Akamba *Mavisa*: Carving a local art world in East Africa & beyond

**MUSAU MULINGE (b1924)**  
Carver, entrepreneur, standardized repertoire & training 1950's  
Interviews 2006, -09, -10 video 2011

**Sculpture NDULA** drummer for a ceremonial dance, c1930 artist unknown, query if by Musau's father  
MULINGE WALI (d1939)

**Song MAVISA NIMASUYA 2005**  
by Kilunda aka Sammy Wambua (d 1996)

GIKOMBA, Nairobi Aug 2011: L: reprise for *Ndula* with dancers;  
R: Vice-chair of the Nairobi Handcrafts Co-op Cosmos Mwangela carving a large order of elders; increase in Heritage themes since 2006

**COMMEMORATING THE PAST, CREATING THE FUTURE_KENYA'S HERITAGE**  
**CROSSROADS Cultural Production, Representation & Local Engagement**  
9 Sept 2011, British Library

Elsbeth Joyce Court  <ec6 @soas.ac.uk>  
Kamba translation: Munuve Mutisya, Kyanzasu Peace Museum
KEY POINTS

1 - Akamba art/craft carving is a large, dynamic, local, ethnic movement that employs their carving (*suvawa*) traditions, e.g. stools, staffs, occasionally *kititu* a power object.

2 - It has maintained a distinctive, expressive practice for nine decade and is amongst the oldest and largest ?80,000 of such modern movements in Africa -- in the world (Cunningham et al: 2005).

3 - The Akamba movement had positive relationships with colonial and national authorities while keeping control of training and trade. Its socio-economic system is characterised by camaraderie, discipline, productivity, flexibility; gender specificity.

(Photo Wamunyu 1985)

4 - The carvers have developed their own representative imagery *mavisa*, associated with their lives, local cultures and nationhood. Their work is accessible and appreciated by Kenyans and recognized internationally. The Akamba movement is an art world (Becker:1982/2008, Danto:1962 Glissant:2010).

5 - The 21st poses serious challenges: shortage of wood & problems with ‘good wood’, over-production, international markets declining, diversification (Choge & Cunningham:2005).
My ART EDUCATION STUDIES in Wamunyu: mid-1980’s about drawing/MAVISA in schools and homesteads. From 2006, research into EFFECTIVE NON-FORMAL EDUCATION IN ART - carving skills (herein), apprenticeship, repertoire, innovation, professional support... MET LOCAL PERSISTENCE TO ENGAGE WITH THEIR CORE AND OTHER NARRATIVES – indeed what should be the source of art education.

STAGES IN CARVING PRODUCTION IN WORKSHOP/ SHED; STEPS BY TECHNIQUE & TOOL in KIKAMBA

1-3 >Kwatua preparing wood; selecting, cutting >ithoka axe, >musumeni saw, measuring >kithimo kya metho: eyes & hands

4-5 >Kuvaka roughing out object; >ngomo nene: big adze, roughing out form

6-9 defining the object; >kumba create, >kuvuthuanga carve, >ngomo nini, >ngomo ntheko: small & skinny adzes, >tuva file, >kavyu knife; >kwasuvya smooth

10-12 finishing the object; can be carried out by non-carvers >musasa sanding, >kuvaka mauta polishing, >kukuna langi colouring

VARIEDTIES OF EVIDENCE

Objects, their documentation > 1920’s and iconography

<<Oral tradition: narrative of origin
Mutisya Munge Carrier Corps WW 1

Critical studies & consultancies: ethnography, art, art history, development – innovations – resources, products, trade

Newspaper, other reportage from1930’s

Records - Kenya National Archives District Reports: nil mention 1917-27, regular mention 1949-53 [cite letters 1949,1953 re skill, individualism] then sparse; need to check Co-op records; accounts

Interviews
Contemporary re-tellings – increased ethnic themes in objects, songs, scenarios >> proactive with Heritage awareness


MM did his carving up in a tree kitau, watch tower for security and privacy 2009, + a model dwelling; iteant sales often by wives.
Narrative: mzee lkwywa Nguku, b1922.
Product development at the shed of Kimunya bothers David & Sammy, Gikomba

*Indian Ocean Slave Dhow* Kimunya David 2006 only 1 sold/11 remaining and dusty, while Noah’s Ark is most popular item—now available in several scales 2011;

Good Wood used for Jacaranda-theme bowl by Kimunya David 2005

Kimunya Sammy artisan/2 students collaboration with KU Fine Arts/Northumbria England-Africa Project re fabrication of a prize-winning baby cot, 2011 - Grant 1.8mKS from KU Innovation Incubation Centre!

[Information & photos of cot: Prof J Guille, U Northumbria]
COMMENTS/AGENDA

1- Akamba art carving is a remarkable, sustainable and flexible local aesthetic movement in a national context, with a very large scale of operation.

2 – Why? Because of Akamba fine skill, productivity & narrative in combination with ‘classic’ heterarchy, long distance trade, tolerance, hospitality, energy. Query invisibility?

3 – The Akamba system of specialized education in art is effective: why not institute a means for it to be accredited in the formal system? Formal system in flux. Address gender specificity.

4 - Query existing scholarship – fragmented, delimited to tourist/airport art; Jua Kali aesthetic; recycling of dated often inaccurate texts, apart from ecology.

5 – Clear chronology: •origins c. WW I,
   •between the Wars,
   •following WW II,
   •Independence
   •growth & peak of tourism,
   •21stc challenges and change

The critical issue is the lack of systematic research and a published history – from Kenyan perspectives.