

History, Trauma, and Revitalization in Haya Villages of Tanzania

PETER SCHMIDT

After an absence of several decades from my original research site in NW Tanzania, I returned in 2008 to visit several of the Haya villages where I once studied oral traditions and the history of iron technology. The first place I revisited was Katuruka, where local oral traditions said King Rugomora Mahe (1650-75) had built a large iron tower to the heavens. Marked by an ancient shrine tree called *Kaiija* (the place of the forge), this sacred place dates back to 500 BC—the earliest date for iron working in East, Central, or southern Africa. To my surprise, the ancient memorial was a stump. I also came to learn that whole families and lineages had perished in the HIV/AIDS epidemic that first swept through this part of eastern Africa.

What struck me was that fewer elders above age 65 were living when compared to four decades earlier. Several remaining elders asked that I return to the village to assist them in documenting what remained of their oral histories and oral traditions. They also wanted help with restoring their ancient shrines and other places documented by archaeology, hoping to make them a cultural heritage destination for employment of youth who now leave the village to seek opportunity elsewhere. Collaborative research initiated by the community provided an extraordinary opportunity to understand what changes had gripped Haya villages over the last 40 years.

I returned in October 2009 with support from a Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad fellowship to launch oral tradition research. Village elders conducted the interviews, with digital recording transcribed by villagers, and the transcriptions (and video recordings) contributing to a permanent village archive.

Censuses conducted in two villages shed more light on the impact of HIV/AIDS, showing that the proportion of males to females over age 65 has declined significantly over the last thirty years. The 1978 Tanzania census shows .97 male to each female, while at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in 1988 this ratio had dropped to .54 to 1, an enormous change; today a ratio of .54 to 1 prevails



in Katuruka village. Thus, a disproportionate number of males in their forties and fifties died during the height of the epidemic. This demographic shift has severely interrupted the transmission of oral traditions. Where there was once encyclopedic knowledge held by some skilled keepers of history forty years ago, there is now only skeletal knowledge held by elders.

A second collaboration focused on development of a village museum and an interpretative tour conducted by youth trained in the oral traditions. The community constructed a *buchwankwanzi* house (photo), the spirit house in King Rugomora's burial estate built in the style of an *omushonge* house. *Buchwankwanzi* opened in June as a site museum, replete with archaeological exhibits of the excavations conducted on-site in 1970 as well as displays of iron working equipment and a photo exhibit of

iron smelting and forging.

Additional research shows a precipitous decline in fertility of village farms resulting from the sale of cattle for quick money upon the untimely deaths of parents and other family. This has removed manure as a key element in once prosperous Haya farming. Perhaps the most poignant index to change is the revitalization of spirit mediumship—the traditional Bacwezi cult—in the face of what is viewed as the failure of Christian churches to provide help during times of stress and affliction. For the first time since World War II, practitioners are emerging in both villages and suburban settings, with some providing reinvented “traditional” solutions to the stresses that infuse daily life.

Peter Schmidt is professor of anthropology and affiliate faculty with the Center for African Studies. He received funding for this project from a Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad fellowship.