

Tanzanian Ritual Perimetrics and African Landscapes: The Case of *Dracaena**

By Michael Sheridan

Whenever I encountered the dracaena plant when hiking through the forests of North Pare, Tanzania, my companions found it significant. “Ah, here we see an old homestead,” they would say, or “this must be an old grave.” This shrub, which has green sword-shaped leaves growing from central stalks, is ubiquitous in the social landscape of North Pare. It forms living fences between adjacent fields, it marks the borders of sacred groves and graves, and it symbolizes the “coolness” and peace that result from having the ancestors’ blessings in Pare.

I had long considered the social functions of dracaena in Pare to be examples of the arbitrary production of cultural meaning in a society’s physical environment. I was wrong. I had put my North Pare work aside in 2004 to review the literature on African sacred groves for a book I was editing.¹ I was looking for general themes, and so was quite surprised—astonished, really—when I found references to dracaena in West African sacred groves. It is a common genus throughout the tropics, so its presence in West Africa was no surprise, but the striking continuity of social significance in both East Africa and West cried out for explanation. This article is a preliminary attempt to make sense of the ethnobotanical fact that dracaena carries a complex cultural load in northeastern Tanzania and also in many societies across Africa. I argue that some symbolic systems, especially those relating to ecological, social, and metaphysical order, have affected land use systems in tropical Africa at a continent-wide spatial scale and a centuries-long temporal scale. Because people in northeastern Tanzania often evaluate and respond to changing land use patterns and institutions by reference to these webs of meaning, the symbolism and power of a particular plant provides a window on regional political ecology.

Symbolic Practice in the East African Regional System

Unraveling the meanings of dracaena in northeastern Tanzania requires attention to the social history of key symbols at various temporal and spatial scales. Matters of power, scale, and meaning have long framed scholars’ understanding of the dynamics of the

* This project would not have been possible without the skills and insight of my research assistants at the University of Vermont in 2005, and at Middlebury College in 2008. Celia Woods-Smith chased down dracaena leads no matter how obscure, Jaska Bradeen provided comprehensive translations and reviews of botanical accounts in French, and Torrey Crim investigated the significance of dracaena in the New World. The flow of this article was vastly improved by an anonymous reviewer’s insightful comments and helpful suggestions.

¹ Michael J. Sheridan and Celia Nyamweru, eds., *African Sacred Groves: Ecological Dynamics and Social Change* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007).

Tanzanian past and the dilemmas of its present. The precolonial economy of East Africa became a dominant topic in Tanzanian historiography after the end of colonial rule ushered in a period of intellectual re-assessment of old assumptions in the 1960s. The goal of the new generation of Africanist historians was an openly nationalistic program of countering the European and Swahili biases of earlier work, emphasizing Africans' agency in their own history, and illuminating the tangled contradictions of colonial rule.² This re-interpretation of Tanzania's past in terms of power took three major forms from 1964 to 1991. The first group comprised detailed, highly localized descriptions and analyses of the cultural history of particular ethnic groups.³ The authors in this group organized oral traditions into coherent narratives, but regional patterns served mainly as a background to local politics. The second cluster drew on Marxist economic theory to mount a radical critique of the political and economic changes introduced by colonization and capitalism.⁴ The major theme of this body of work is that capitalism invaded East Africa and transformed economic and political relationships in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These authors have argued that precolonial economic relationships were egalitarian exchanges rather than capitalistic, profit-seeking activities. The third set explored the implications of the "enlargement of scale" in social relations as the lives of relatively isolated groups of people became increasingly intertwined.⁵ This line of thought culminated in John Iliffe's synthesis of Tanganyikan history as a constantly changing regional dynamic of cultural, political, and economic processes.⁶ His even-handed analysis focuses on the expansion of scale within this dynamic, as Africans creatively responded to changing ecological, economic, and political constraints and opportunities.

More recent historical and anthropological studies of ecology and society in Tanzania have shifted away from cultural history and a largely materialist perspective toward a concern for localized political and cultural processes of environmental management and social organization. The work of Steven Feierman and James Giblin are good examples of this new approach to power and meaning because both show how African land use expresses culturally specific concepts of legitimate political authority. This new trend in Tanzanian historiography has reframed the debate by calling for case studies that show the intersection of agricultural history, political economy, and cultural processes. Exchange constitutes a major theme in this new work, but this is not limited to

² John Iliffe, *Tanganyika under German Rule, 1905–1912* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 6; Andrew Roberts, ed., *Tanzania before 1900* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968), v.

³ E.g., Isaria N. Kimambo, *A Political History of the Pare of Tanzania, c. 1500–1900* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969); Steven Feierman, *The Shambaa Kingdom* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974).

⁴ E.g., Isaria N. Kimambo, *Penetration and Protest in Tanzania: The Impact of the World Economy on the Pare, 1860–1960* (London: James Currey, 1991); Helge Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

⁵ Roberts, *Tanzania Before 1900*; Isaria N. Kimambo and Arnold Temu, eds., *A History of Tanzania* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969).

⁶ John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

material resources because people, ideas, and practices also moved through the regional network.⁷

The changing nature of this regional system—indeed, its very “systematicity”—lies at the center of the debate over ecological control in Tanzanian history.⁸ How and why did precolonial East Africans create specialized farming systems with intensive land use practices such as irrigation and terracing? Answers to this question are important for more than an accurate historical record; these practices also offer opportunities for today’s East Africans to transform their landscapes in ways that enhance sustainable livelihoods and ecological resilience. Although colonization surely brought tremendous economic, political, and ecological change, these transformations occurred alongside (and often through) indigenous processes. The social uses of dracaena represent an indigenous process that both shaped agrarian change in particular landscapes and linked East Africa into a regional cultural and ecological system, and which is still relevant today.

Symbols are a necessary aspect of East African agrarian history because production, exchange, and consumption are always mediated by systems of meaning. For example, the precolonial regional economy was a fluid set of overlapping, shifting economic networks embedded in equally fluid sets of ethno-linguistic groups that often had more to do with geography and mode of production than political identity.⁹ As is the case in other parts of Africa, the group identities now commonly glossed as “tribes” were flexible relationships in precolonial Tanganyika rather than taken-for-granted units.¹⁰ In Pare, an immigrant could adopt a new geo-economic identity by speaking Chasu, eating the iconic Pare food (*kishumba*, a stiff mixture of mashed beans and bananas), and living a farming lifestyle in the Pare highlands.

In this dynamic regional system of economics and symbols, rituals were important social institutions for creating, confirming, and demonstrating durable social

⁷ Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); James Giblin, *The Politics of Environmental Control in Northeastern Tanzania, 1840–1940* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); N. Thomas Håkansson, “Rulers and Rainmakers in Precolonial South Pare, Tanzania: Exchange and Ritual Experts in Political Centralization,” *Ethnology* 37 (1998), 263–83; Gregory Maddox, James Giblin, and Isaria N. Kimambo, eds., *Custodians of the Land: Ecology and Culture in the History of Tanzania* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995).

⁸ N. Thomas Håkansson and Mats Widgren, “Labour and Landscapes: The Political Economy of Landesque Capital in Nineteenth Century Tanganyika,” *Geografiska Annaler, Series B: Human Geography* 89 (2007), 233–48; Juhani Koponen, *People and Production in Late Precolonial Tanzania: History and Structures* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki Institute of Development Studies, 1988).

⁹ Thomas Spear and Richard Waller, eds., *Being Maasai: Ethnicity & Identity in East Africa* (London: James Currey, 1993).

¹⁰ Charles Ambler, *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Jean-Loup Amselle, *Mestizo Logics: Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Thomas Spear, “Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa,” *Journal of African History* 44 (2003), 3–27.

relationships.¹¹ For example, until the postcolonial government moved North Pare marketplaces to their current locations in the 1970s, the defining features of these markets were buried clay pots (*mahirimo*) laden with conditional magic that rewarded honest exchanges and punished deception. Cultural symbols became economic forces through ritual practice. Practices such as initiation ceremonies, bridewealth exchanges, and blood-brotherhood pacts were not side effects of material relationships; rather, these rituals were the “warp” that when woven with the “weft” of material exchanges (of both commodities and people) formed the regional economic tapestry.

Dracaena was (and in North Pare, still is) precisely this sort of critical symbol at the intersection of ritual practice and agrarian economics. This is why it is such a powerful symbol in the highlands of northeastern Tanzania. As a symbol of legitimate access and control, *dracaena* was part of the regional cultural “toolkit” with which East Africans negotiated the course of change over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although most of the specialized production systems in East Africa shifted into new configurations of land, labor, and capital over the twentieth century, some of the older symbols are still rooted—literally—in the East African landscape. Here I focus on the bundle of symbols associated with this particular plant.



Fig. 1. *Dracaena* marks a grave in a field of beans and maize in Usangi, North Pare, Tanzania. Photo by the author, June 2004.

¹¹ Michael J. Sheridan, “An Irrigation Intake Is Like a Uterus: Culture and Agriculture in Precolonial North Pare, Tanzania,” *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002), 79–92.

Dracaena and Ritual Perimetrics in North Pare

Although many tenorial matters in the North Pare highlands are now deeply ambiguous, so that landusers may be unsure if it is village governments, prominent politicians, or non-governmental institutions that have the strongest terms of control over “public lands,” the tenure of farm plots remains relatively secure within a patrilineal and patrilocal kinship system.¹² Of course, actual land use is far more flexible and complex than this normative framework, and the practice of farming in the North Pare highlands relies on a dense web of seasonal and long-term loans, gift exchanges, and legal disputes about plots in different agro-ecological zones. The abstractions of kinship and property do, however, take material form at the boundaries between kin group territories and where natural features (such as rivers, streams, and forests) or social features (such as public footpaths and roads) abut farm plots. On these boundaries, living hedges of dracaena plants (in Chasu, *masae*, in Kiswahili, *masale*) are recurrent features of the North Pare landscape. Farmers do not usually completely surround their plots with the plant, but rather place it on contested borders and corners in order to literally inscribe social arrangements into the landscape and therefore prevent tenorial conflict. It is a form of landesque capital that invests labor and symbolism in the landscape, thus reducing future costs and risks. North Pare residents also use it to mediate and resolve social conflict. Even in the most heated conflict, someone carrying a sprig of dracaena may not be attacked. In legal disputes, sending a leaf of dracaena to one’s rival requires them to listen to one’s argument without anger or resistance. It therefore marks and mediates boundaries in both the landscape and in North Pare society.

