hampton University Museum in Virginia.

In 2006, we located the Mwakiru family, and later delivered to the NMK's Mombasa branch the family's written appeal to have their stolen vigango returned. NMK Principal Curator of Coastal Sites and Monuments, Mr. Philip Jimbi Katana, then wrote the official request to the two American museums. The Illinois State Museum readily agreed to the request, and

“As this case of the involuntary voyage of Kalume's vigango demonstrates, the desire in the West for non-Western cultural property is upsetting local populations and stripping them of their tangible cultural heritage.”

Monica Udvardy
on September 13, 2006, an eight-person delegation, headed by Kenya’s Minister of State for National Heritage, Suleiman Shakombo, and the Kenyan Ambassador to the United States, Peter Ogego, traveled to Springfield to collect the kigango. At that time, Hampton University refused to return their kigango or even to meet the delegation. However, shortly after the Kenyan delegation left the United States, Hampton bowed to public pressure and shipped the kigango to Kenya.

The NMK’s actions concerning the Mwakiru vigango demonstrate a new focus on recovering Kenya’s cultural heritage not only for the NMK itself, but also on behalf of individuals, families, and ethnic groups. In another recent case, the NMK assisted in the return of regalia of Nandi resistance hero Koitalel arap Samoei from a British family to Nandi elders in 2006.

Tracing the path of the Mwakiru vigango

Most vigango are stolen by unemployed Mijikenda male youths and sold to shops and markets in the coastal cities and in the capital, Nairobi, which then sell them to Western dealers and collectors. Most of the vigango in the United States have been imported by a dealer based in southern California. This dealer has sold many of the vigango to private individuals, including several associated with the Hollywood film industry; these individuals often then donate them to museums. Records from the Illinois State University Museum show that the actor Powers Boothe donated one of the Mwakiru vigango and seven other vigango to the Museum in 1986. The other Mwakiru kigango was donated to Hampton University Museum by an undisclosed individual in the same year; Museum records indicate that it was one of ninety-four vigango collected by the American dealer among the ninety-nine total vigango acquired by the Museum between 1979 and 1987.

Media attention and more vigango repatriation

Our efforts to return these vigango have received widespread attention from the news media. In 2006, Mike Pflanz, the East African correspondent for the Daily Telegraph (London) and the Christian Science Monitor, visited the Mwakiris and published a story in both papers about their stolen vigango and our research on vigango in U.S. museum collections. NMK curator John Baya Mitsanze also took Pflanz and a photographer to the Giriama homestead of Karisa Disii Ngowa to photograph several recently erected vigango. After Pflanz’s articles appeared, we were deluged with requests for interviews by the news media.

Probably the most important coverage was by the New York Times. Marc Lacey, the New York Times East African correspondent for the Daily Telegraph (London) and the Christian Science Monitor, visited the Mwakiris and published a story in both papers about their stolen vigango and our research on vigango in U.S. museum collections. NMK curator John Baya Mitsanze also took Pflanz and a photographer to the Giriama homestead of Karisa Disii Ngowa to photograph several recently erected vigango. After Pflanz’s articles appeared, we were deluged with requests for interviews by the news media.

Lacey’s article about vigango theft, which described the vigango loss of both Giriama families, was published on page 4 of the 2006 Easter Sunday edition. At the same time, Lacey launched a multimedia, interactive version of the story on the New York Times website which ran for three months.

Other news media reporting the story include Kenya’s national daily newspapers, radio interviews, and discussion on the BBC and NPR. At least fifty special interest blogs and websites have discussed the issue from the perspectives of art history, archaeology, African Studies, and cultural anthropology.
The media attention has raised general public awareness about the devastating impact on local communities due to the widespread global marketing of African cultural heritage.

It has also led to the voluntary return of nine more vigango from the private African art collection of American producers/screenwriters Lewis and Jay Allen, after Connecticut art dealer Kelly Gingras discovered the Mwakiru case on the Internet while preparing an exhibit at her Insiders/Outsiders Art Gallery. Gingras notified the daughter of the late couple, Brooke Allen, who agreed that the statues should be returned to Kenya. Allen and Gingras handed the statues over to the Kenyan Ambassador during a ceremony at the United Nations headquarters in New York City in June of 2007, an event that was also covered by the New York Times.

There are also indications that the media attention has affected other African art dealers. In October 2007, Linda Giles contacted several African art dealers in New York City about Kenyan artifacts for sale. None of the dealers mentioned having any vigango. An employee of the Pace Primitive Gallery volunteered the information that Kenyan “funerary statues” could no longer be sold. He noted that some of these statues had just recently been returned to Kenya and that it appeared that the statues should never have been collected in the first place.

Current challenges
In spite of these successes, there are still many vigango in museums and private collections in the United States, Europe, and Kenya. We have been able to verify the presence of more than 400 vigango in various American museums, but there is no information about the families from whom they were stolen. This demonstrates the need to photograph vigango still in situ.

Though Kenya's passage and enactment of a national heritage bill protecting various aspects of natural and cultural heritage is an excellent step, its application is hindered by its lack of a list of specific artifacts covered. Hence, vigango do not currently receive special protection through inclusion in a red list. We are also unaware of any efforts to prevent the sale of vigango and other stolen or endangered cultural items in the many curio and art shops catering to tourists and collectors.

References
Pflanz, Mike, 2006. Kenyans welcome home sacred relics stolen by British. Telegraph, April 15, News section.
Biography

Monica Udvardy and Linda Giles are anthropologists who work in the East African coastal area. Monica Udvardy is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology and Director of the International Studies Program at University of Kentucky. Linda Giles is an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Illinois Wesleyan University and Independent Scholar. Their research on vigango theft has often been conducted in conjunction with Kenyan John Mitsanze (National Museums of Kenya). The authors gratefully acknowledge the copy editing of this article by SAFE volunteer writer/editor Susan Timberlake.