“What is the magic in cranberries?” he asked the Indians again and again. And they’d laugh at him. Or they’d say, “There’s nothing magical. It’s just a good job, if you don’t mind getting wet...” “But I know these Indians think cranberries are magical,” the director said. “They just don’t want to share the magic.”

Blasphemy by Sherman Alexie

A novelist and social critic, Sherman Alexie is one of America’s most accomplished Native American storytellers. His sentiment about white men and listening arises out of a short-story dialogue, but it wells up from deep inside a long legacy of Native American experience with white settler colonialism and domination. Alexie’s pithy statement transcends geography or ethnicity to act as a powerful proxy for marginalized people around the globe, those stripped of identity and history by colonial experiences. The sentiment penetrates to the core of how histories of the colonized have been written—with the white men talking and writing and ignoring the voices of those whose land they have taken and whose histories they have co-opted or erased. Sherman Alexie’s Spokane persona dances, universally, across other landscapes, constantly reminding us that local identity is malleable, always subject to new manipulations and erasures, no matter what skin colors or nationalities are involved.

The failure to listen and learn from local knowledge systems is a hallmark of colonialism. It has led to myriad policy and development failures in for-
mer colonized part of the world that ruined entire societies and left behind a wasteland of shredded identities. History is an integral part of the project of talking, not listening. African societies and their histories came out of rich oral literature that exhibited complex genres and ways of preservation. This was a very vulnerable way of maintaining historical records in the face of highly developed Western bureaucracy that demanded literacy as entre to power and privilege. Explicit expectations for literacy in writing colonial history excluded the nonliterate—a purposeful repression of oral literatures and a colonial determination *not to listen*. Simultaneously, colonial chroniclers wrote during conditions of imposition, repression, conflict, failed projects, and a host of other conflict-filled circumstances in which white Western perspectives prevailed. When colonial authorities occasionally listened to and accepted advice of local elites (usually on their payrolls), they did so at significant peril—finding that popular uprisings against elites often implicated the colonial government in awkward disputes with popular opposition groups in local society (Curtis 1989).

I was fortunate to begin my professional career in a superb setting for better understanding how colonial silencing and postcolonial listening unfolded over the colonial and postcolonial periods in Buhaya, a verdant hilly landscape west of Lake Victoria (Schmidt 1978). The Bantu-speaking Haya have a deep history attached to monumental landscape features, such as a 2,000-year-old memorial to the origins and significance of iron production in this region, between Rwanda and the lake. The stories I share about an archaeology of listening start in Buhaya, back to 1966, when, as a young postgraduate student at Makerere University in Uganda, I first visited this region with fellow students to observe the capital site of Karagwe Kingdom (once famous in Europe because the king hosted John Hanning Speke and James Grant), contiguous to eastern Rwanda. That visit provoked additional inquiry into the history of the region, a rich published literature that included a German ethnography (Rehse 1910) and extensive indigenous publications by F. X. Lwamgira (e.g., 1949a, 1949b), local administrator and historian.

Impressed by an extensive lineage of colonial observations and a surprisingly rich corpus of indigenous research into myth, oral traditions, folktales, and marriage customs, I returned to the region in early 1969 to continue research into how the Haya constructed their histories across social groups and time, using archaeology to enrich the tapestry of history. As I launched my research, I was keenly aware of my personal ignorance of how local people imagined
their historical past, present, and future. It was patently clear that the practice of archaeology in such a setting required a thorough familiarity with the historical landscape—before an archaeology asking significant questions was possible. By necessity, my relationships with knowledge keepers in villages quickly developed to the point where I became an apprentice to a scattered group of key elders with extraordinary knowledge—elders who then passed me around to their circle of like-minded friends and relatives. Recognition of this relationship within the wider community carried the understanding that I was both a student and an apprentice who was learning the oral traditions and histories of the Haya (Schmidt 2017a).

Given this start to my field research, some have asked: “Why were you moving around Haya villages talking with elders and not excavating?” My response: I was learning history and landscape from local knowledge keepers with the anticipation that my hybrid perspectives could help unveil African histories heretofore hidden from view. My training came from anthropologists Stuart Struever and Frank Willett and historians John Rowe and Ivor Wilks, the latter two having worked and lived for decades in African communities, valorizing oral testimonies alongside archival and archaeological research. This background, this way of seeing history, brought a perspective to the field that advocated settling in and understanding how local folks lived historically informed lives, how they played out historical knowledge in daily performances, and how the landscape was structured and given meaning by local cultural beliefs. It was critical to understand answers to these questions before I could be so bold as to put an archaeological shovel to the ground.