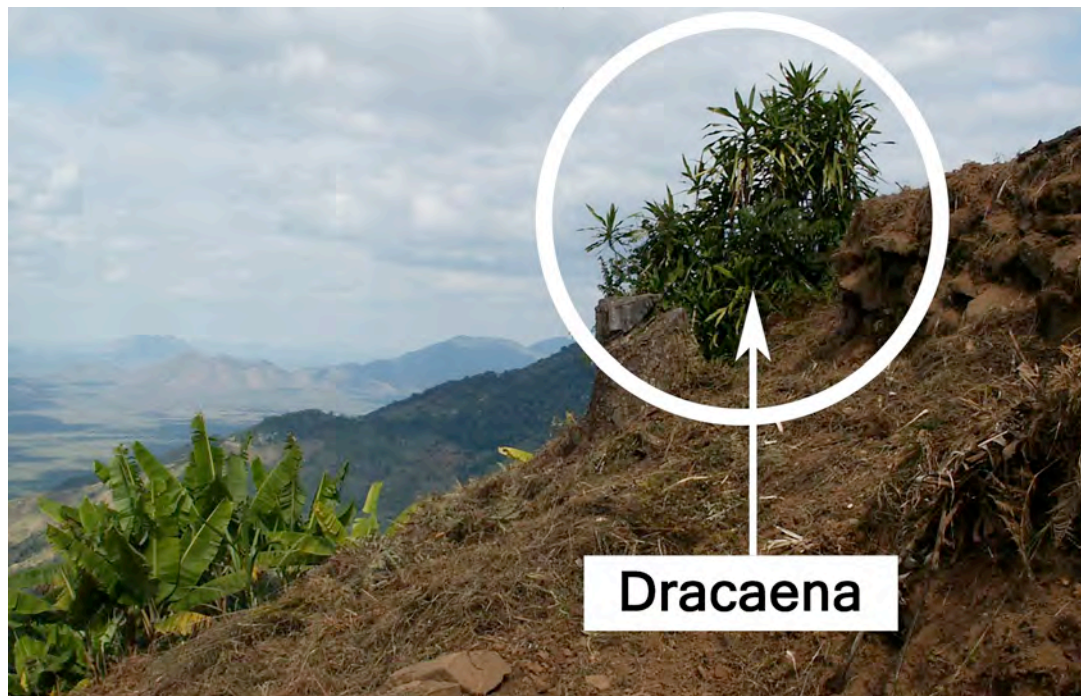


Fig. 2. Dracaena marks the corner of a field in Ndorwe village, Usangi, North Pare, Tanzania. The lowlands of Middle Pare and Kenya are visible in the background. Photo by the author, July 2004.

¹² Michael J. Sheridan, “The Environmental Consequences of Independence and Socialism in North Pare, Tanzania, 1961–88,” *Journal of African History* 45 (2004), 81–102.

Dracaena is a remarkably useful plant for marking land in the highlands of northeastern Tanzania. It takes root from cuttings, even in relatively dry soil, so many hedges start as live stakes. Goats do not find its leaves palatable. It requires little attention, pruning, or management (which has made the genus popular as decorative vegetation in American airports, hotels, and offices). This use of *dracaena* in North Pare is an example of what Glenn Stone has called *perimetrics*—the demarcation of agricultural boundaries and perimeters.¹³ Perimetrics are typically part of the process of agricultural intensification that leads farmers to invest more labor in their land in order to increase crop yields—but often at the cost of diminishing returns on the increased input of labor or capital. Intensification may be driven by market forces, population pressure, or social goals, and it generally takes material form in fertilizer use, terracing, irrigation, and plowing.¹⁴ As land becomes more valuable, more closely settled, and more full of these vestiges of human labor, the assertion and protection of boundaries becomes increasingly important in order to avoid (or defend against) land disputes.

Perimetrics emerge as extensive farming systems become intensive, and are therefore excellent archaeological and historical indicators of shifting agricultural dynamics. Stone distinguishes between “pure” and “latent” perimetrics.¹⁵ “Pure” perimetrics are landscape features created by people to serve as borders, while “latent” features (such as roads and riverbanks) serve as borders only as a secondary function. North Pare farmers rely on the “pure” perimetrics of *dracaena* (as well as those of barbed wire, sisal hedges, and eucalyptus rows) when engaged in land disputes.¹⁶ The records of the local court contain many examples of disputes in which a defendant had cut or moved someone’s *dracaena* boundary in order to gain additional crop area—even as little as a few centimeters’ worth of soil.

We cannot, however, simply read the extent of *dracaena* hedges in North Pare to determine where and when intensification occurred (as is possible with stone-lined terraces and irrigation systems) as a sort of ethnobotanical archaeology. As described below, the evidence for the linkages between *dracaena* and agrarian change come from the plant’s symbolic multivocality and the spread of its social functions across much of Africa.

¹³ Glenn D. Stone, “Agricultural Intensification and Perimetrics: Ethnoarchaeological Evidence from Nigeria,” *Current Anthropology* 35 (1994), 317–24.

¹⁴ Ester Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth* (Chicago: Aldine, 1965); Sheridan, “An Irrigation Intake”; Mary Tiffen, Michael Mortimore, and Francis Gichuki, *More People, Less Erosion: Environmental Recovery in Kenya* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 1994); B. L. Turner, Goran Hyden, and Robert Kates, eds, *Population Growth and Agricultural Change in Africa* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Stone, “Agricultural Intensification.”

¹⁶ *Dracaena* may also be used to assert claims in North Pare. In 1958, for example, a North Pare man insisted that he owned a particular *nyasutu* tree (*Albizia gummifera*), and planted a *dracaena* stalk at its base. A forestry officer responded that because the tree was on the list of reserved species, it was government property, and that the man had to remove his “mark of prevention.” Forestry officer, Usangi, to Mnjama Sefu Mbwana, 5 August 1958, 517/F3/106, Tanzania National Archives (hereafter TNA).

The people of North Pare also use dracaena to ritualize the perimetrics of common property resources. Until the 1970s, farmers usually left most of the trees and shrubs around springs untouched in order to protect the water from the sun. Springs should, in the North Pare eco-cosmological system, be well-shaded and dark with thick cloaks of vegetation, so that the sun cannot “force the water back down into the rocks.” Before plastic jerrycans became popular, no one could collect water with a sooty cooking pot. If a farmer tried to plant crops in such an area, they had to pay a fine (in beer). The responsible elders then planted some “black” sugar cane (one of three local cultivars of *Saccharum*) and dracaena around the spring’s perimeter. The means of protection made good ecological sense (vegetation removal can certainly contribute to changes in the aquifer), but they were also culturally logical. A symbolic dichotomy of hot and cool materials links these prohibitions and prescriptions. The “heat” of both soot and the sun threaten the “coolness” of water, so a water source must be kept unpolluted and dark. Both black sugar cane and dracaena are also symbolically related to “coolness” and the authority of ancestral spirits.



Fig. 3. Dracaena and a footpath mark the border of the Kwa Mbendi sacred grove, Usangi, North Pare, Tanzania. Photo by the author, June 2004.

Dracaena also figures prominently in the perimetics of sacred sites in North Pare. Over 600 sacred groves exist in North Pare, and comprise about 8 percent of the land in Mwanza District.¹⁷ These small forests are the locations for sacrificial rituals to kin group ancestors and initiation ceremonies. Each grove contains only indigenous trees, and is managed by the oldest man of a clan or lineage. He is responsible for sacrificing beer and meat in the grove to bring rain, fertility, and prosperity. Terms of management reduce to the simple dictum that no one may cut or remove any vegetation in a sacred grove—not even a single leaf. There are two sorts of sacred grove in North Pare. A *mpungi* is a small grove, usually smaller than a house, whereas a *mshitu* is a forest ranging from 1.2 to 4 hectares, and used primarily for initiation ceremonies. A typical *mpungi* is a clump of tall trees surrounded by fields of maize, beans, and bananas. It contains the skulls of all the men of a particular kin group, although skull installations ceased in the 1930s because of pressure from colonial administrators and missionaries. *Dracaena* still figures, however, on many grave sites in North Pare, particularly those of Muslims. A typical Muslim grave in North Pare is a rectangular concrete structure in the banana grove just downhill from a homestead—with *dracaena* at each of its corners.



Fig. 4. *Dracaena* adjacent to the grave of Chief Sabuni Naguvu, who governed Usangi, North Pare, 1925-1949. Photo by the author, July 2004.

A *mpungi* receives full sun, so its sides are thick walls of green leaves, vines, and especially *dracaena* plants. One of the tasks of the *mpungi* caretaker is to maintain this wall

¹⁷ Michael J. Sheridan, “The environmental and social history of African sacred groves: A Tanzanian case study,” *African Studies Review* 52 (forthcoming 2009).

of green, if necessary by planting trees and training their limbs. Although *mpungi* are essentially vegetation-covered graves that function as shrines, they are also prominent reminders of a kin group's legitimate land tenure—as marked by dracaena. The presence of both ancestors' skulls and dracaena demonstrates the length of a lineage's occupation of that land, and it is for this reason that some of the clans in Pare dispute the existence of other clans' *mpungi*. For example, one of the *mpungi* of a clan that settled in Pare relatively recently (*ca.* 1840) does not contain any dracaena specifically so that rival clans would not challenge its status as an *mpungi* and therefore call the clan's land rights into question.

