

Hidden Histories – Tanga – Teacher notes – History focus

Hidden Histories is an oral history project in the coastal areas of Tanga, Tanzania. Developed over 11 years, the aim of the Hidden Histories team was to co-create a project with the villagers, who are mostly living with no legal tenancies, or first-generation residents from the Zigua, Bondei, Shambaa, Digo and Mbugu peoples, who work mostly as fishermen and on small farms. They documented their lives, thoughts, knowledge and skills.

In the Pitt Rivers Museum there is a collection of 550 figures that originated from the area, about 15 miles from where the team worked.



The objects in the museum are called mkaramo and are only about 12 cms high (less than half a ruler). They are made of a mixture of sand and unfired clay.

They were collected near Tanga in (now) Tanzania. It used to be called Tanganyika and then after independence from British colonial rule it joined with Zanzibar island to become Tanzania ("Tan" comes from Tanganyika and "Zan" from Zanzibar).





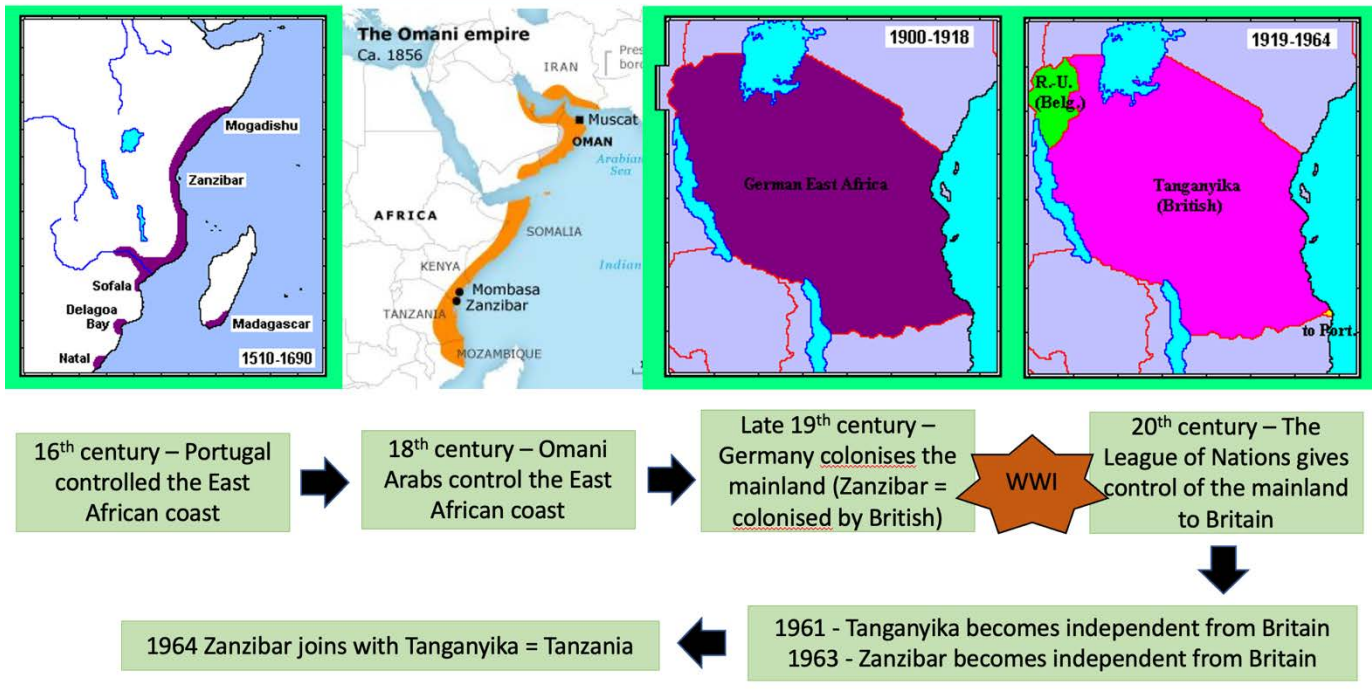
The location of Tanzania on the coast of East Africa.



Maps showing where the project took place.

The figures were 'acquired' in 1958 by the British colonial official Ralph E. S. Tanner.

What is now Tanzania (especially the coast) was part of many empires over time:



- The East African coast (where Tanzania is) has long been part of a bigger Indian Ocean system and so the area has had longstanding relationships with Arabia and South Asia. Also useful to know, is that Zanzibar and the mainland have an important relationship but they are not always under the same rulers.
- In the early 16th century, the Portuguese took control of much of the East African coast from the Arab traders who used to have power in the area. It was important to the Portuguese because it was along their route to Asia – they also wanted gold, ivory and enslaved people from the region.
- The Omani Empire competed for power in the Indian Ocean with the Portuguese and the British. Omani Arabs took power from the Portuguese on the East African coast by the end of the 17th century and settled especially in Zanzibar – eventually the Omani Empire split with one part in East Africa under one sultan and one part in Oman under another sultan.

