

**The
Makonde
— of Kenya**

The struggle to belong

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The Makonde

The Makonde are a Bantu speaking community who live on both sides of river Ruvuma which forms the border of Tanzania and Mozambique. The community originated from the Northern part of the Republic of Mozambique mainly from Mwendé district of Cabb Derogado province. A small group of Makonde migrated to Kenya in the early part of the twentieth century, and have remained ever since. The Kenyan Makonde are estimated to be 4000 people.

The community started streaming into Kenya as early as 1948. The Kenyan Makonde consists of descendants of exiled freedom fighters, refugees fleeing civil war, labourers who were recruited by the British during the colonial period to work in sisal farms and sugar plantations across Kenya's coastal province in Kwale, Kilifi and Taita Taveta.

The Makonde community lost their formal working jobs in the sisal firms and sugar plantations in the 1990s. During this time, there was an order by the government to the employers regarding employment of non-Kenyans. All employers were to

ensure that their foreign employees were registered with the government and had work permits. Given the high fees required for work permits vis a vis the remuneration, most companies opted to terminate their contracts with the foreign workers including Makonde community members.

After Kenya's independence, they were neither repatriated nor given Kenyan identification. However, they were given DC¹ cards five years after independence. These allowed them to work and pay taxes. This situation changed when there was a change in political regime. They were given alien cards thereby formally recognising them as foreigners. These cards were meant for identification especially when encountering the police.

Creation Myth

It is quite common to have creation myths across Traditional African Communities. They explain how the communities believed they came to existence.

According to the Makonde, the first Makonde settled along River Ruvuma. He was not fully human as he was unwashed and unshorn. The creature lived alone for a long time and became very lonely. He then carved a female figure from a piece of wood from a tree and placed it upright in the sun by his dwelling. The following day at sunrise, the figure came to life as a beautiful woman and hence became his wife. Together, the couple washed for the first time River Ruvuma².

They conceived and a child was born but it died three days later. The wife suggested that they move from the river to a higher place where reeds grow which they did and the wife conceived again. The child also lived for three days then died. She suggested that they move higher still to where thick bushes grow, which they did. She conceived again and this time the child survived. The couple had other children in the plateau over time. These children became the first ancestors of the Makonde. The name Makonde is coined from the ward 'Kondeni' which means wetlands besides the river.



2. John Stoner, Makonde (The Rosen Publishing Group, 1998)

Makonde Art

The creation myth explains the birth of the tradition of wood carving.³ It is a parable of the agony of creation and how the true artist must discard many of his works before he can achieve his aim.⁴ The wood carving was initially used during their cultural dance known as 'Kinyago', where 'Lipoko' a curving to cover all the face and upper parts of the body was used. They eventually ventured into wood curving as an economic activity due to high demands and their perfection in the art.

The Makonde have gained fame throughout the region and beyond for their beautiful and highly refined woodcarvings. The Makonde craftsmanship has been described as having no equal. The realism and life-like qualities and finely honed details in the statue and animal carvings are unparalleled; the artistic flair of the more abstract pieces is exquisite.⁵

Makonde art has been categorised as either modern or traditional Makonde sculptures. This is to distinguish between the two as the latter is used in rituals. Their masks are used in

initiation ceremonies.⁶ Their art reflects a woman's importance in their matrilineal society. The early carvings were solely based on the mother figure. Other themes came into Makonde artwork much later.⁷ Their sculptures have and are still being used as inspirations to create contemporary African art.⁸

Makonde art, though mainly made up of wood carving, may also include tattooing. Generally, men tattooed boys while the girls were tattooed by women. Tattoo and carving skills are usually learnt from parents or other family members and the tattoo artists are considered professionals.

The tattooing process usually requires three or more sessions in order to produce the desired result. The process is painful and some people (especially girls) lose the courage to complete the second and third sessions. The tattooing ritual was a sign of courage and belonging; an outward sign to show that one was Makonde. The older Makonde in Kenya have a few have markings on their faces something that is not present on the younger ones.