In form, a *mshitu* forest looks like a *mpungi* on a larger scale. A wall of impenetrable green stands next to cultivated fields. Montane rainforest trees reach up to 40 meters high, and vines fill any gaps to create a closed canopy. All five of the *mshitu* in Usangi (the southern half of North Pare) stand on hilltops or knobs of a ridgeline, and from a distance they stand out as clumps of dark green with near-vertical sides. Most of these forests are encircled by a footpath that denotes the boundaries of the tabooed initiation site, and each has two entrances with “gates” of dracaena planted on each side.

The use of dracaena for such “ritual perimetrics” was innovatively expanded in the 1960s. The Mshitu wa Kena, the most sacred of Usangi's five initiation groves, lost approximately 25–40 percent of its area to encroaching farmers in the months surrounding Tanganyika's independence in 1961. To save the forest, both the colonial chief and TANU political party leaders walked the forest's reduced perimeter and marked a new border with dracaena.¹⁸

Ritual perimetrics also figured in recent efforts to conserve North Pare's forest resources. The German development organization GTZ (the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, implementing the Tropical Forestry Action Plan) measured its progress by the number of trees planted in North Pare, so it convened a conference of North Pare's sacred grove caretakers in 1996 in order to encourage the elders to plant more trees in their forests.¹⁹ The group of caretakers agreed to mark the borders of each sacred forest with dracaena and to plant ficus cuttings in the groves in order to “strengthen them.” Many dracaenas took root, but most of the ficus dried up because of their perimetric and tenorial implications. When a ficus cutting did take root and put forth leaves, the agency foresters would often soon find it inverted, with its leaves underground and dry roots in the air. GTZ believed that encroaching farmers were to blame, but it was the same elders who had planted them who had sabotaged the project. The elders told me that they inverted the ficus cuttings because they feared that these trees would become the property of GTZ, and would then become property of the Tanzanian government after the project was complete.

¹⁸ Sheridan, “The Environmental Consequences,” 89.

¹⁹ Abuhayan Fundi Semvua, “Mishitu and Mpungi: Report to TFAP-North Pare,” manuscript, TFAP-North Pare Project archives, Mwanza, Tanzania (1996); TFAP-North Pare, “Mpungo wa ulinzi, utunzaji, na uendelezaji mpungi na mishitu, Tarafa ya Usangi na Ugweno [Plan for protection, management, and expansion of mpungi and mshitu groves, Usangi and Ugweno Divisions]” (manuscript, TFAP-North Pare Project archives, Mwanza, Tanzania [1997]). Copies of both documents are in the author's possession.

Dracaena, on the other hand, is not on the list of “reserved tree species” that require an official permit to cut, and therefore safely indicative of only kin group tenure.

In North Pare, therefore, dracaena is not just a living fence that the goats will not eat. It is a multivocal symbol with associations of male ancestral authority and the moral order that brings prosperity. Some of my elderly female informants told me, for example, that dracaena leaves were once used to “cool” the vagina of a woman who had suffered a rape. They emphasized that this procedure was not to take advantage of the plant’s medicinal properties, but rather to placate the ancestors and restore the “coolness” that brings general fertility to land, livestock, and people. In its more typical uses as a marker of both mundane fields and symbolically saturated shrines, the plant mediates the perimeters of kin group territories, common property resources, and sacred sites—while it also mediates symbolic oppositions such as accessible/taboo, wet/dry, conflict/peace, and life/death. It is, in Ortner’s phrasing, a “key symbol” that condenses various meanings in North Pare, and its meanings hinge on the general themes of peace, order, and the legitimacy of boundaries.²⁰ However, this significance spans a larger geography and a longer history than the regional political and ecological history that now frames how dracaena affects land use patterns in the northeastern Tanzanian highlands. The power of this plant, and its multiple meanings, are only visible by comparing the social significance of dracaena across Africa.

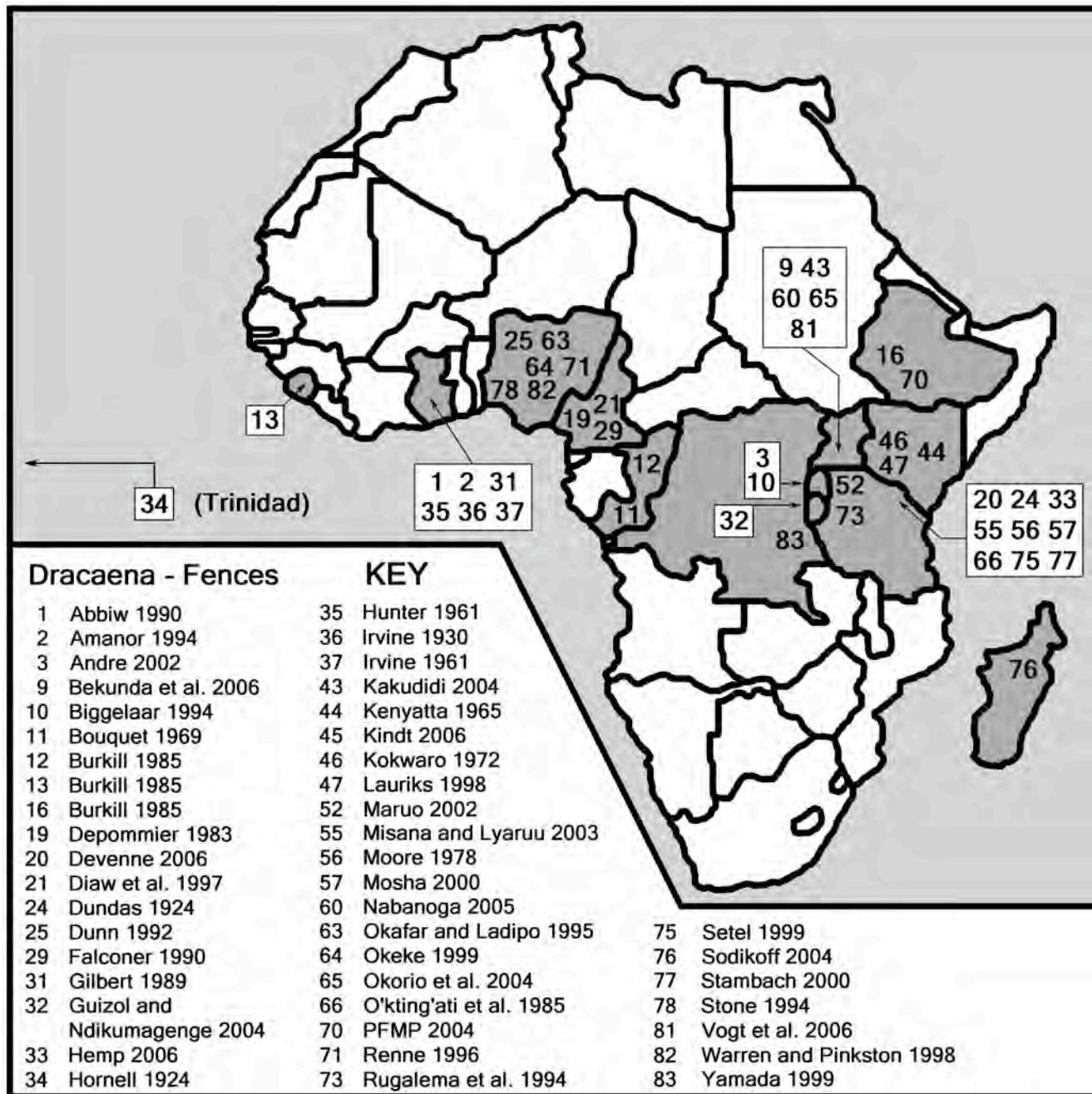
Africa’s Boundary Plant

Dracaena is significant in North Pare because it links local ecology, political economy, and moral economy. Dracaena serves the social functions of marking graves, sacred sites, and farm plots in many African societies. When I realized the striking continuities in the cultural values ascribed to this plant, I began to gather all the references to dracaena in Africa that I could find. I read ethnobotanical reports, farming systems research, and descriptions of sacred groves. Finding dracaena was like searching for a particular leaf in a forest. Many authors mention dracaena in passing, as an incidental fact in their description of another topic—such as noting that farmers make hedges from the species, or that it is found at gravesites. I organized the resulting bibliography on dracaena in Africa into three categories of social significance, and plotted the citations to check for regional patterns. Note that I excluded ethnomedical uses of wild dracaena²¹ and sources that mentioned the species without any social significance.²²

²⁰ Sherry Ortner, “On Key Symbols,” *American Anthropologist* 75 (1973), 1338–46.