It was important to understand local ideas about the most important sites, the most significant ritual centers of great antiquity, and the most memorable places before I could make an informed decision about where I should or might excavate. If I succeeded in building the trust of local communities, then, with their guidance, I might be able to help explore historical questions of significance to them and to me—something that stuck out as a significant issue in their lives and in the way that their history was represented to others. In retrospect, this approach had strong affinities with the practice of participatory community research (see Atalay 2012; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008; Hollowell and Nicholas 2009; Pyburn 2003; Schmidt and Pikirayi 2016; Smith and Jackson 2008; and Smith and Waterton 2012 for examples of community-driven and participatory research that incorporates ethnographic methods and best ethical practice).
An Apprenticeship

For the first 10 months of a 20-month stay, I settled into three different villages in Buhaya to learn about local and religious myth and history (Map 9.1). Along the way, after scores of interviews and conversations, I came to see a natural intersection of perspectives: my awareness that a sacred site called Kaiija (Place of the Forge) was a central historical focus and interest of elders in central coastal Buhaya; and the encouragement by these same elders, excited by possible findings, that I (we) should undertake excavations at Kaiija. I remember thinking when the elders openly said that they wanted to see what was under the Kaiija tree shrine that they were deeply curious and committed historians. I followed their advice, because I, too, was tantalized by the legend of King Rugomora.

Map 9.1. The Kemondo Bay Area of Northwest Tanzania, with locations of Katuruka village and the sacred shrines of Kaiija and Kya Rugomora.
Mahe, who supposedly built an iron tower at Kaiija, with one of its legs at a distant shrine called Kya Rugomora. The royal capital compound of King Rugomora, who lived at the end of the seventeenth century, was built around this ancient local shrine as a means of co-opting its heritage power and legitimacy over the centuries (Schmidt 1978, 2006, 2013, 2017a).

Our first excavation, conducted by local villagers thoroughly trained in the methods of archaeology and overseen by elders (Schmidt 2014a), was placed precisely where the elders marked the location of an iron forge used to construct the iron tower (Schmidt 1978, 2006, 2013). As we worked as an integrated team with many from nearby residential units, I realized that we were engaged in testing an indigenous research hypothesis—that iron production evidence linked to the iron tower story was located in this zone beneath the Kaiija shrine (Map 9.2)—but only years later realized the implications of that engagement.

Map 9.2. The King Rugomora Royal Burial Estate, ca. 1970, showing the incorporation of Kaiija shrine within the core of the seventeenth-century palace compound.
vis-à-vis the principles of community-based participatory research. The re-
search design arose from local knowledge, and its implementation was both
participatory and collaborative.

As predicted by the elders, the first distinct feature to be uncovered was a pit
with slag and charcoal. Upon exposing the boundaries of the pit and then set-
ting this feature into broader spatial context, it proved to be a forge 2,000+ years
old (Schmidt 1978, 1997), much older than King Rugomora’s regime 300+ years
ago. Additional examination of the oral texts showed clearly that woven into
the legends of King Rugomora were ancient Cwezi (mythological) narratives
(Schmidt 2006, 2013), showing a conscious attempt by the usurper Hinda clan
to disguise its takeover of an ancient shrine by creating an identity with Cwezi
myths and thus creating the illusion of a regime of great antiquity (see Kaindoa
2013 and Schmidt 1978 for the original text). Initial scholarly reactions from the
most influential historian of Africa deeply betrayed a profound misunder-
standing of the role of local participants: “It would be becoming to acknowledge
that there had been an element of luck as well as of judgment in his discovery”
(Oliver 1979:290). This perspective ignores local knowledge and leadership—no
surprise for the era when this was written. Agency from the perspective of this
outside observer/reader was through my activities, as if I was isolated from,
separated from, and unaware of my intimate relationships.

The iron forge (and its associated structural remains) beneath the Kaiija
shrine tree came to be recognized as the most ancient iron working in eastern
Africa, remembered and affirmed by the monumental attributes of the shrine.
Given the presence of late first millennium BCE dates in the Early Iron Age as-
semblage (Clist 1987; Schmidt and Childs 1985), the Kaiija phenomenon dates
to the latter first millennium BCE, a remarkable time depth for oral traditions
about the specific function of archaeological features to remain viable, but not
so remarkable when juxtaposed to Mesopotamian oral accounts of exceptional
complexity preserved over hundreds of years (Schmidt 2006).

An ensuing debate arose over dating of oral traditions linked to iron pro-
duction. An age of 2,000+ years for oral traditions seemed much too old and
apparently inconsistent with three occupational periods for some to accept—a
heresy against the scripture of literacy (Oliver 1979). 2 This notion was put to rest
with the recognition that conditions of continuity prevailed at neighboring sites
with more detailed dating (Clist 1987; Schmidt and Childs 1985) and with the
recognition of Kaiija’s use as a sacred site through deep time and through the
control of several religious cults (Schmidt 2017a). 3
We came to learn that frequent and long-lived ritual performances by different but interrelated cults over 2,000 years ensured continuity in the core meaning of the Kaiija shrine (Schmidt 2013, 2017a). For anthropology and history, this recognition introduces a new understanding of the capacity for longevity of oral accounts, a deep-time antiquity at odds with Western refusal to listen, living within a colonial paradigm (e.g., Mason 2000). No matter how little Euro-centric historians dislike dating oral genres to such deep antiquity, the association will not go away. It is a critical insight into the antiquity of oral accounts on landscapes deeply configured by local cultures over deep time. The Kaiija tree shrine marks a major shift away from the Western paradigm about oral traditions incapable of deep antiquity (Schmidt 2006).