- Germany as a rising power in Europe decided they needed their own colonies in Africa, like other European powers. In the late 19th century Bismarck started to establish a colony in mainland East Africa (causing conflict with the sultan in Zanzibar who claimed control of both the island and the mainland, but Bismarck used military threat to force the sultan to accept the German control of the mainland.) Britain also came to undermine the sultan's power in Zanzibar itself. Britain and Germany negotiated over which of them would control which parts of East Africa – Germany took what is now mainland Tanzania and Britain took Zanzibar island and what is now Kenya (the area to the north).
- When WWI broke out, German and British territories were side-by-side in Africa and so there was a theatre of war in East Africa, in which many East Africans fought on both sides. By 1916, Allied troops occupied most of German East Africa. After the war, the League of Nations gave German East Africa to Britain (and it was given the name 'Tanganyika').
- In the 1950s Julius Nyerere created the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), a political organisation that pushed for independence from Britain. At independence in 1961 Julius Nyerere became the leader of the country (and remained in power until 1985).



Tanzania, coast

Who knows how the mkaramo are used?

The makaramo figures were photographed in UK and the images then used to spark conversations in Tanga. It was hard finding people who knew anything about them: eventually three sisters and a daughter (who was a trained and reputable mganga- or healer) gave the team the most information.

There's a big difference between mganga (healer, or waganga- plural, healers) and uchawi (sorcery) in Tanzania, although they often tend to be muddled when they are discussed in the Global North.

Mganga are kind, using their power and training for positive ends to heal and cure.

Uchawi is sorcery and does not require training. It is used for harm and destruction, sometimes even killing people. Margareth Esther John and her aunts believe the makaramo are cursed Uchawi objects, and are objects used by witches to cause harm.



“They are clay figurines shaped however you want to form them,...then you send them with a specific purpose to the recipient, the enemy...If you send them to your enemy, you’ll scare them...it can literally scare you to death.” Hester Salehe

Hester Salehe looking at images of makaramo



“In this area, and internationally, I became famous for mafingo, which is where you remove unpleasant things from people’s bodies.

Mafingo enters your body at night, possesses you, and then causes aches and pains. I set my traps and I capture the mafingo, like a skilled fisherman with a net. I have the ability and skills, learned since I was a child, over many years. This makaramo figure is used to trap the mafingo and to get rid of them.” Margareth Esther John

Margareth Esther John

“I’m not afraid of the pictures of makaramo, they are just papers, decoration, not the real thing. If you showed me the real thing, yes, I would definitely be afraid.

If you encounter these makaramo in person, face-to-face I would be terrified that they have been invested with curses...once the designated person who has been cursed finds it (and they will find it, because that is part of the curse)...They can either become crazy or even in some cases die.”



Mwanamvua Salehe

What is assimilation? Discuss the meaning of the term.

Look at these definitions – do you agree with them – what did the person who wrote these definitions think about the process of assimilation?

- Cambridge dictionary: the process of becoming similar to others by taking in and using their customs and culture
- Britannica: the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture... taking on the traits of the dominant culture



Church service,
German East
Africa –1910s

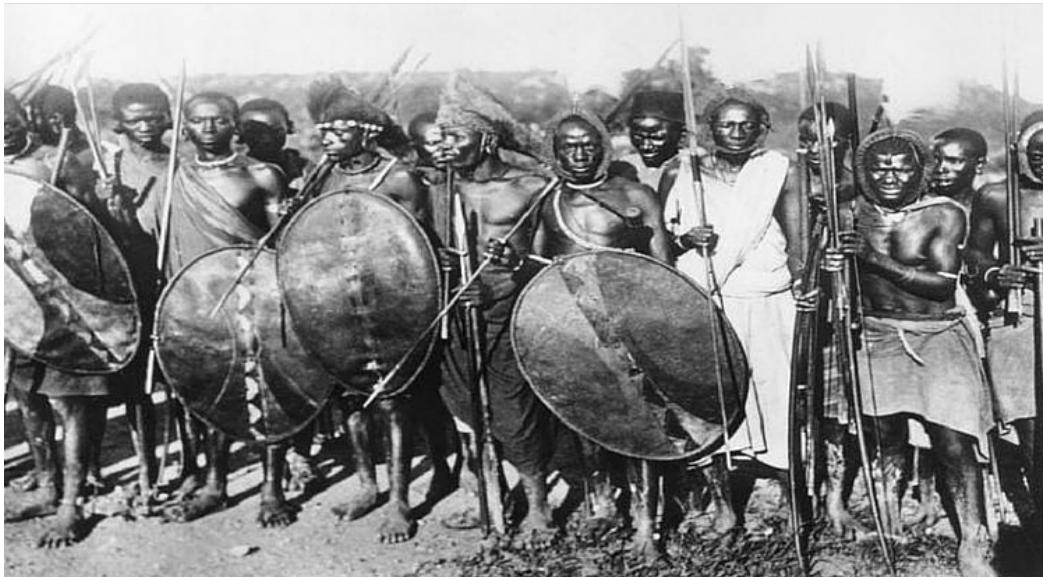
“I was born in Kenya to a Christian family ... I found information on Christianity and colonisation, about missionaries and the ways they ‘saved’ my ancestors (with Bibles, violence, subjugation and the intentional dismantling and/or demonisation of indigenous belief systems).”