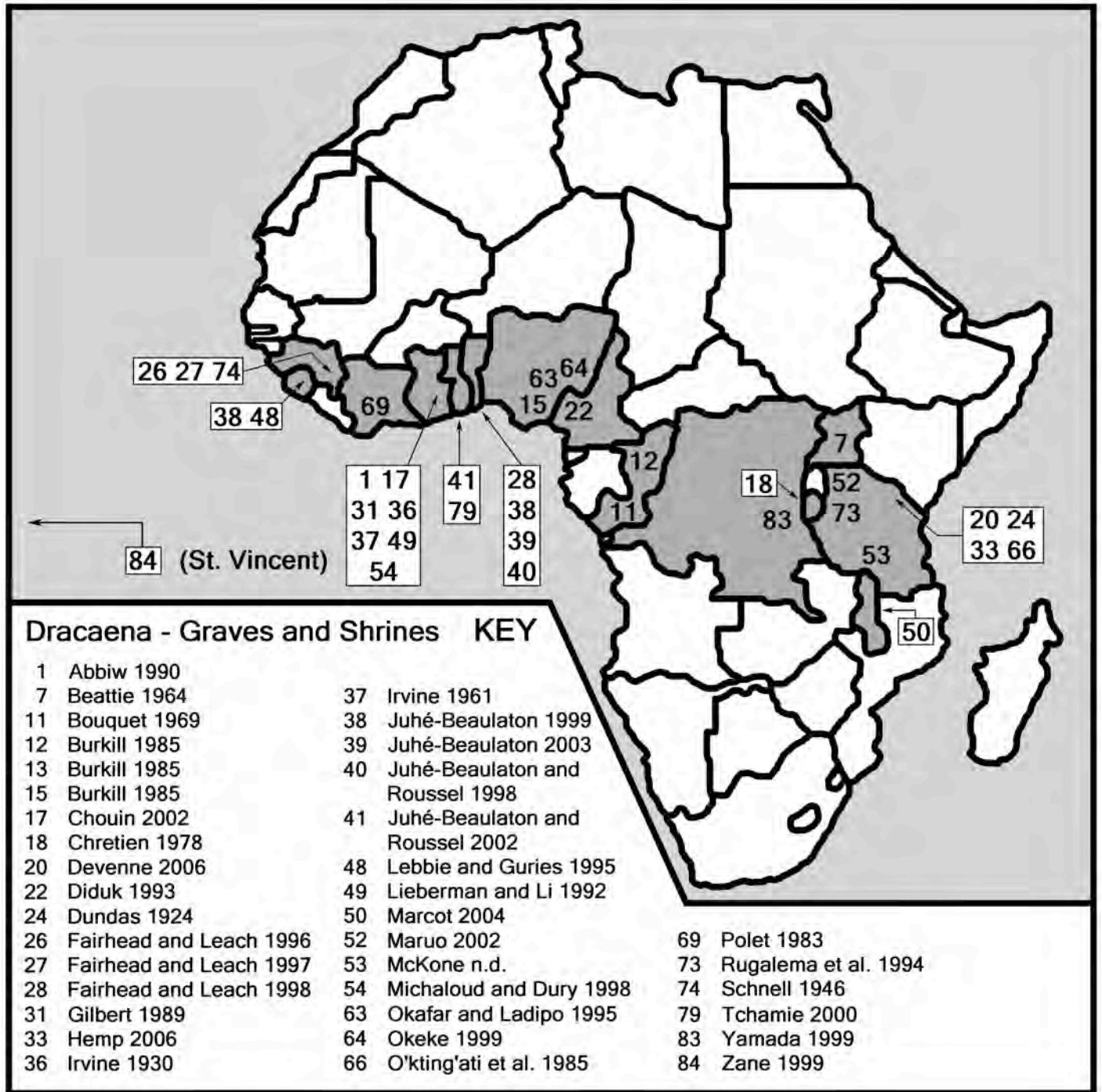
²¹ S. J. Boeke, I. R. Baumgart, J. J. A. van Loon, A. van Huis, M. Dicke, and D. K. Kossou, “Toxicity and Repellence of African Plants Traditionally Used for the Protection of Stored Cowpea against *Callosobruchus maculatus*,” *Journal of Stored Products Research* 40 (2004), 423; S. C. Chhabra, B. L. A. Mahunnah, and E. N. Mshiu, “Plants Used in Traditional Medicine in Eastern Tanzania, I: Pteridophytes and Angiosperms (*Acanthaceae* to *Canellaceae*),” *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 21 (1987), 253.

²² E.g., that it appears in a particular forest—D. R. MacDevette, D. K. MacDevette, I. G. Gordon, and R. Bartholomew, “Floristics of the Natal Indigenous Forests,” in C. J. Geldenhuys, ed., *Biogeography of the Mixed Evergreen Forests of Southern Africa* (Pretoria, South Africa: Foundation for Research Development, 1989), or that children eat the fruit of dracaena in Ethiopia—G. Addis, K. Urga, and D. Dikasso,

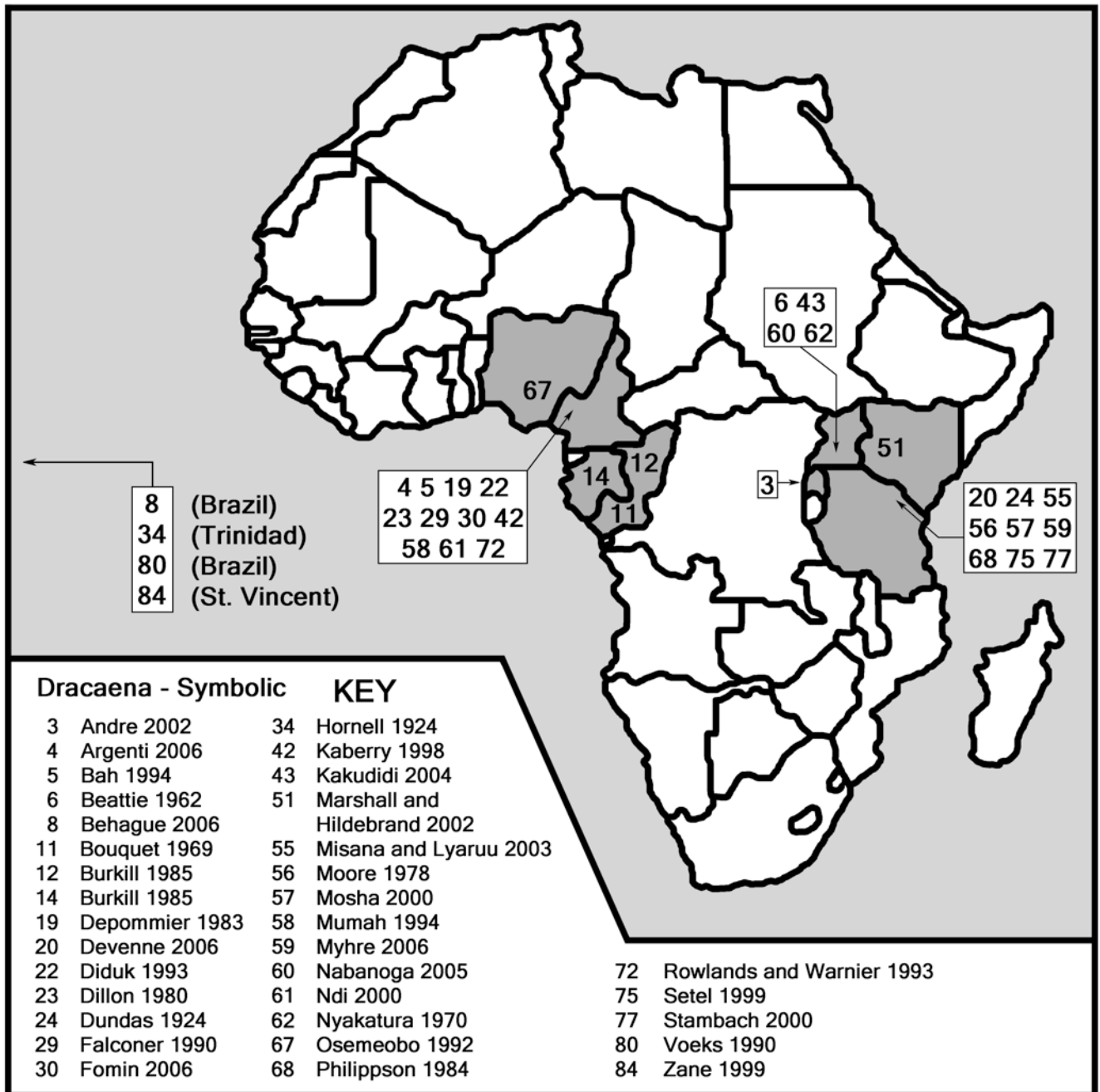


Map 1. *Dracaena*'s uses as fences and boundary markers in Africa and the African diaspora. Numbers correspond to the numbered references in this article's bibliography. Placement of the numbers, and boxes and arrows, roughly corresponds to the locations specified in the literature surveyed. Some of the references are more clustered than they appear on the map. In particular, the numbers for Nigeria and Cameroon are clustered in southeastern Nigeria and western Cameroon. Please note that multiple references by the same author(s) are publications based on the same research at the same sites. These maps are therefore only rough guides to the geographic spread of socially significant dracaena.