As a young apprentice of Haya history, I was often lost in the detail and troubled by not seeing historical problems of high value that might merit archaeological inquiry. As I was wrapping up my initial oral tradition inquiries, my focus was also pulled to documenting huge iron smelting sites on the landscape while I was trying simultaneously to understand the historical importance of ritual sites that repeatedly appeared in local discourses (Schmidt 1978). My elderly guides helped me regain a focus on significant historical problems when they encouraged me to stop listening to their stories and start listening to their advice as to where it was important to expand knowledge about the past (for additional insights into the genesis of mutuality in community engagements, see Pikirayi and Schmidt 2016; Pyburn 2003; Smith and Waterton 2012; Tully 2007). Once I began to follow their path, a surprisingly rich array of insights and contributions unfolded over the next decade. What if I had listened to only their narratives rather than to the tellers of the narratives? Had I continued to examine just the narrative forms or had I continued to devote significant attention to survey and test excavations without the intervention of elders, then this paradigm shift in the antiquity of oral traditions and the role of ritual performance in maintaining threads of continuity would have been lost to our scholarly discourse.

Listening with Interruptions, Awakening to Female Knowledge Keepers

My next narrative about the value of an archaeology of listening has its origins during the same period—the beginning of my career as an archaeologist and my collection of oral testimonies in the same subregion south of Bukoba town. As I listened to scores of oral testimonies years ago, my ear was attuned
to oral traditions linked to sacred sites and other physical places of cultural importance, foremost among them the Kaiija shrine. As I now reflect on this experience, I see, again, that it fits closely with today’s participatory community approach. What I did was congruent with local cultural sensibilities; it was also in keeping with my apprenticeship to the most knowledgeable keepers of oral accounts to follow the lead and advice of local collaborators; and I was able to reach a deeper understanding of Haya history based on mutual respect (Schmidt 1978, 1997, 2010, 2017a). Yet participatory approaches of this era also carried with them entrenched androcentric ideas about who could and who could not be trusted to provide reliable testimonies.

This issue first arose when I interviewed a female spirit medium in northern Buhaya in 1969. My male counterparts in Kiziba Kingdom quickly and pointedly questioned me as to why I was engaged in such an interaction and warned that I had best pay attention to my relationships in their circle (Schmidt 2017a). As disquieting as it was at the time, this experience captured a norm in Haya culture—suppression of female voices in matters pertaining to history and culture, a perspective that was amplified by a discipline-wide and colonial proclivity to filter local testimonies through male points of view. I was captured as much by my own background as I was by local values.

Moving Forward

When I first started inquiries into the history of Rugomora Mahe and the Kaiija shrine tree, my focus with local counterparts was to collect multiple accounts of many different genres of oral traditions, including royal Hinda clan history, Cwezi oral traditions, and the relationship of King Rugomora to the Kaiija shrine in Katuruka village (Schmidt 2006, 2013, 2017a). During my initial study, collaborating elders told me that a “caretaker” once lived in the palace house in the burial estate of King Rugomora where the Kaiija shrine tree was also situated. Each time I inquired about this person, I was told only that she or he had abandoned the site in the early 1960s. Beyond such comments, silence prevailed; I failed to elicit specific answers about where the caretaker had decamped to and why. Reflecting on this now, I wonder: if I had pressed harder, would I have learned more about this individual and her or his role at the shrine and burial estate? Yet such reflexivity is overwhelmed by the values that then inhibited free inquiry into histories held by women (Schmidt 2017a). When testimonies were conveyed by privileged voices of powerful males, I was powerless to interdict such practice (especially in my role as apprentice), so female
histories remained subaltern, out of circulation, outside of discourse. I have also learned over more than four decades that my restricted ability to listen to female voices within collaborative settings of the late 1960s and 1970s was as subject to change as other cultural practices that developed vulnerability with the coming of HIV/AIDS in Buhaya (Schmidt 2010).

Culture Change and HIV/AIDS

After an absence of more than two decades from Buhaya, I returned in 2008 to find communities living under the pall of HIV/AIDS (e.g., Lwihula et al. 1993; Mutembei 2001; Ndamugoba et al. 2000; Rugalema 1999). The people of Katuruka village, the location of the Kaiija shrine and the burial estate of King Rugomora, were living without hope and with a deeply eroded sense of identity (Schmidt 2010, 2014a, 2014b, 2017a). Out of my social visit came an invitation to participate in an initiative by village elders to inquire into their oral traditions and sacred sites, to preserve their heritage knowledge for future generations. What followed was my deep engagement with Katuruka-initiated research during which I was a key collaborator and co-producer—a trajectory in my professional career that I did not anticipate at the time.