3 Jen Finke 'Traditional Music & Cultures of Kenya' < <http://www.bluegecko.org/kenya/tribes/makonde/> > accessed 29 August 2015

4 < <http://www.airwreck.com/life/articles/africa/makonde.htm> > accessed 29 August 2015

5 < <http://www.airwreck.com/life/articles/africa/makonde.htm> > accessed 29 August 2015

6 Professor Elias Jengo 'The Makonde Sculpture' < http://www.afrum.com/index.php?categ=art_cur&action=vypis&select=406 > accessed 28 August 2015

7 ibid

8 Jengo (n 6)

Challenges faced by the Makonde

The Makonde in Kenya lack documentation that recognizes them as citizens of Kenya. They do not identify as Mozambicans either. Majority of the Kenyan Makonde were born in Kenya.

Their lack of Kenyan citizenship denies them the right to Kenyan identification documents. This in itself poses a number of challenges. Those that engage in carving as a source of livelihood are exploited by middlemen.⁹ They have no freedom of movement and cannot receive government assistance. They cannot marry in civil or religious set-ups.¹⁰ They also cannot

access higher education, banking services, medical services or get an official burial due lack of death certificates. Security concerns in Kenya make it difficult to access offices without a government issued identification document. As a result, the Makonde are not able to participate in any economic or political¹¹ activity.

Though peaceful and hardworking farmers and sculptors, their resistance to give up their traditions and culture while living among other Kenyan communities has caused them to be being isolated and hitherto labelled as intolerant by their neighbours.¹²

Milestones

The Makonde are among the few communities that has held on to their roots and traditions. They have also successfully brought to the attention of the country and President Uhuru Kenyatta, their plight as stateless people.

The Makonde are a resilient community having endured life on the margins for more than half a century. Their fight for survival is a fact evident even from their creation myth.



Michael Lingondo, Makonde elder. He has been living in Kenya for the past 60 years.

9 'Alloys Musyoka,' Kenya: Hope for Stateless Makonde People as Fight for Recognition Bears Fruit' (the STAR, 8th April 2015) < <http://allafrica.com/stories/201504080389.html> > accessed 31 August 2015

10 Right to marriage is a basic human right as contained in Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.

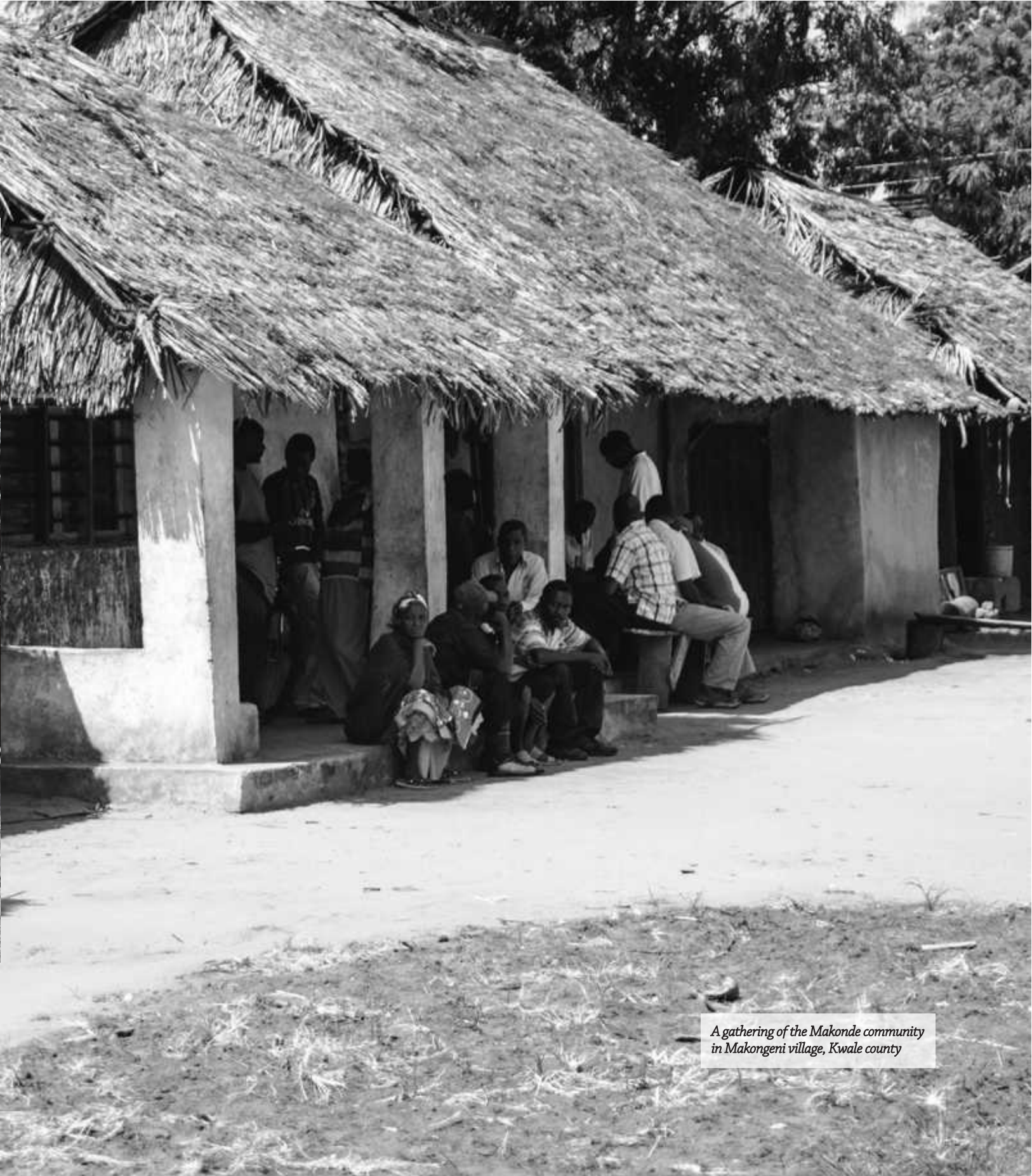
11 They cannot vote. As 'non-citizens', they are not eligible to vote in Kenya. Article 83(1) of the Kenyan Constitution provides that for one to qualify for registration as voter, among others, one should be an adult citizen.