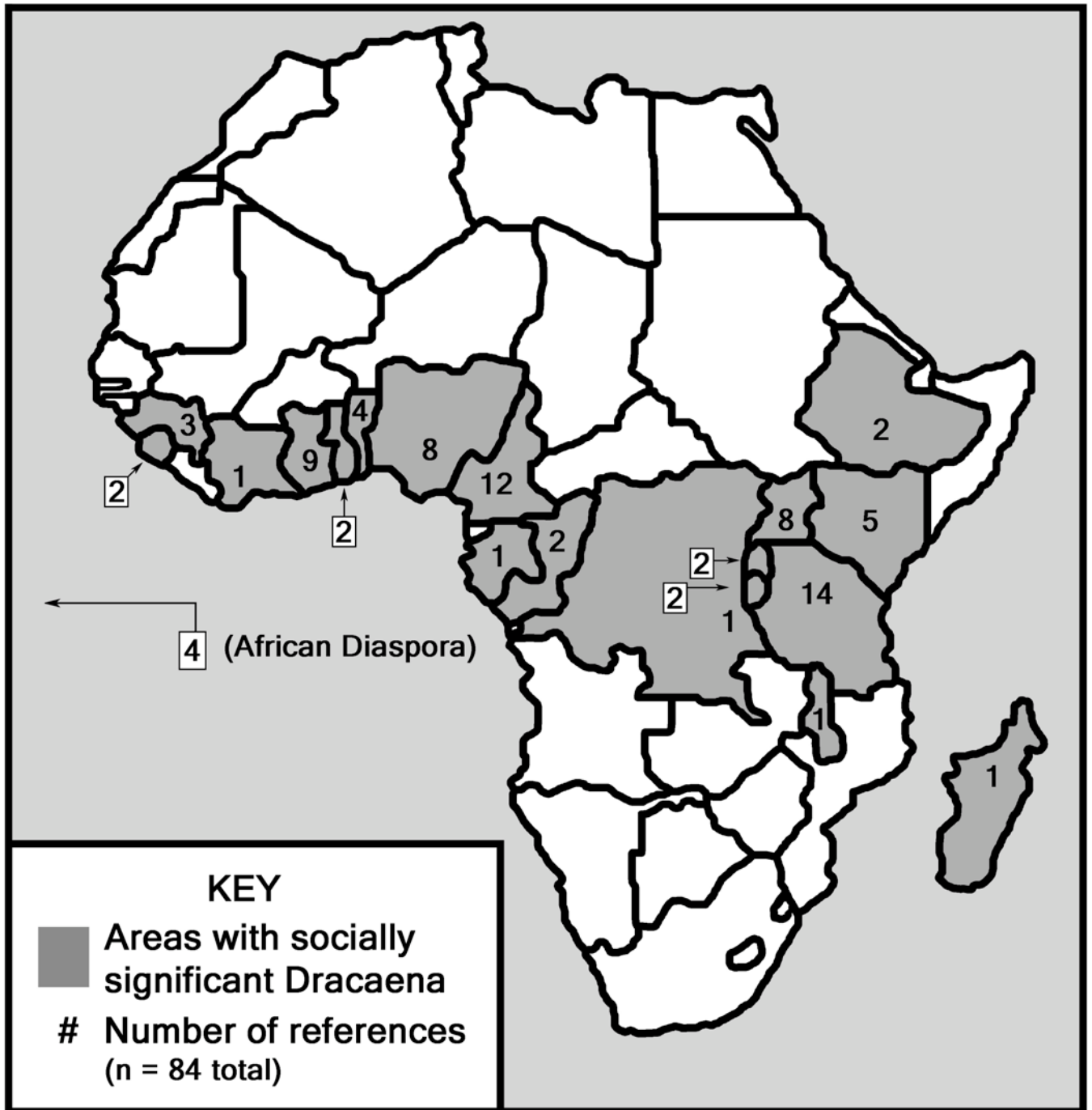
"Ethnobotanical Study of Edible Wild Plants in Some Selected Districts of Ethiopia," *Human Ecology* 33 (2005), 83-118.



Map 2. *Dracaena's* uses as grave and shrine markers in Africa and the African diaspora. Numbers and placement follow from Map 1.



Map 3. *Dracaena*'s uses for various symbolic purposes in Africa and the African diaspora. Numbers and placement follow from Maps 1 and 2.



Map 4. *Dracaena*'s social significance in Africa. The dark shaded area represents countries featured in Maps 1, 2, and 3, and the numbers indicate how many references occur in each country. Note that there is significant clustering in these areas, so that most of Tanzania's references are only for the Kilimanjaro cluster, and the one reference for Congo-DRC does not indicate that *Dracaena* is significant throughout the country.

Map 1 shows the broad distribution of dracaena as fencing and boundary marker throughout tropical Africa.²³ In East Africa, this is usually *Dracaena steudneri* or *D. usambarensis*, while in much of West Africa, *D. reflexa* and *D. arborea* fill this role.²⁴ Not all of these references are for mundane fencing; in Burundi, for example, dracaena marks the boundaries of nineteenth-century royal compounds, but farmers use thorny *Caesalpinia decapetala* shrubs for fencing.²⁵ Map 2 shows the usage of dracaena to mark graves, shrines, and sacred sites. These markers are part of the ecological process of sacred grove formation. In the forests of eastern Congo-DRC, for example, Nyindu farmers assume that any dracaena they encounter marks an old graveyard, and so they avoid farming there.²⁶ Such taboo areas can therefore experience a growth cycle from a single plant to a socially defined sacred grove.²⁷ Map 3 shows the distribution of various meanings of dracaena. These include representing ancestors in ritual practices, featuring in exchange rituals such as marriage, conferring protection from various threats, and connoting fertility and the social significance of twins. In practice, of course, many of these meanings overlap. In northwestern Rwanda, for example, Catherine André reports that dracaena both marks fields and is a necessary part of the legal ritual for transferring land.²⁸ As is often the case in African land use, the material world is symbolic and symbols have material effects.²⁹ Some of the references I used therefore appear on more than one map. Map 4 summarizes these patterns.

It is clear that there are two clusters of dracaena use in the literature on tropical Africa, showing its social lives in the West African forest-savanna belt and in the East African highlands. The rather striking gap in Congo-DRC, the Central African Republic, and southern Sudan may represent a lack of scholarship in these areas and my

²³ Nation-states are, of course, an arbitrary frame of reference for this study. The mapping of dracaena in entire nation-states does not indicate the universal use of dracaena in those areas.

²⁴ Jan Bos, *Dracaena in West Africa* (Wageningen: Agricultural University Wageningen, 1984); H. M. Burkill, *The Useful Plants of West Tropical Africa*, 2e (Kew: Royal Botanic Gardens, 1985); J. M. Dalziel, *The Useful Plants of West Tropical Africa* (London: Crown Agents, 1937).

²⁵ Philippe Guizol and Cleto Ndikumagenge, "Forest Dynamics: The Case of Burundi: Images, Views, Farmer Innovations and Forestry Policies," in Didier Babin, ed., *Beyond Tropical Deforestation: From Tropical Deforestation to Forest Cover Dynamics and Forest Development* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2004), 157–76.

²⁶ Takako Yamada, "A Report on the Ethnobotany of the Nyindu in the Eastern Part of the Former Zaire," *African Study Monographs* 20 (1999), 1–72.

²⁷ G. Michaloud and S. Dury, "Sacred Trees, Groves, Landscapes and Related Cultural Situations May Contribute to Conservation and Management in Africa," in P.S. Ramakrishnan, K.G. Saxena, and U.M. Chandrashekhara, eds., *Conserving the Sacred for Biodiversity Management* (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing, 1998), 129–43; Michael J. Sheridan, "The Dynamics of African Sacred Groves: Ecological, Social, and Symbolic Processes," in *African Sacred Groves*, 9–41.

²⁸ Catherine André, "Custom, Contracts, and Cadastres in North-West Rwanda," *European Journal of Development Research* 14 (2002), 153–72.

²⁹ Parker Shipton, "Land and Culture in Tropical Africa: Soils, Symbols, and the Metaphysics of the Mundane," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994), 347–77.

unfamiliarity with the francophone botanical literature. The literature on dracaena, scattered as it is among various disciplines, contains many intriguing parallels. In both Tanzania and Cameroon, for example, dracaena appears as both peace symbol and boundary marker.³⁰ A similar discourse of moral-ecological order appears in both North Pare and the Bum area of Cameroon, where rituals with dracaena leaves ensure that “the country becomes cold, no sickness enters ... the country is cold, cool, at peace.”³¹ Perhaps most fascinating is the possibility that some of the social significance of dracaena in Africa has followed the African diaspora to the Americas. In both Trinidad and Cameroon, dracaena has served as both a boundary fence and as protection from lightning.³² In northern Brazil, ritual specialists use imported dracaena from West Africa as symbols of purification for both people and musical instruments.³³ Finally, on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, Afrocentric religious sects plant dracaena on graves.³⁴ In sum, therefore, dracaena does not have a single set of meanings across tropical Africa, and is rather a set of shreds and patches of meaning with many divergent localized manifestations. There does seem to be, however, a general cultural model at work here that concerns boundary maintenance.

³⁰ Thierno Mouctar Bah, “Traditional Peacemakers,” *UNESCO Sources* 62 (1994); D. Depommier, “Aspects de la Foresterie Villageoise dans l’Ouest et le Nord (Cameroun)” (report for the Institut de Recherche Agronomique and Centre Tropicale Forestier Technique, Yaoundé, Cameroun, 1983); Richard G. Dillon, “Violent Conflict in Meta’ Society,” *American Ethnologist* 7 (1980), 658–73; Julia Falconer, “The Major Significance of ‘Minor’ Forest Products: The Local Use and Value of Forests in the West African Humid Forest Zone,” in *Community Forestry Note* 6 (Rome: FAO, 1990); Sally Falk Moore, “Old Age in a Life-Term Social Arena: Some Chagga of Kilimanjaro in 1974,” in Barbara Meyerhoff and Andrei Simic, eds., *Life’s Career-Aging: Cultural Variations on Growing Old* (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications, 1978), 23–76; R. Sambuli Mosha, *The Heartbeat of Indigenous Africa: A Study of the Chagga Educational System* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000); Mary M. Mumah, “Sacred Sites in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon: A Study of Sacred Sites in the Nso Fondom,” in David Carmichael, Jane Hubert, Brian Reeves, and Audhild Schanche, eds., *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places* (London: Routledge, 1994), 98–114. Michael Rowlands and Jean-Pierre Warnier, “The Magical Production of Iron in the Cameroon Grassfields,” in Thurston Shaw, Paul Sinclair, Bassey Andeh, and Alex Okpoko, eds., *The Archaeology of Africa: Food, Metals, and Towns* (London: Routledge, 1993), 512–50.

³¹ Phyllis Kaberry, “Kingdom of Bum” [ethnographic fieldnotes from 12 April 1963], electronic document (1998). http://www.era.anthropology.ac.uk/Era_Resources/Era/Kingdom_Bum/

³² James Hornell, “The Evil Eye and Related Beliefs in Trinidad,” *Folklore* 35 (1924), 270–75; Kaberry, “Kingdom of Bum.”

³³ Gerard Behague, “Regional and National Trends in Afro-Brazilian Religious Musics: A Case of Cultural Pluralism,” *Latin American Music Review* 27 (2006), 91–103; Robert Voeks, “Sacred Leaves of Brazilian Candomble,” *Geographical Review* 80 (1990), 118–31.

