

INTANGIBLE HERITAGE ENDANGERMENT AND ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY IN KENYA'S SACRED KAYAS

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Ritual Loss = Ontological Rupture

Background

The Sacred Kaya Forests of the Mijikenda are UNESCO World Heritage Sites that function not merely as ecological reserves, but as ritual landscapes embedded with deep cosmological meaning. These spaces historically anchored governance, spirituality, and collective identity through ritual performance, sacred authority, and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Beyond their materiality, the Kayas constitute a form of 'spiritual infrastructure' through which communities reproduce social order, moral legitimacy, and metaphysical coherence. Their value lies not only in their physical preservation, but in the continuity of ritual practice.



Problem Statement

Despite conservation success in preserving the physical integrity of Kaya forests, intangible heritage practices—such as oath-taking, elder council deliberations, and ancestral invocation—are rapidly declining. This paradox raises critical concerns about the effectiveness of current heritage management approaches.

Drivers of this decline include religious transformation, formal education systems that devalue indigenous knowledge, generational disengagement, and the erosion of traditional authority structures.

Theoretical Framework & Argument

This study draws on the concept of ontological security, understood as the confidence in the continuity of self-identity and social order. It argues that ontological security in Kaya communities is sustained through ritual repetition rather than mere physical landscapes.

As ritual practices decline, communities experience disruptions in predictability, belonging, and existential continuity. Thus, the loss of intangible heritage constitutes not just cultural erosion, but a deeper ontological rupture.



Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative approach grounded in 2025 fieldwork across selected Kaya sites. Methods include semi-structured interviews with elders and community members, participant observation of ritual practices, and interpretive analysis of policy frameworks.

This approach enables an in-depth understanding of lived experiences, capturing both structural transformations and subjective perceptions of heritage loss.

Findings & Discussion

Findings reveal a significant weakening of ritual transmission systems, particularly among younger generations. The diminishing authority of elders and reduced participation in ritual practices indicate a fragmentation of intergenerational continuity.

Additionally, heritage management frameworks tend to prioritize documentation and physical conservation, often neglecting the performative and lived dimensions of heritage that sustain community identity.



Implications

The study calls for a reconceptualization of heritage as a dynamic and enacted system rather than a static object. Policies must shift toward safeguarding living traditions and enabling community-led continuity of ritual practices.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the endangerment of intangible heritage within the Sacred Kayas signals a profound ontological crisis. Addressing this requires moving beyond preservation of space toward sustaining the cultural practices that give these spaces meaning.