The Katuruka initiative first acknowledged that the profile of keepers of knowledge had changed significantly. The death of a disproportionate number of elderly males during the HIV/AIDS pandemic had changed how and by whom history was kept and disseminated (Schmidt 2010, 2017a). Instead of dominantly male collaborators/participants, females were openly recognized as the new keepers of historical knowledge. This transformation in heritage values brought to the surface vitally important subaltern accounts held by women (Schmidt 2010, 2014b, 2016). During inquiries led by local elders, female elders emerged as some of the most prominent keepers of oral knowledge, a major break from previous norms of androcentric control over heritage knowledge. By listening closely to elderly women, we together learned of a heretofore unrecognized female ritual authority with significant political and religious power in the region (Schmidt 2017a). Driven underground by dominant male discourses, these subaltern accounts significantly revise our interpretation of one of Africa’s most sacred shrines, Kaiija, and the religious and political roles of its ritual officiant (Figures 9.1a and 9.1b).

Female elders of Katuruka revealed during interviews that life surrounding the burial estate of King Rugomora was deeply influenced and governed by a
Figure 9.1. Two descendants of ritual officials of the Balama clan that supervised New Moon ceremonies: (above) Ma Eudes Bambanza at age 86 (2009); (below) Ma Zuriat Mohamed at age 71 (2009). Photos by author.
female ritual official named Njeru (the White Sheep). Njeru was married in 1900 to King Rugomora (d. 1675), a marriage that transformed the 12-year-old virgin into the bride of King Rugomora as well as the ritual officiant of his burial estate. In this capacity, she was responsible for oversight of the monthly New Moon rituals that renewed the kingdom’s prosperity (Schmidt 2014a, 2014b, 2016, 2017a). Moreover, she was called a king, received tribute from those living within the huge burial estate (the former royal holdings), and was a much respected and revered patron and neighbor. Once male participants realized that Njeru was being openly discussed among female peers, they eagerly contributed their memories of her. We listened closely, amazed with the contrast to past testimonies and intent to learn about a powerful community member heretofore treated with silence.

While conducting interviews, my male counterparts were deeply attentive to narratives about Njeru, hanging on each word and wanting to explore details with follow-up interviews. They knew little about her history and its significance, though some who were raised next door to her palace had detailed information about her life. Among the most significant findings was the role of Njeru in New Moon ceremonies. As part of the monthly ritual of renewal, Njeru oversaw ritual processes conducted by Cwezi spirit mediums at Kaiija shrine (Schmidt 2016, 2017a). The Cwezi cult had earlier co-opted ancestral spirit possession of animals such as leopards and snakes (also associated with renewal rites) by social groups with long occupation on the landscape and their own histories of appropriating places associated with nature spirits. The ancestors of ancient social groups, such as the Bayango iron workers, possessed animals associated with key shrines like Kaiija and Kya Rugomora—later appropriated by the Cwezi kubandwa cult at the turn of the second millennium AD and then taken over and transformed by the Hinda royals in the seventeenth century. This final appropriation was manifest when the spirit of King Rugomora possessed a snake, which was kept by Njeru and her long line of ancestral predecessors.

Understanding of Njeru and her significance to the heritage of the Haya and, more broadly, the Great Lakes region, developed from interviews that project leader Benjamin Shegesha conducted with Ma Eudes Bambanza, Ma Zuriat Mohamed, Ma Eudes’s brother Leveriani Bambanza, and Faustin Kamaleki, once a neighbor and then the CCM (Chama Cha Mapinduzi) regional party secretary (Schmidt 2017a). As we listened to these participants in the Katuruka project, we learned that Njeru was a descendant of the clan of King Rugomora’s first wife. As a member of that clan, her marriage to King Rugomora marked an important
thread of continuity through the centuries. Considered a mukama (king) by her subjects, she could withdraw their estates or levy fines against those who disobeyed her will, even the local king of Maruku: “People received her with great honor; the palace was built, fences were erected and by protocol she was higher than the Mukama of Maruku. If she became angry, heads of cattle had to be paid” (Ma Eudes Bambanza, November 26, 2009, Katuruka; Schmidt 2017a).