12 'The Stateless Makonde Tribe of Kenya's Coast' (UNHCR Refugees Daily, 16 January 2014) < <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refdaily?pass=52fc6fdb58&id=52d77f125> > accessed 31st August 2015





*A typical Makonde house
found at the Coast.*



*A gathering of the Makonde community
in Makongeni village, Kwale county*



Children without documents are particularly vulnerable. Without identification documents, education and healthcare services are often out of reach. They face the risk of forced child labour and child trafficking. Without documents, stateless children cannot reach their full potential.



A Makonde child





Faces of Makonde children.





Makonde boys playing football. They hope to play for local, national and international clubs one day.



Makonde youth fetching water.



The Makonde continue to struggle, they fend for themselves through hand skills. They are often hired as casuals and paid minimal wage as they cannot negotiate for a better pay because they lack national documentation.





*Esther (left) holding her two nieces.
She is still hopeful for a brighter future.*



Makonde Youth are locked out of access to white collar jobs or the possibility to establish their own businesses.

Makonde art.









The Makonde carving are unique to their culture.



Makonde women gather to discuss the challenges and opportunities in their community.





Left: Men playing music instruments. Right: Women performing a traditional dance.



Young Makonde women with their children.



Young Makonde women performing a traditional dance in Makongeni village, Kwale county.



Makonde women weaving mats.



*A Makonde woman
preparing firewood
to cook.*





*Young Makonde girl
performing her daily chores.*



A Makonde grandmother and her granddaughter.



Amina Kassim Magoma was married to a Kenyan and separated from her husband. She cannot get some of her children from her husband due to lack of any documents therefore no form of protection exists for her and many other Makonde women at the Kenyan Coast.



Drums are the main musical instruments used by the Makonde people during their cultural festivities.



Thomas is an experienced Makonde drummer. He hopes to hand over his drumming skills to the young Makonde generation.



Lucas came to Kenya in 1952. He is stateless, lacking national Kenyan documentation. He is hopeful that he will be considered fully Kenyan.



The elders of the Makonde people often meet to discuss the challenges and opportunities that affect their community.



Mzee Severino De Meta (left) and his colleague came to Kenya in 1951. They lack Kenyan Identification cards.



Makonde men during their free time.



Thomas, one of the Makonde elders has been in Kenya for over 65 years. He is stateless.



Thomas Nguli (left) is the chairman of the Makonde community. He is a sculptor while his colleague weaves mats.



This is a Lipiko Mask. It is worn during the Makonde cultural festival.



Tailoring is one of the Makonde's income generating activity.



Young Thomas Nguli and family.



The Makonde both young and old watching a traditional dance





*Typical Makonde houses
at the coast of Kenya.*



Cultural initiation and rites of passage ceremonies among the Makonde involve community gatherings with plenty of music



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