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**EAST AFRICA IN TRANSITION: ETHNICITY, ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT.**

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**TITLE**

**THE KIKUYU KIONDO KOSMOLOGY AND ARCHITECTURE: Why Traditional African Huts are Circular.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

One of the most important of the cultural artefacts in East Africa, the kiondo basket is analysed for its symbolic and cosmological function among the Kikuyu tribe. Its language and architecture is carefully presented for the first time by an architectural theorist. Drawing examples from the architectural and artistic world of geometrical symbols and motifs, the kiondo is shown to be a powerful cosmological model of the life of the Kikuyu. The psychic function of the kiondo is further shown to permeate their mode of organisation both in the macrocosmic state and in the individualised man. The paper presents other forms of architectural constructions following the kiondo model and presents architecture in its widest meaning. The paper concludes that using the kiondo cosmology it is possible to have a deeper insight into the architecture of the Kikuyu traditional hut as it is merely the kiondo cosmology in another form.

**KEY WORDS:** The Kiondo, Cosmology, Symbols, Mandalas.

**KEY CONCEPT:** Kikuyu Traditional Architecture.

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The kiondo is a complex document. By calling it a document from the onset, I am making the claim that it is written in a certain language and that it can be decoded, understood, and that it is more than a container or carrier of foodstuffs to and from the market. I want to set forward the thesis that the kiondo is one of the most powerful symbols among the Kikuyu and that it has been written in an archaic and incomprehensible language that will require careful and systematic decoding today. It is not the intention of this paper to go into the origins, history and diverse manifestations of the kiondo specific to diverse cultures or even among the Kikuyu. These diverse manifestations of the kiondo I will leave to anthropologists and historians. As a theorist, I will restrict the discussion to questions of meaning and this will be done by distilling the essence or substance and separating this essence from the actual form and utility. Welcome to the symbolic world of the kiondo.

Arno Hollosi claims that every representation of an object is a way to encode its meaning. The user has to decode the representation in order to understand the meaning of the object.<sup>1</sup> In trying to decode the meaning of the kiondo, we have to go back to Carl Jung's pioneering definitions of the basic terms in the world of symbols.

Man uses the spoken or written word to express the meaning of what he wants to convey. His language is full of symbols, but he also employs signs or images that are not strictly descriptive. Some are mere abbreviations or strings of initials, such as UN UNICEF, UNESCO, badges, insignia, trade names, etc. These are not symbols but signs, and they do not more than denote the objects to which they are attached.

Symbols on the other hand are purified essences that point to a higher ideal or idea.<sup>2</sup>



Fig 1  
Yin-Yang

This is the primary symbol of Taoist religious and philosophical beliefs. The yin-yang is also used in Confucianism. Tao, "the way," theorizes that everything in the universe is made of two conflicting forces: the yin and the yang. The yin is the negative, passive power, depicted in black. The yang is the positive, active power, depicted in white. Harmony can only be achieved when the two are perfectly balanced, as in the circle. The small circle of the opposite color is contained in each, signifying their interdependence. The yin may represent the soul, night, darkness, the Earth, and sustenance, whereas the yang may represent the spirit, light, day, heaven, creation, and dominance. As darkness preceded creation, the yin precedes the yang.<sup>3</sup>

As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the merely factual or material circumstance and into the realm of dreams, the unconscious and the spontaneous.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Sufi, (Islamic mystics), symbols are devices for the translation of divine realities into intelligible and phenomenal (material) world.<sup>5</sup> That is, we can only comprehend cosmic reality through symbols. (fig 2)