³⁴ Wallace W. Zane, *Journeys to the Spiritual Lands: The Natural History of a West Indian Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 48. In 2008 I visited the adjacent Caribbean island of St. Lucia to learn more about boundary plants in the African diaspora, and plan to publish my findings elsewhere.

Dracaena, Frontier Societies, and Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa

How are we to make sense of this remarkable pattern in Africa's cultural biogeography? It is clearly not the case that dracaena simply holds similar meanings across a swath of tropical Africa. In some societies, the plant is a pragmatic and convenient living fence (e.g., the Krobo of Ghana³⁵). In others, it is a complex key symbol with meanings in cultural domains such as agriculture, religion, and kinship (e.g., the Kedjom of Cameroon and the Chagga of Tanzania³⁶). I hypothesize that the distribution of the social values of dracaena in tropical Africa is based on its role in the deep past of African history and its continuing relevance throughout successive waves of agrarian change.

A theoretical model of African cultural history that can account for some of the striking continuities and similarities in the social life of dracaena in Africa is the "internal African frontier" hypothesis of Igor Kopytoff. Kopytoff suggests that Africa's precolonial status as a relatively underpopulated continent made labor the scarce factor of production rather than land (as was the case in Eurasia). African societies therefore devised complex ways to organize rights in people.³⁷ Many of these strategies for structuring social labor took form in gender hierarchies, ethnic group occupational specializations, and rituals of incorporation. These processes took place alongside a long-term demographic expansion that resulted from the advent of domesticated crops and livestock in sub-Saharan Africa. The composite model posits the following growth cycle of African societies on the moving frontier of demographic expansion. People move away from a "core" society due to various pressures or opportunities (demographic, economic, and political), and relocate on its periphery. With an institutional vacuum in this frontier area, the migrants build a new society using a toolkit of older cultural and ideological materials. After creating methods for attracting new settlers and incorporating them into the new community, higher status groups respond to demographic growth by shifting social organization from a focus on kin group solidarity to the more organic solidarity of rulers and subjects. Some people inevitably leave this newly mature society (again, for various reasons), and the process begins over again, with minor structural variations.

According to Kopytoff, this model helps to explain the "ceaseless flux" of African cultural features, such as patterns of gender and age hierarchies, the widespread use of rites of passage to reinforce social roles, the use of sacrificial shrines to mark political

³⁵ Kojo Amanor, *The New Frontier: Farmers' Response to Land Degradation, a West African Study* (Geneva and London: UNRISD and Zed Books, 1994), 59.

³⁶ For Cameroon, see S. Diduk, "Twins, Ancestors, and Socio-Economic Change in Kedjom Society," *Man*, n.s., 28 (1993), 551–71; for Tanzania, Moore, "Old Age."

³⁷ Igor Kopytoff, "The Internal African Frontier: The Making of African Political Culture," in Igor Kopytoff, ed., *The African Frontier* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3–85. The notion of wealth in people, and particularly wealth in relationships, is a useful tool for linking historical demography and social history. For examples, see John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Jane Guyer, and Samuel E. Belinga, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa," *Journal of African History* 36 (1995), 91–120.

territories, and the ongoing preoccupation with autochthony.³⁸ This vision of African societies as unfolding historical processes leads us to conceptualize the African past as dynamic patterns at different scales in time and space; “instead of being a patchwork of classic tribes, it was through the centuries more like a shimmering beadwork of repetitive patterns—hamlets, small and large chieftaincies, kingdoms, and empires—each of which was in constant structural motion as it changed its shape from one pattern to another.”³⁹ Colonial rule changed these dynamics, but did not replace them.

Ritual perimetrics, as expressed in plants such as dracaena, were an important mechanism for creating societies on the demographic and ecological frontier, and this helps us to appreciate the distribution of the social functions of dracaena, and in African societies with quite different characteristics. The social significance of the plant does not follow the analytical dichotomies that characterize African social history, such as extensive/intensive agriculture, hierarchical/decentralized politics, and high/low population density. Rather, the geographic distribution of the social life of dracaena suggests that it has mediated and been the idiom of many such transformations in African agrarian history. In indicating physical and metaphysical boundaries, it may also indicate the thresholds of social change.

Throughout West Africa, planting trees (especially *Dracaena arborea*, *Milicia excelsa*, and *Ficus* spp.) is often the founding act of village settlement. These vegetation clusters become focal points for social practices ranging from initiation ceremonies to land tenure institutions.⁴⁰ The resulting thickets become small forests, and often become sacrificial shrines where political leaders legitimize their authority by reference to the founding act of local society.⁴¹ Dracaena marks the graves of political elites in both Burundi and Cameroon.⁴² In Ivory Coast and Guinea archaeologists can rely on dracaena to show them where to excavate ancient burial sites and settlements.⁴³ These examples show that dracaena has been embedded in particular and quite divergent local histories of

³⁸ Kopytoff, “The Internal African Frontier,” 7; Bambi Ceuppens and Peter Geschiere, “Autochthony: Local or Global? New Modes in the Struggle over Citizenship and Belonging in Africa and Europe,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005), 385–407.

³⁹ Kopytoff, “The Internal African Frontier,” 77.

⁴⁰ Dominique Juhé-Beaulaton, “Arbres et Bois Sacrés: Lieux de Mémoire de l’ancienne Côte des Esclaves,” in Jean-Pierre Chrétien and Jean-Louis Triaud, eds., *Histoire d’Afrique. Enjeux de Mémoire* (Paris, Karthala: 1999), 101–118, Dominique Juhé-Beaulaton and Bernard Roussel, “Les Sites Religieux Vodou: Des Patrimoines en Permanente Évolution,” in Marie-Christine Cormier-Salem, Dominique Juhé-Beaulaton, Jean Boutrais, and Bernard Roussel, eds., *Patrimonialiser la Nature Tropicale: Dynamiques Locales, Enjeux Internationaux* (Paris: IRD Editions, 2002), 415–38, Michaloud and Dury, “Sacred Trees.”

⁴¹ Monica Wilson, *Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 70.

⁴² For Burundi, see Jean-Pierre Chrétien, “Les Arbres et les Rois, Sites Historiques du Burundi,” *Culture et Société: Revue de Civilisation Burundaise* 1 (1978), 35–47. For Cameroon, see Diduk, “Twins.”

⁴³ Jean Polet, “Localisation d’une Necropole du Deuxieme Millenaire Ere en Zone Lagunaire de Basse Cote d’Ivoire Grace à un Indicateur Vegetal: *Dracaena arborea* L.,” *Revue d’Archeometrie* 7 (1983), 1–10 ; R. Schnell, “Sur Quelques Plantes à Usages Religieux de la Région Forestière d’Afrique Occidentale,” *Journal de la Société Africaniste* 16 (1946), 29–37.

migration, settlement, demographic growth, and institution-building, yet as a regional phenomenon the social uses of the plant demonstrate a rhythm in history. *Dracaena* was part of the “shimmering beadwork” of institutional dynamics on the African frontier, and is therefore woven into much of Africa’s social fabric today.⁴⁴ Some support for this argument may be found in Christopher Ehret’s historical linguistic reconstruction of social patterns in Africa’s “Classical Age” (1000 BC—AD 400). The term “*saale,” meaning “thorn fence,” appears as part of the language of what he calls the Kaskazi peoples.⁴⁵ The continuity is apparent in the Chasu, Chagga, and Kiswahili terms for *dracaena* in Tanzania—respectively, *isae/masae*, *isale/masale*, and *sale/masale*.⁴⁶

I envision the interaction of *dracaena* with African frontier societies as following an incremental process. Emigrants establish a new settlement and use *dracaena* to mark a shrine symbolizing both legitimate land tenure and the primacy of a particular kin group (or kin group segment). When the first generation of settlers dies, *dracaena* marks their graves. I am not suggesting that these frontier societies necessarily physically carried the plant from an older settlement, but that they may have found a familiar plant in their new environment and put it to use. This explains the use of *Dracaena reflexa* and *D. arborea* throughout West Africa, and the appearance of the slightly different *D. usambarensis* and *D. steudneri* in much of East Africa. Gravesites became shrines and the protected vegetation grew into sacred groves. At the same time, demographic and/or economic growth increases the likelihood of land disputes, and perimetrics become important. Because *dracaena* already marks the cognitive boundaries of political legitimacy and kin group solidarity, these meanings make it a likely candidate for marking physical boundaries of farm plots (which may also relate to patterns of patrilineal land tenure⁴⁷).

⁴⁴ I am not suggesting that these social values of *dracaena* simply correspond to the so-called “Bantu expansion” in Africa’s Iron Age. This was not one wave-like migration of people, rather, it was a complex dynamic of shifting populations, languages, and lifestyles (see Jan Vansina, “New Linguistic Evidence and ‘The Bantu Expansion,’” *The Journal of African History* 36 (1995), 173–95). Nor should *dracaena* be considered a characteristic of Bantu-language-speaking societies. Societies that do not speak Bantu languages use *dracaena* for fencing, such as in Nigeria (see Stone, “Agricultural Intensification”). In western Kenya, some Okiek foragers (a non-Bantu group) are now shifting toward an agricultural lifestyle (see Fiona Marshall and Elisabeth Hildebrand, “Cattle before Crops: The Beginnings of Food Production in Africa,” *Journal of World Prehistory* 16 (2002), 99–143). Those that farm are also adopting *dracaena* from neighboring groups for use in their initiation and marriage ceremonies.

⁴⁵ Christopher Ehret, *An African Classical Age* (Charlottesville and Oxford: University Press of Virginia and James Currey, 1998), 59.

⁴⁶ Clearly, there is much potential for further historical linguistic research on this topic. Other names for *dracaena* include *peregun* (Nigeria), *igitongati* (Burundi), *nkoeng* or *nkung* (Cameroon), *buna* (Ghana), and *ofito* (Kenya).