During our first interview with Eudes Bambanza, Benjamin asked her about the sacred Kaiija shrine and its associated rituals, a line of questioning that provoked her to share memories of Njeru and her snake—the spirit of Rugomora Mahe:

As far as I know the snake . . . used to come to Njeru and coil three times on her thighs. That snake used to drink milk. It did not stay long; it went back to its house. . . . There was the house of Rugomora the Great [later the palace house of Njeru]. It was there that he [King Rugomora] came out as the snake which married the woman. (Ma Eudes Bambanza, November 26, 2009, Katuruka; emphasis added; Schmidt 2017a)

Perhaps the most remarkable occurrence in this interchange is Benjamin’s close listening to Eudes’s narrative in my presence. In years past, say, 20–30 years ago, he would never have discussed Njeru, let alone pursue the topic during a historical conversation—the usual androcentric treatment of oral history (Schmidt 2017a). Yet, in the throes of vast losses of oral heritage, Benjamin was hyperattentive to any shreds of Katuruka’s past that might emerge during the project. Njeru’s life, and the proscriptions placed on it, fascinated Benjamin, who as a younger man missed knowing Njeru because of his residence outside the village. He and I learned:

But she, too, wanted to be happy . . . she . . . could [not] bring a boyfriend into Nyaruju [the palace]. . . . In Nyaruju no beer was kept; people brought beer in their containers, enough to drink while they conversed in the house. (Ma Eudes Bambanza, November 26, 2009, Katuruka; Schmidt 2017a)

Eudes explicitly mentioned the prohibitions placed on Njeru’s romantic life and the types of tribute brought to the royal palace. Months later, Eudes’s brother Leveriani elaborated on the topic of Njeru’s romantic life, ending with a tour of the former farms and homes of her forbidden paramours—a distinctly male perspective that also emphasized the misfortunes of those who forgot to respect taboos about any sexual contact with Njeru.
It is Njeru’s role as spiritual coordinator and head of royal rites at Kaiija and the royal burial estate that interests us most. Her marriage to Rugomora’s spirit through a snake is a deep-seated metaphor for reproduction. Fertility, already the central symbolic axis of the Kaiija shrine due to its association with reproductive metaphors associated with iron working, is a core focus. Reproduction is renewal, a continuation into the future. The snake trope in this instance is transforming: It was the king again uniting with his virgin wife Njeru—always re-represented as a recent bride. Zuriat, a member of the clan handling ritual protocols at New Moon, shared an enlightening perspective on Njeru’s relationship with the snake. “The ancient Mukama was represented by Njeru, who was regarded as his wife. On such occasions she was regarded as a newlywed bride. That is what it meant, the appearance of the Mukama” (Ma Zuriat Mohamed, December 1, 2009; Schmidt 2017a). Thus, with the advent of New Moon ceremonies, Njeru became a newly wedded bride to Rugomora: we witness yet another ritual renewal, transforming Njeru’s status from his wife to his new bride. New Moon was also a time when trusted advisors took up residence at Njeru’s and neighbors, kin, and subjects gathered to celebrate; these minifestivals, often called bacchanals among elders today, included the performance of the royal orchestra beneath the Kaiija tree:

People came from Maruku and it became a great festivity, that appearance of Mukama [Rugomora Mahe] at the occasion of the New Moon. . . . I even witnessed the royal orchestra at Kaiija when it came there at the occasion of the New Moon. On that day one heard the orchestra. I worked there. I am explaining what I witnessed. I saw Mukama Njoka [snake]. The day the Mukama appeared, we made a great celebration; we ate and drank. . . . I worked there, following instructions [and giving instructions] to those who came to work under my supervision of six years. (Ma Zuriat Mohamed, December 1, 2009, Katuruka; emphasis added; Schmidt 2017a)

The king’s spirit within the snake was empowered to mate with Njeru, his wife and new bride. The son of one ritual official told us:

She would sit, legs stretched out, and the snake would come onto her thighs; that is, her husband slept with her. . . . Those were magic happenings. It knew that she was already clean and it came and got on her thighs. She stretched out her legs, it settled on her thighs for some time and then left. (Ta Leveriani Bambanza, May 1, 2010, Katuruka; emphasis added; Schmidt 2017a)
Lest we begin to think this narrative is influenced by the gender of the storyteller, similar interpretations are found among many women, as when Ma Zuriat made perfectly clear her understanding of Njeru’s ritual role in reproduction:

How can you explain a marriage between a snake and a human being? *But at the time when the snake was about to appear, Njeru was smeared with fat.* People like my father would not sleep on their beds. If I am pulling your leg, go and ask another person. On that day, there was plenty of beer for your fathers and grandfathers. *It was a feast. It was the arrival of the king. Njeru was as quiet and collected as a new bride on wedding day. The fat was dripping from her face. Then the snake came and rolled itself and coiled on her naked body.* We children were told to keep away but we understood what was happening. . . . I wish I could take Maria [her daughter] to where such marvels still exist. How lucky those people in the past were! (Ma Zuriat Mohamed, May 10, 2010, Katuruka; emphasis added; Schmidt 2017a)

Even women raised outside the ritual orbit acknowledged the reproductive power of Njeru’s ritual coupling with Rugomora:

No, sir! I am glad I didn’t see it. Up to now I hear people [only] talk about it. Even when I walk at midday when it is very warm, I ask myself, “*What should I do if I met the snake which lived here and which people said copulated with Njeru?*” But I pass and go my way. That thought does not deter me from walking by. (Ernestina John, April 9, 2010, Katuruka; emphasis added; Schmidt 2017a)

Once liberated from values under which they had silenced female voices, men also significantly enriched knowledge about Njeru. A former next-door neighbor vividly remembered seeing Njeru with the snake during New Moon ceremonies:

It [the snake] was spotted. I remember it had a few spots. *Njeru stretched her legs and the snake came; then something mysterious happened. She sat respectfully in there. When the snake came and entered, it crossed Njeru’s thighs. He came to marry. . . .* Oh, then bulls were slaughtered, now meat was roasted. All the people worshiped respectively. Before the snake arrived, all the people assembled, for it is the day Njeru became wife of King Rugomora. Thereafter Rugomora Mahe, through the form of this snake, disappeared into the plantation. . . . I witnessed that when I was a small child. That was a big celebration. That was the ceremonial marriage of
that day. (Faustin Kamaleki, February 2, 2010, Katuruka; emphasis added; Schmidt 2017a)

Through their participation in the Katuruka heritage project, women were instrumental in making the key research contributions in ways not previously imagined. They warmly embraced the need to discuss topics and activities once woven into their daily lives at the Kaiija shrine and King Rugomora’s burial estate. As significant knowledge appeared in their narratives, so, too, did women develop an awareness that they had important contributions to make to local history as well as the heritage project within their village (Schmidt 2017a).

These never-before-recorded narratives open new historical vistas and deeply enrich the substance of ritual history and politics in east-central Africa. Elaborate narratives about rites of reproduction that incorporated symbolic copulation with King Rugomora are ethnographic revelations; no similar phenomena are recorded in eastern Africa, though there are bits and pieces, really scraps, of information about a python cult dedicated to fertility rites, suggesting that such rites occurred at Kaiija long before King Rugomora (Roscoe 1909; Schoenbrun 2014; Tantala 1989). The extension of power of Njeru’s office to include sanctions against the local king, the exclusion of the king from Njeru’s palace or burial estate, and the confiscation of plantations from a wide variety of people, including princes speak to significant political autonomy unknown outside the traditional political structure.

Njeru ruled during a political vacuum caused by colonial machinations with several Haya kingdoms that meant the loss of the Kanyangereko section (chiefdom) of Bukara to her archrival and competitor, King Kahigi II at Kanazi Palace of Kihanja Kingdom. Njeru took advantage of opportunities to exercise her power and authority from her base in Katuruka after traditional patterns of power were interrupted by intrigues and colonial gullibility. In 1900 King Kahigi pulled off a successful ruse—deceiving German authorities by planting guns in the house of the prime minister of his kinsman and neighboring king in Bukara (across Kemondo Bay to the east). Kahigi’s hegemony over Kanyangereko (of which Katuruka is a part) unfolded the same time that Kahigi appointed Njeru as the ritual officiant at Kaiija shrine. Thrust into this political breach, Njeru became a new and vital authority, working with her troop of serving girls and drawing on the tribute of those within Kanyangereko to lead a prosperous life filled with ritual festivals that drew widely on her capacity to receive local tribute.4
Beyond the informative testimonies, there is little knowledge about the ritual requirements of Njeru’s office. Lwamgira (1949a), a local administrator and historian, identifies the office as *muka gashani* (wife of the burial estate, i.e., the king) in Kiziba Kingdom, north of Bukara. Information from the White Fathers’ diary at Kashozi Mission relates how Catholic nuns took special notice of young girls who carried out these ritual duties at the burial estates of Kiziba. They had fallen on hard times, forgotten by their patron, the King of Kiziba. Severe internal conflicts for the throne and other difficulties made sustaining the royal house very difficult. Seen as destitute victims, some of these girls were encouraged to settle at Kashozi Mission and take up Christian practices (Larsson 1991). No other mention prepares us for the scale of influence and power that such ritual officiants could rise to. The heritage research initiative in Katuruka was energized by these revelations. The organizing committee and research participants both realized that Kaiija and the *gashani* estate had been enriched with a powerful new dimension to their common heritage. The Katuruka-initiated research makes a major contribution to East African and Tanzanian history.