- Mwende Katwiwa, poet and activist.

While some colonialists believed Africans should keep traditional beliefs and ways of living (although colonialists often distorted these even while purporting to ‘preserve’ them), other colonialists believed they needed to change African societies and in particular that they needed to make more Africans Christian. (Christianity of different forms had existed on the continent since the 1st century but it’s through colonisation that Christianity became the biggest religion in Africa).

Colonial 'subjects' were forced to assimilate: although in the coastal regions- including Tanga and Pangani there were over 140 rebellions. Colonists feared how spiritual leaders- who were often extremely well known and popular- organized and motivated people to rebel against, ignore or undermine colonial rules.

Controlling Africans' beliefs was seen as even more important after German East Africa was shaken by the Maji Maji Uprising of 1905-1907 which was led by a spiritual medium who (through spiritual practices) gave people more confidence to fight against the harsh German regime.



Warriors in Maji Maji Uprising of 1905-1907

Keen to avoid a similar uprising, when the British took over the area after WWI they quickly made a law (The Witchcraft Ordinance) restricting spiritual practices in Tanganyika. Colonial officials didn't distinguish very much between uchavi and mganga and so people could be punished for practicing either.

Many colonists were against traditional beliefs because they saw these as getting in the way of 'civilizing' people and so they tried to force them to assimilate.

Colonists also feared how spiritual leaders might organize and motivate people to fight against colonial rule, as had happened with the Maji Maji.



Sir Donald Cameron, British governor of Tanganyika (1925–1931) with Tanganyikans

“Donald Cameron personally took up the task of drafting ... a new ordinance that expanded the definition of ‘witchcraft.’ ... under this legislation, witchcraft included not only acts ‘with the intent to cause injury or misfortune’ but also so-called occult [supernatural/magic] knowledge and practices that were not intended to cause injury or misfortune. ... Reliance on the term ‘occult’ facilitated **the conflation of practices of uchavi and (some) practices of uganga**. People committed offenses when they called on objects and entities that were unrecognizable and unknowable for colonialists. The law had nothing to do with the assessments of the effects of such practices. It created a space for the category of ‘witchcraft’ by focusing on activities that could be examined by colonial officials. ”

- Stacey Langwick, anthropologist.



The Future:

Should these objects be in a British Museum?

Today many communities around the world are questioning whether their objects should be in UK museums. The Pitt Rivers welcomes discussions with communities around the future of the collections they hold. The interviewers asked people what they thought about the makaramo figures being in a UK museum and whether they should stay here. We're thinking about the future by looking at the past.

For the residents of Tanga, there are a range of opinions, no single story:

"These clay figures have great importance to the people of Tanga and Tanzania in general. When we look at them, that's when we start a conversation. That's how culture grows, as both sides, the Tanzanian and the visitor communicate and explain. I think this desire to learn, and to grow, helps both English and Tanzanian culture to grow."

Mywini Kombo

"All these things which have been made here, these are natural cultural things. And preserving one's natural culture and the concepts behind them is a good thing. It's also about acknowledging the talent and skills that went into making these things. So, if someone in the UK has decided to put this in a museum, they've recognised these handmade works are important...We Tanzanians need to be better at preserving the culture for our young people, who perhaps do not understand, or grasp their importance. This is vital. It is vital for us to learn and know about our culture and talents."

Mwinyi Kombo (a student saving to go to university)

"This one, someone would say I am seeing something with a big nose and big teeth, and it's frightening, ugly, horrible. It can literally scare you to death. It's called Saliti, it doesn't have arms or legs, and it's a form. When it enters your body, it can suck the blood out of you".

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