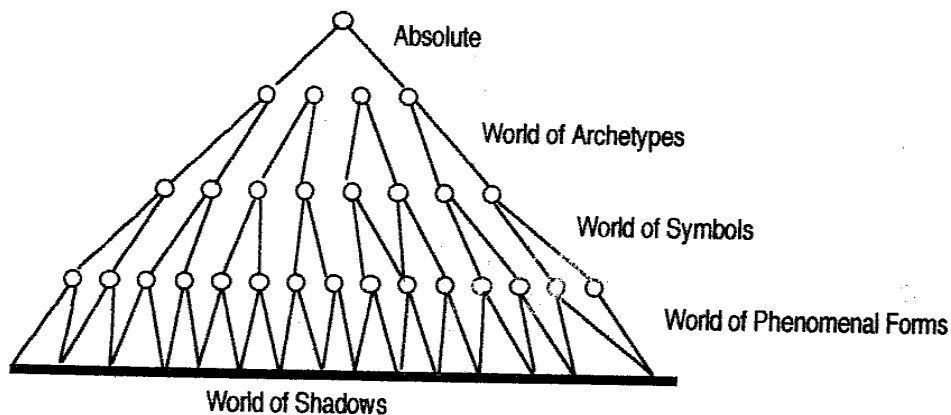


Fig 2

The true basis of symbolism is the linking together of all realities both natural and supernatural.

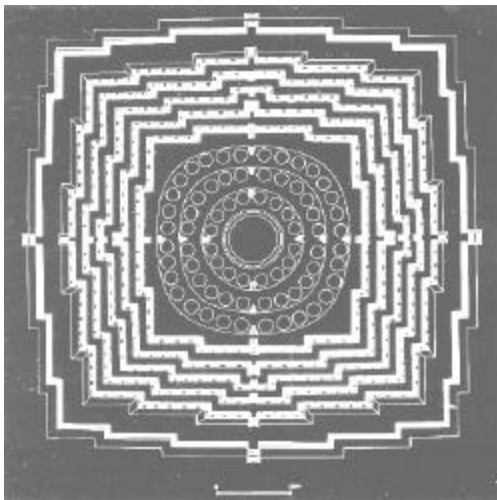
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According to Jung who has studied this subject in depth, symbols originate from certain archaic remnants or primordial images still active in our psyche, and these are *subconsciously* and *instinctively* represented.

The existence of a cultural symbols is brought about by what Christian Balkenius, calls 'spontaneous generation of symbols'.<sup>6</sup> These cultural symbols focus a people within a particular worldview.

A worldview is a coherent collection of concepts and theories that allow us to construct a global image of the world, and in this way to understand as many elements of our experience as possible.<sup>7</sup> As Jung explains, it is not necessary for the individual to understand this world model, though it still exists at a subconscious level as 'tacit knowing'. The concept of 'tacit knowing' presupposes that any articulated worldview is the result of unconscious factors that are culturally as well as biologically filtered and influenced.<sup>8</sup> This subliminal awareness and comprehension of information, especially information of a particular paradigm into which a person is born is what constitutes his cosmology. The 'Kihooto World View' as elaborated by Dr Gerald Wanjohi is the Kikuyu world as seen through the mirror of their proverbial wisdom. A cosmology is articulated or 'figured', in symbolic language as diagrams, proverbs, and myths etc. It is thus possible to see how a symbol like the Yin - Yang in fig 1 has been used in China to construct a comprehensive understanding of the Chinese world.

These constructions whether mental or physical, are usually in the form of 'Mandalas'.



Mandalas are geometrical diagrams which help man to visualise cosmic order in the mind's eye. The temple of Borobudur in Java is an example of a perfect mandala.

**Fig 3. Aerial View of Borobudur Temple, JAVA.** A mandala is a geometrical pattern embodying a spiritual truth. Brought to its greatest pitch of sophistication by Tibetan Buddhists, its essentials can nevertheless be found in the religious art of far distant times and places. Mandalas can be drawn out of the ground, and the plan of Borobudur, - something which could never be seen except with the mind's eye - has all the characteristics of one.

Aerts Diederick explains that the construction of a worldview or cosmology of a people is done by the use of symbols and these symbols or world models as he calls them are the means in the construction of a coherent cultural existence.<sup>9</sup> Fertility dances like the one illustrated in fig 4 by the Bavenda tribe in South Africa are mandala constructions which help them comprehend their own reality.

Fig 4. Fertility through cosmic harmony, is achieved by the dance in which the young virgins of the Bavenda tribe identify with the serpent force. After the rains, during these ceremonial days, the old women initiate the virgins, conduct the ceremony, and act as the pivot around which the dancers spiral in the rhythmic movements and sinuous coils of the python. Collapsing and reviving, they rest like the forces of nature in the seasonal round of death and rebirth.