Because the ritual office of Njeru relates so specifically to the content and structure of the Rugomora Mahe site, it also holds great significance for heritage specialists and archaeologists seeking better interpretation of the spatial orientation of sacred structures and activities. During the Katuruka project, villagers took the initiative to reconstruct the Buchwankwanzi (“Spitting Pearls”) house of King Rugomora. Buchwankwanzi was the house in which the king entertained his closest advisors and consulted his Cwezi spirit mediums (Schmidt 2017a; Figure 9.2). After the king’s death, it became the depository for his relics: his knives, his shield, his ritual hoes, the ritual paddles of Mugasha (god of waters and storms), his spears, his stool, and other key paraphernalia. Each Buchwankwanzi was an ancient museum for the Haya, a place where the material symbols of kingship were curated, helping to activate and retain memories. It was also the location of the king’s jawbone or skull, kept over time as part of the royal memorabilia. Buchwankwanzi was a key ritual structure for Njeru, a place where she continued to consult spirit mediums and advisors and where she used King Rugomora’s regalia in the New Moon rituals of renewal. Buchwankwanzi was at the ritual core of the burial estate, a placement verified by archaeological evidence. With an archaeology of listening, a more complete interpretation of Katuruka heritage now compellingly includes Njeru’s ritual and political activities.
Listening and Then Forgetting—Then Listening Again

Listening ipso facto places one in an advantageous position to understand how and why Haya changed in their concerns over what is significant heritage in village life. Shortly after the Katuruka community project was launched, we were again called on to listen, this time to a call for action from a local primary school near Katuruka village. The headmaster wanted us to examine some human skulls and long bones gathered by students as part of a biology lesson that led to more than chicken and cattle bones being brought to class. At the time, we were very busy, right in the middle of Katuruka interviews. Benjamin Shegesha was taken by the idea, so we made time to travel to Nyarubale Primary School to look at the bones from a nearby rock shelter. Such a significant and unexplained presence of human remains caused us to return to organize the
materials and document the rock shelter (Figures 9.3a and 9.3b). We found high-caliber bullet wounds in several of the skulls, suggesting death by gunshot (Daniels 2013). Not one of the elders in neighboring villages could explain the reason(s) for the presence of ancestors in a rocky ledge, let alone how some came to die from gunshot wounds.

Benjamin and I took the problem to the Katuruka committee, which incorporated an appropriate line of questioning among its experts, finding that not one person could recall loss of life leading to the placing of dead kin at Mazinga Cave. This left us at a dead end. Then I remembered something that I had forgotten for 40 years: my record of several detailed texts from 1969, spelling out the order of battle and command and the ultimate massacre that resulted below Kanazi Palace at the border with Kihanja Kingdom. I did not remember the theme or the core focus of these oral traditions, long ago recorded, archived, and forgotten, until I helped pose a direct question about significant killings near Katuruka.

I remembered that in 1969 I listened to and recorded several oral accounts with highly specific details about a major massacre of local people by the German military government, approximately in 1901. I also remembered that at the time I heard these oral accounts I was struck by the magnitude of the killings, several times asking my collaborations to repeat their testimony. These conversations took place during the same months when other elders were guiding me to Kaiija, when I roamed the villages listening to and learning from elders for months. It was some months before I could excavate my archives back in Florida and identify the oral traditions of great historical importance. I was shocked, again, by their specificity, detail, and credibility. The first text is riveting:

They met the Germans at their camp in Ngogo. When the German officer Hauptmann [Captain] Lionel [Richter] saw the Bakara and their leaders, he asked for their Mukama. When he asked who was Mukama, [the Katikiro (prime minister)] said that he was, and within moments he had been shot dead with a pistol by the German officer. Then the German African askaris [police/soldiers] present started firing into the seated crowd; the askaris had tried to warn the people, but their signs had not been understood. Of the hundreds there, there were only a few survivors. It took the relatives of the dead nine days to retrieve and finish burying their dead at the same place. Some were not buried, and their skulls could be seen for years thereafter. (Lugimbana Bandio, November 5, 1969, Maruku; emphasis added; Schmidt 2017a, 2017b)
Figure 9.3. Mazinga Cave: (left) the waterfalls and (below) the rock ledges where multiple human skeletons were placed. Photos by author.
Upon reading these texts, I immediately wondered why some bodies were left on the field of death. Lwamgira (1949a) addressed this issue, observing that those killed in battle cannot be returned to the homestead for burial. They must either be thrown in a hole in the bush or put in a cave. It appears that such ritual proscriptions explain the presence of human bodies killed by heavy guns, both in the place of battle and in nearby rock shelters:

When [Kishebuka’s troops] arrived, a German asked them where Kishebuka was. Gradually, they were looked over by Korongo as he searched for Kishebuka. As he asked for Kishebuka, the Katikiro spoke up and announced that he was [the mukama]. When Korongo asked the people if [he] was Kishebuka, they replied that he was Katikiro of Kishebuka. During Korongo’s inspection, one askari [African soldier] who was a friend of Kishebuka’s tried to warn the people that they were in danger and would be shot. When Korongo learned that Kishebuka was not present, he was very angry and ordered his askaris to open fire. The Abendere were the first to die, then the Bakara. Those who escaped the deadly fire were those who happened to be standing in the proximity of Korongo. Those not killed by rifle fire were killed by the Bahamba (citizens of Kihanja Kingdom ruled by Kahigi II) and their spears. Those who escaped to Kiizi (near the whites) were not killed but those who went to Kitembe forest were pursued and killed by the Bahamba (there and two other forests—Rugege and Kyamakonge). After this slaughter, the Germans went to Kahigi’s kikale [palace] in Kanazi, Kihanja. (Byakela Rusinga, November 29, 1969, Maruku; emphasis added; Schmidt 2017a, 2017b)