⁴⁷ There are eighty-four references in my data set on *dracaena* in Africa, and for the thirty-three citations that contained enough social data for me to correlate *dracaena* use with kinship-property systems, most are from patrilineal societies. The matrilineal exceptions are in Ghana. See Michelle Gilbert, “Sources of Power in Akuropon-Akuapem: Ambiguity in Classification,” in William Arens and Ivan Karp, eds., *Creativity of Power: Cosmology and Action in African Societies* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 59–90; John M. Hunter, “Akotukrom: A Case Study of a Devastated Cocoa Village in Ghana,”

This symbolic shift from ritualized social boundaries to “pure” perimetrics thus creates mundane agricultural structures (fences) with important metaphysical superstructures. The symbolic capital of a meaningful institution (such as the significance of a rain shrine marked with dracaena) can, in this way, be converted into landesque capital that “banks” labor in the landscape by manipulating symbols.⁴⁸ As demographic growth, political dynamics, and opportunities push and pull people to a new frontier, the process begins anew with dracaena as part of the flexible cultural model and institutional mosaic that accompanies territorialization. This model suggests that dracaena mediates the tension between intensive and extensive agricultural systems in Africa, and is therefore one of the “feedback loops” that informs the course of agricultural intensification by allowing landusers to invest meaning in the landscape in order to reduce or prevent disputes.⁴⁹ This is not to say that dracaena is the only plant species with these characteristics (in Ivory Coast, for example, the kapok tree [*Ceiba pentandra*] also follows similar patterns⁵⁰), but the cultural biogeography of dracaena across sub-Saharan Africa shows that this plant is a particularly important focal point for the perimetrics of agrarian change. Clearly, this is a topic that requires further research.

By exploring the spatial scale of dracaena, and by inferring the temporal scale of its significance, this analysis demonstrates how the East African dynamics of land use unfold within the webs of power and meaning that had been woven in quite different times and places. This is not to say that the multivocal symbolism of dracaena in tropical Africa has determined the specific course of land use history in North Pare or elsewhere. Clearly regional analyses that investigate Africa’s articulation with the capitalist world-system are

Transactions and Papers of the Institute of British Geographers 29 (1961), 161–86). This pattern suggests that comparative work on the symbols of African landholding is likely to reveal gendered structures. Further study may reveal if the social significance of dracaena corresponds to the distribution of kinship systems in sub-Saharan Africa. For an analysis of land tenure processes from the perspective of cognitive schema and symbolic systems, see Ellen Oxfeld, “The Man Who Sold the Collective’s Land: Understanding New Economic Regimes in Guangdong,” *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology* 2 (2004), 11–39.

⁴⁸ On landesque capital, see Christopher T. Fisher and Gary M. Feinman, “Introduction to ‘Landscapes over Time,’” *American Anthropologist* 107 (2005), 62–69. Most studies of landesque capital focus exclusively on the material products of physical labor, such as terraces, irrigation systems, dikes, etc. See, for example, Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield, *Land Degradation and Society* (London: Methuen, 1987), and Håkansson and Widgren, “Labour and Landscapes.” My expansion of the notion of labor to include the “symbolic work” of meaning-making can be seen as a complementary analytical strategy, not a plea for an exclusively phenomenological perspective on landscape. On “symbolic work,” see Jules J. Wanderer, “Simmel’s Forms of Experiencing: The Adventure as Symbolic Work,” *Symbolic Interaction* 10 (1987), 21–28.

⁴⁹ On complex feedback loops in East African agricultural systems, see Löwe Borjeson, “Boserup Backwards? Agricultural Intensification as Its Own Driving Force in the Mbulu Highlands, Tanzania,” *Geografiska Annaler, Series B: Human Geography* 89 (2007), 249–67.

⁵⁰ Jan van den Breemer, “Ideas and Usage: Environment in Aouan Society, Ivory Coast,” in Elizabeth Croll and David Parkin, eds., *Bush Base: Forest Farm* (London: Routledge, 1992), 97–110. Alma Gottlieb, *Under the Kapok Tree: Identity and Difference in Beng Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

well suited for showing causation in African land use patterns.⁵¹ As Africa's boundary plant, dracaena is more context than cause. The significance of dracaena in Africa is more like a pattern of family resemblances in a group photograph or a classic riff around which jazz players improvise new forms. Understanding this tension between continuity and change at different scales helps us to analyze current land use practices as social relationships that are simultaneously material and symbolic. Such a perspective requires us to reorient studies of African land tenure away from static structural regularities of "tradition" and "customary law" and focus on the process of how Africans contrast externally-imposed land use policies with indigenous webs of land use meaning.

Land Tenure Muddles vs. the Clarity of Dracaena

As in many parts of Africa, land tenure in Tanzania has become a drawn-out process of ambiguity-ridden negotiation among various social actors.⁵² In North Pare, land tenure matters have become a deeply ambiguous institutional morass of half-implemented reform efforts. One result is that property rights are most secure where the state is least involved.⁵³ Compared to the institutional chaos described below, dracaena appears to North Pare farmers as a paragon of stability, morality, and order.

Landholding in precolonial North Pare had been a flexible and variable set of practices that entrenched power—that of elderly men as heads of patrilineages in the highlands, and that of chiefs to control agricultural labor in the lowlands. Colonial land policies were intended to reduce tenurial complexity, but in the end increased it by layering new institutions atop the older ones. This process began in earnest in 1934, when the government compelled Pare farmers to plant cassava as a bulwark against famine. Land was both vacant and scarce because the heads of patrilineages were reserving land for migrants and children, so the government created a new official within each Native Authority called the *mgawa shamba* (Kis., the land divider) to redistribute land for cassava plots. On 9 July 1938 the Chief Secretary asked the Provincial Commissioners to provide him with reports on native land laws so that the state could begin to supervise an inevitable process of evolution from communal to private property. In August, the nine chiefs of Pare gave the District Commissioner a document enumerating the "Existing Laws and Customs Regarding Land Tenure," in which they formalized and tightened their control of all land.⁵⁴ Blithely disregarding the office of the *mgawa shamba*, the chiefs presented the rules of landlordism (which governed their allocations of farmland in the North Pare

⁵¹ Håkansson and Widgren, "Labour and Landscapes."

⁵² On the complexities of African land tenure, see Sara Berry, *No Condition is Permanent* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), R.E. Downs, and Stephen Reyna, eds., *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988), and Issa Shivji, *Land Tenure Problems and Reforms in Tanzania* (Paris: Sahara and Sahel Observatory, Natural Resource Management Programme, 1996).

⁵³ Sheridan, "Environmental Consequences."

⁵⁴ Existing Native Law and Custom Regarding Land Tenure, 1938, TNA 517/12/2B/6, Translation by Ringo Tenga. Document missing at TNA, English copy in Ringo Tenga, "Land Law and the Peasantry in Pare District: A Historical Analysis" (LL.M. dissertation, University of Dar es Salaam, 1979), 226–29.

lowlands) and generalized these to the entire district. The District Commissioner rewrote this list of laws by excising the stipulations for tribute payments, ignoring the ambiguous status of the land divider, and enshrining soil conservation as the fundamental reason for giving the chiefs such power over land.⁵⁵ The Upare Tribal Council ratified the laws on 13 August 1938. When this sociological and legislative exercise began in July, the Chief Secretary had wanted his government to be midwife to the birth of an evolutionary model of land tenure; less than five weeks later Pare District was locked into a static and authoritarian system that personalized land tenure in the chiefs.

The Pare chiefs were unable to shift land use practices toward the administration's goals of soil and water conservation during the 1940s, and the Mbiru tax protests of 1945 alerted the administration to the instability of indirect rule.⁵⁶ After a series of agricultural development efforts throughout northeastern Tanzania (with results ranging from very modest success to outright failure) in the early 1950s, administrative attention turned to the transformation of land tenure. Formally, land in Pare was held in trust by the chiefs, and all other individuals had use rights. By the early 1950s, however, land was becoming commoditized, which contradicted the core principles of indirect rule. In his 1953 report to the Royal Commission on Land and Population, Pare District Commissioner Smithyman admitted that

the traditional system of tenure is already much changed, if not in name, then in fact. It is felt that the only hope of obtaining a proper regard for the value of the land, is to encourage permanent ownership. Sale should be allowed, or rather recognized, as it already takes place.⁵⁷

Much like his counterparts in colonial Kenya,⁵⁸ Smithyman advised that “the creation of a landless labouring or industrial class must be envisaged, and in fact encouraged” in Pare.⁵⁹ The Commission agreed wholeheartedly, and advised the colonial government to abandon its policy of self-sufficiency in food for each district and move toward private landholding and free markets.⁶⁰ The government had to intervene, the report insisted, because local tenurial evolution was being held back by the chiefs' conservatism and self-interest.⁶¹

The government responded by abandoning development schemes and undertaking an enormous sociological exercise in 1954, the systematic investigation of land tenure practices throughout Tanganyika. Each District Commissioner received a list of 69

⁵⁵ Proposed Native Law Regarding Land Tenure, Approved by the Upare Tribal Council, 13 August 1938, TNA 517/12/2B/5. Document missing at TNA, copy in Tenga, “Land Law,” 230–32.

⁵⁶ Kimambo, *Penetration and Protest*.

⁵⁷ Main Land-Population Problems of the Pare District, with Brief Recommendations for Solutions, 20 April 1953, TNA 19/3/5D/16.

⁵⁸ See Parker Shipton, “The Kenyan Land Tenure Reform: Misunderstandings in the Public Creation of Private Property,” in Downs and Reyna, *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa*, 91–135.

⁵⁹ TNA 19/3/5D/16.

⁶⁰ Iliffe, *A Modern History*, 553.