Jung also explains that a true mandala representing the Self in man is usually drawn as a circle divided into four, with the four sides of the square designating the four parts of the human psyche – Thought, Feeling, Sensation, and Intuition. (fig 5)

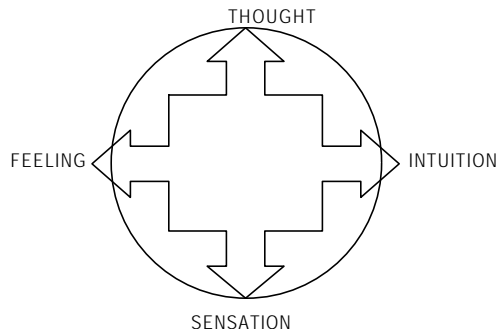
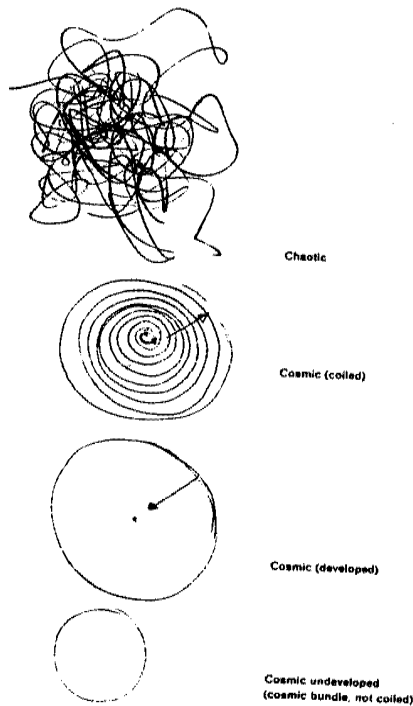


Fig 5. The Self represented as a Mandala

This is what is represented in Bolobudur in three dimensions. In the fourth dimension of time, the circle is transformed into a spiral which is deciphered as representing the journey of the Soul towards cosmic harmony. (See Paul Klee's notebook, fig 6) The spiral is thus an advanced archetypal symbol of the circle in the fourth dimension.

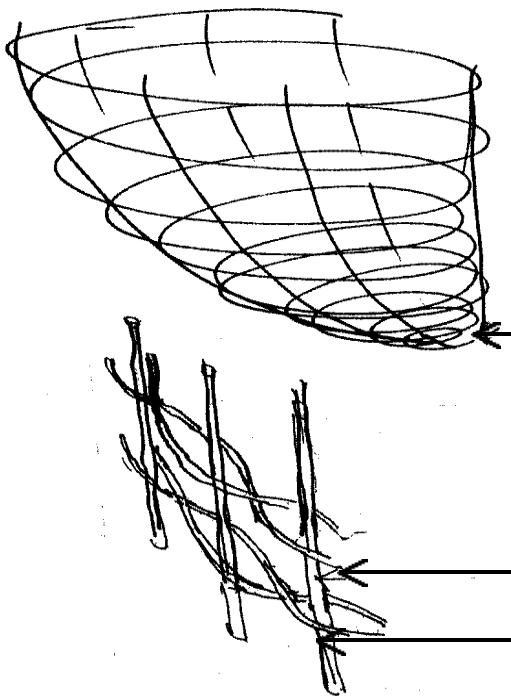
Fig 6: Paul Klee's Notebook

The Kiondo is written in the language of the spiral. Its basic structure is that of a weave composed of the two basic elements of the weave - the warp, (mirugamo - or those who stand erect) and the weft, (rurigi – string). As a mandala representing the Self, the warp stands for the male principle in the Self, while the weft stands for the female principle. Starting from the navel (mukonyo), the kiondo is constructed as a spiral that grows into a basket whose size depends on use. The sides are usually decorated with several bands of various colours which are in turn separated by thin stripes. This is achieved by varying the

colours of the weft. (fig 7)



**Fig 7.** The kiondo in its well known format as a basket  
The big bands are called 'Matina' or Stages and the small stripes are called 'Micoori' or stripes. The leather flap at the top is a modern innovation when the bag has become a fashion statement. Like humans who share similar genes but are never alike, there does not exist a Kiondo exactly like another. Each is unique.