These stories immediately sent me to historical writings about the Haya, including those that discuss the impacts of colonialism (e.g., Austen 1968; Cory 1959; Curtis 1989). What I found was a complete erasure of any mention of this massacre. Even local histories, such as Lwamgira’s (1949b) small booklet about Kanyangereko (Bukara), whitewashed this atrocity. This omission is no surprise, for Lwamgira was a major German and British client, known for his deep collaboration with both colonial powers. While other abuses by German administrators appear in the historiography (see Austen 1968), there is only silence for Ngogo.

Stories like that told by Byakela Rusinga were once an active part of daily storytelling in some families. By the second decade of this millennium, this heritage was no longer passed on from generation to generation. Why? How is
it possible that vital second-generation accounts disappeared over the course of five generations? These were questions that I puzzled over. Were the brutal and egregious colonial abuses so traumatic as to be dismissed by later generations as improbable or fantastic? Did local preaching help suppress memories of colonial atrocities? A more accessible explanation had already emerged in the Katuruka research—a marked diminishment of elderly male testimonies. The absence of these important oral narratives was linked to the ravages of HIV/AIDS, leading to a significant elimination of elderly keepers of oral traditions (Schmidt 2010, 2017a). This change occurred in nearby Katuruka and Nkimbo villages, both experiencing deep personal losses as well as loss of knowledge-keepers accompanied by the deep loss of their oral narratives.

Such deep erosion of the intangible heritage, particularly the loss of once vital, multiple oral traditions that animated the tragedy of the 1901 massacre, mobilized the Katuruka committee to launch a follow-up community research project in the vicinity of the primary school (Schmidt 2017a). Local elders contributed their knowledge and registered their strong support for an educational exhibit about Mazinga Cave at Nyarubale Primary School, which was mounted in 2013. While they could not provide any direct knowledge about the events that contributed to the presence of human bodies at Mazinga Cave, they provided keen insights into burial practices associated with spirit mediums—sufficient to eliminate any association of the Mazinga Cave materials with ritual authorities. Their testimonies also underlined the fragility of the oral form when chains of transmission suffer serious rupture.

The texts from my archive bring the story around to how I was “trained” to listen as an anthropological archaeologist. I admit to being a selective listener, but I was sensitized by my training to recognize that foible. Listening was close to my sole purpose during 1969. It remains a constant part of my archaeological practice. As part of my apprenticeship in listening, I was able to proffer a solution to a local mystery: Whose bones are in Mazinga Cave? Without listening closely to elders in 1969, there would have been no way to explain how these human remains came to Mazinga Cave, because it was an appropriate setting for those killed in battle. Most importantly, the historical evidence needed to explain Mazinga Cave would never have been preserved, ensuring forever the subaltern condition of a major colonial atrocity (Pandey 1995; Spivak 1996).

Contemporary heritage knowledge about this genocidal event was entirely erased, a victim of the HIV/AIDS pandemic that broke chains of transmission (Schmidt 2010). Today a small exhibit at the primary school places the
remains into historical context and restores pride in the way that heritage was once maintained so meticulously in the region (Schmidt 2017a). The unspoken lesson from these vignettes is that it is impossible to practice an archaeology of listening without residing in communities for extended periods and enlisting local knowledge-keepers as trusted partners. This is precisely the advantage of a community archaeology that affords insights and understandings of the past otherwise inaccessible to many archaeologists.

Notes

1. During my early graduate training in archaeology, Stuart Struever was completing his Ph.D. under the supervision of Lewis Binford. Along with my peers, we were fed positivist pablum in huge helpings. It was not until my stay with the Haya that I came to an awareness that history making could follow alternative pathways.

2. This was not a deeply stratified rock shelter with distinct stratigraphy. The site was situated in a working farm where for generations if not centuries hoe agriculture reached to–40 cm to homogenize deposits, making continuous multiple dating for the multiple occupations impossible. Continuous occupation is affirmed by ceramic evidence, and by deep-time genealogical ties to the land and documentation of successive cult utilization of the site in ritual performance related to fertility, renewal, and iron working.

3. A horizon with burned forest trees on part of the site dated to the late-second millennium BCE had been broken up and had, with disturbances, penetrated into other features near the forge, at first confusing some; it was clearly a distinct phenomenon derived from burned forest evidence (Clist 1987).

4. Girls given as gifts to chiefs and kings were called Bazana. They remained in service until they were married. Their children also became Bazana.

5. Ray (1991) in his study of Buganda ritual offices provides skeletal sketches of minor female officials whose only apparent responsibility was to safe-keep the royal jawbone.

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