⁶¹ Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources to all District Commissioners, Notes on Government Paper #6, “Review of Land Tenure Policy,” 3 June 1958, TNA 517/L2/2/18.

questions designed to gauge a tribe's progress on an evolutionary continuum from communal to individual land tenure. The questions ranged from methods of (men's) land allocation to (men's) rights in trees.⁶² When the Acting Land Tenure Advisor interviewed Chief William Sabuni of Usangi in 1954, most of the answers that he received were normative statements about the Native Authority and the communitarian system of landholding that was supposed to be extant in Pare.⁶³ The report mentions the use of dracaena boundaries in the Pare highlands, but asserts that these only marked borders established by tribal authorities.

Sabuni described how the system of tribute payments was shifting from beer to cash (up to Tsh 20/=, depending on the acreage and the wealth of the borrower). His response to a question about land sales (that land in North Pare could never be sold) led to a heated debate within the focus group of thirty to forty men who had gathered at Sabuni's open-walled court building. In the ensuing discussion Sabuni eventually admitted that he had bought land himself, and that banana groves, mature trees, and houses were commonly bought and sold in order to prevent the fragmentation of inherited plots. This interview alerted the colonial administration that land tenure was in a bit of a muddle in Pare because a transformation was clearly afoot, yet there was no legal framework in place to regulate the process. Given that the District Commissioner served as judge in cases appealed from Native Courts, how could he settle land cases involving sales without legal recognition of individual land rights that would undercut both the chiefs and the district's land use policies?

The solution came in 1958, just as TANU and popular resistance to the colonial state were becoming increasingly influential. The government proposed a series of legislative and administrative changes that would encourage individual ownership of land in the pockets of high population density throughout the Territory.⁶⁴ To mitigate the danger that a wealthy minority (i.e., Indians and Europeans) would gobble up land and create a landless class, the administration intended to maintain an older law preventing land sales by Africans to non-Africans by requiring that such sales be personally approved by the Governor.⁶⁵ Africans would be able to mortgage their land, but the government would sharply limit the institutions able to recover debts through foreclosure. In Pare, the District Commissioner eagerly welcomed the proposal because land cases were clogging the local courts and landowners were trying to register their property at the District Office

⁶² African land tenure (Government Circular #5 of 1954), TNA 517/L2/2/15. Although the degree of central control over land allocation varied widely throughout colonial Tanganyika, the questionnaire assumed that all "tribal areas" had a particular person with the authority to allocate rights to community land. The document calls this person the "Great Commoner" and the questions clearly indicate that such a person is invariably male.

⁶³ Acting Land Tenure Advisor to DC Same, 9 December 1954, TNA 517/L2/2/7.

⁶⁴ Review of Land Tenure Policy, 1958, TNA 517/L2/2/20a.

⁶⁵ According to the Pare District Commissioner, this provision did not comfort landowners in Pare, who were not worried about non-Africans consolidating land. Instead they feared that wealthy Chagga coffee-growers would buy up land in the Pare highlands at irresistible prices. See DC Same to PC Tanga, Comments on "Review of land tenure policy, 1958," TNA 517/L2/2/20b.

despite the lack of a Land Registry.⁶⁶ When colonial officers presented the proposal throughout Pare, public opinion coalesced into two contradictory positions. Most of the recognized landholders were simultaneously patrilineage elders, chiefs, headmen, and councilors, and they denied that any process of individualization was occurring. Instead they insisted that they managed younger farmers as quasi-tenants. Younger men embraced the proposal, saying that it would make their *de facto* freehold tenure *de jure* as well, so that the senior generation could not evict them from the lands they were using regardless of whatever tenurial changes came. This debate became moot soon after independence, when Prime Minister Kawawa converted all titles in land to 99-year leases and enshrined the principle of state ownership of land in Tanzania.⁶⁷

President Julius Nyerere's new government was far more concerned with halting the trend toward the commoditization of land and class division in rural Tanganyika than the tenurial security of its rural producers. As early as 1958 the TANU leader argued that the colonial system of capitalist agriculture would lead to extreme inequality; "if we allow land to be sold like a robe, within a short period there would be only a few Africans possessing land in Tanganyika and all the others would be tenants."⁶⁸ Government policy tried to strike a contradictory balance between equity and prosperity by helping successful farmers to transform the agricultural practices of their neighbors and simultaneously fighting against exploitation by those same capitalist farmers. Land policy implementation therefore bifurcated into activist and punitive processes. Active measures included capital-intensive settlements and irrigation projects in some areas. Punitive measures focused on the more obvious cases of exploitation, such as the feudalistic *nyarubanja* system in northwestern Tanganyika and the semi-feudal system of the Pare lowlands. In 1965 the government banned landlordism in West Lake Region and investigated the practice in Pare (by this time, however, landlords had stopped allocating land and collecting tribute).⁶⁹ In October 1969 the central government banned landlordism in Pare and formally made all tenants into owners of the land they used.⁷⁰ For most people in the North Pare highlands, however, land policy remained largely unchanged from 1961 to 1971. The independent government inherited the colonial two-tier system of "customary" and statutory law and did little to change local practices (such as the ritual perimeters of *dracaena*) that seemed to be functioning well enough.⁷¹

⁶⁶ TNA 517/L2/2/20b.

⁶⁷ Andrew Coulson, *Tanzania: A Political Economy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 136.

⁶⁸ Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity: A Collection from Writings and Speeches 1952–1962* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 55.

⁶⁹ Administrative Secretary, Kilimanjaro Region to Area Commissioner, Same, 6 November 1965, TNA 548/L20/19/101; Administrative Secretary, Kilimanjaro Region, to Commissioner for Lands, Dar es Salaam, 3 November 1966, TNA 548/L20/19/116.

⁷⁰ Tenga, "Land Law," 169.

⁷¹ For historical reviews of land law and policy in colonial and pre-Arusha Declaration Tanganyika, see Shivji, *Land Tenure Problems*, and Liz Wily, "The Political Economy of African Land Tenure: A Case Study from Tanzania" (Ph.D. thesis, University of East Anglia, 1988).

In the North Pare highlands, post-independence land fragmentation from the 1970s to the present has led to a gradual agricultural involution without much direct interference from the state. Farms in North Pare grow smaller with each generation, so that many farmers now have twelve to fifteen plots scattered across the mountainsides. Village governments in the highlands mediate land disputes but only rarely allocate land, while villages in the lowlands distribute land to whosoever can put it to use.⁷² Since independence, the local courts and administration in Pare have followed a policy of “land to the tiller,”⁷³ which has effectively strengthened (male) farmers’ use rights in land by reinforcing their ownership rights to crops (rather than enhancing the entitlements of the women who actually till the land). The purpose of this policy has been to boost agricultural production while retaining formal state ownership of land. In effect, however, this focus on individual rights to land through crops has allowed farmers to bend land laws, colonize new territory, and evade the state’s increasingly unrealistic demands.⁷⁴ Most of the agricultural directives issued by local, district, regional, and national administrators since independence have been (at best) inconsistently implemented, and have usually been arbitrary and short-lived. Few farmers in North Pare have altered their land use practices as demanded by the state, although many have eagerly embraced agroforestry, fruit crops, and hybrid seeds. The result of these sedimentary layers of broken institutions is that land ownership in North Pare remains largely a matter for patrilineal kin groups, which rely on the ritual perimetrics of dracaena to mitigate or prevent land disputes. The social life of boundary plants in North Pare is often quite messy, as the many legal cases resulting from moved or cut dracaena stalks demonstrate. Compared to the murky tenurial chaos described above, however, dracaena is an icon of clarity and order.

Conclusions: The Continuing Significance of Dracaena

The formal procedure for getting official legal title to one’s land (*hati ya umiliki*—a legal document firmly establishing long-term use rights under actual government ownership of land), on the other hand, is difficult, expensive, and has uncertain outcomes. It usually requires a landowner to pay for the district surveyor to create detailed maps, and this means the payment of a large fee (in 1998, it was Tsh 40,000/=), supplies of paper, pens, fuel, food, and lodging for the survey crew, and perhaps a few well-placed bribes. Even if a landowner were willing to follow this procedure to the letter, it is still possible for the state to confiscate a plot by eminent domain, declare land to be a conservation area, or reallocate the parcel by reference to one of the many postcolonial directives on land use.

As compared to formal legal processes of establishing ownership, dracaena has many advantages for rural Tanzanians. It is cheap and readily accessible. Its longstanding

⁷² This pattern of coercive and opportunistic land use and settlement policy in the lowlands, and a more hands-off approach in the highlands, has been characteristic of both colonial and independent governments. This is fundamentally a matter of cash crops (especially coffee) having been the backbone of the northeastern Tanzanian economy since the 1930s, so that interference with land matters in the highlands would have threatened production.

⁷³ Tenga, “Land Law,” 167.

⁷⁴ Sheridan, “Environmental Consequences.”

institutionalization as a perimetric is apparent in the landscape. It is not too surprising that most people in North Pare choose to use dracaena to mark their fields, graves, and sacred groves. In addition to these economic and pragmatic incentives to rely on ritual perimetrics rather than statutory law, dracaena in North Pare has an attribute that much of the Tanzanian legal system lacks: it integrates ecology, social organization, and morality. Ritual perimetrics have therefore outlived colonial and postcolonial efforts to introduce new ways to establish rights in land.

This study of dracaena's social values in North Pare and across Africa has implications for the study of agricultural intensification and land use. It suggests that the footprints of past institutions may still be visible in the present landscape, and that the institutionalization of agricultural intensification relates to multivocal symbols of boundary making, authority, and what we might call "moral ecological rationality."⁷⁵ It is apparent that dracaena and other ritual perimetrics constitute part of the diverse set of social-ecological systems that structure African landscapes. Landscape boundaries such as hedges and fences are not simply "things," they are social relationships in which people negotiate the meanings of land, resources, and property.⁷⁶ In focusing this paper tightly on the social life of a particular plant, I hope to catalyze further research into the ethnobotany of land use, symbolic capital, and perimetrics in northeastern Tanzania—and across tropical Africa.

Map References

Note: Numbers before the authors' names correspond to the plotted numbers on the maps in this article.

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