**Fig 8.** The Kiondo as a spiral

Navel (Mukonyo) where everything starts. All the warp members point to here. The string, (weft) starts here.

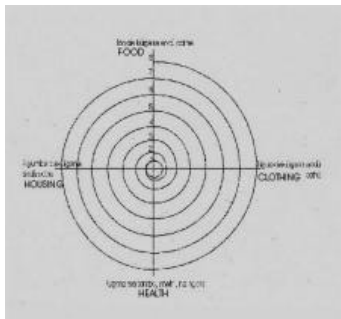
**Fig 9.** The Kiondo weave.

The weft ( Female Principle)

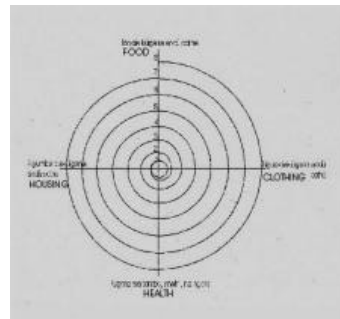
The warp (Male Principle)

Like all existence on the descending scale of realities, the spiral is a symbol. It denotes eternity, since it may go on forever. But because we necessarily conceive infinity in our own and therefore finite terms, we are forced to limit the limitless. It is only by imposing limits that we can make infinity accessible to us. Thus in practice, the spiral will end; on paper in two dimensions, we have in this space-time world to stop drawing it.<sup>10</sup>

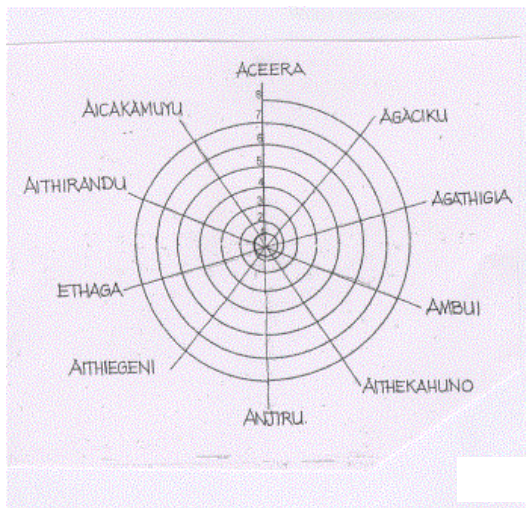
The kiondo as a model of life for the Kikuyu, can be interpreted to represent the individualised cosmic man, (microcosmic man) and at the same time to represent man within the cosmic order. (Macrocosmic man) (figs 10, 11) The Kikuyu mythological origins from a single source can be represented by the navel. The nine full clans by ten 'mirugamo', and the social organisation through the structure of the kiondo. (Fig 12) This is the 'Kikuyu Kiondo Kosmology'.



**Fig 10 Macrocosmic Man.**  
 0 - Man  
 1 - Home  
 2 - Extended Family  
 3 - Sub-Clan  
 4 - Clan  
 5 - Tribe  
 6 - Nation  
 7 - Diaspora



**Fig 11. Microcosmic man. (Individualised Cosmic Man)**  
 0 - Soul  
 1 - Child  
 2 - Adolescent  
 3 - Youth  
 4 - Warrior  
 5 - Middle age  
 6 - Old Age




**Fig 13. The Kikuyu Kiondo Kosmology**

The Kikuyu mythological Origin represented here by the form of the Kiondo. The navel represents the 'Spirit of Place' or 'Genius Loci'. The Origin or locus is Mukurwe wa nyagathanga at the beginning of time. The Warp or Mirugamo represent the original 9 full clans which never change. The 'Spirit of the Age' (Zeitgeist) or 'Age-groups', (Rika in Kikuyu) are represented by the Stages of the kiondo. Each stage (itina) represents an age-group which gives way to another after a generational change, (Ituika) or strip. These generations are masculine and are given male names like, Maina, Irungu, etc. This is an interesting switch of the male and female principles, something that also happens in the Chinese representation of them in the Yin-Yang. In the individual man above, the strip stands for an initiation into the next stage of life eg circumcision or marriage. Is it possible to speculate on the reasons of the popularity of a kiondo without stripes among the modern Kikuyu women?

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The myth of Mbari ya Mumbi was relevant when it was vital to foster solidarity and unity within the Kikuyu community. This usually occurred in times of deep internal crisis, or when faced by external threats. A good example is the rallying nationalist songs sung just before and during the Mau-Mau upheavals.<sup>11</sup>

One song relating to the kiondo went like this: 

Kiondo kiambirwo-i,  
Ni Kenyatta wa Muigai  
Muingi ukiogothera ndigi,  
Mau-Mau igitiriha,  
Kiondo kiambirwo.

The Kiondo was constructed,  
By Kenyatta wa Muigai  
The People wove the strings  
The Mau-Mau concluded it  
The Kiondo was constructed.

It can be seen from the fore-going, that the Kikuyu Kiondo Kosmology was deeply embedded in the collective psyche. Kikuyu children when playing will hold hands and actually construct and deconstruct a living spiral much like the girls of the Bavenda tribe and sing;

Nyambaga kondo gakwa-i,   
Wone ngiamba-i,  
Wone ngiambai-i,  
Ningugatharia,  
Tharia!!

I construct my kondo, (small kiondo)  
See me construct it,  
See me construct it,  
I deconstruct.  
Deconstruct !!



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A most beautiful example of the kiondo cosmology among the Kikuyu is seen in the traditional Gicukia dance. (Fig 13) performed by young men and women. The couples form circles around a tree. As can be seen in the picture, the men stand upright like poles with their arms placed stiffly straight on the girl's shoulders. All the young men's hands would thus be pointing like rays towards a centre, the tree, (navel). The girls' hands encircle the men's waists thus forming a sort of weave akin to the weft gripping the warp in the kiondo. The whole circle moves slooowly around in sensuous rhythmic movements, with the fixed tree representing the The Origin, Navel or axis of the world, (Axis Mundi) This is the 'Kikuyu Kiondo Kosmology'.



Fig 13. The Gicukia Dance.

A powerful example of Kikuyu cosmic mandala constructions comparable to the Borobudur temple in Java. Fig 3 and the Bavanda fertility dance in fig 4.

That the circle is a powerful cosmological symbol appearing in most cultures is discussed in detail by Aniela Jaffe, a student of Carl Jung. Writing on 'Symbolism in the Visual Arts' she discusses the Mandala - Square/circle duality and explains that

Whether in classical or primitave foundations, the mandala ground plan was never dictated by considerations of aesthetics or economics. It was a transformation of the city into an ordered cosmos, a sacred place bound by its centre to the other world, and this transformation accorded with the vital feelings and needs of religious man.<sup>12</sup>

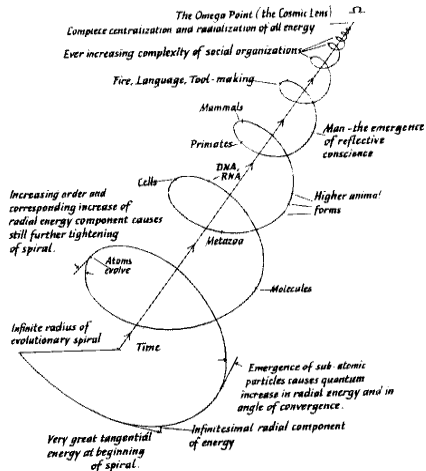
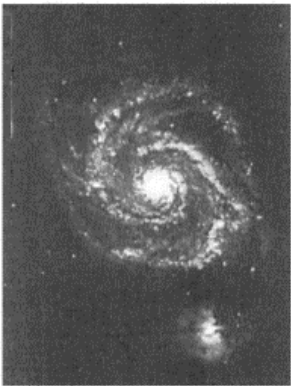
That one distinctive feature of African traditional architecture is the prevalence of circularity in the ground plan is not in dispute among historians. What is not generally agreed upon or given the importance due to it are reasons for the circularity. This question is in the province of 'Theory of Architecture' and it is not a field that attracts as much attention as 'History of Architecture'. Whereas history is concerned with issues of documentation and classification of the architectural form and content, theory is concerned with the deeper issues underlying the why of form and content. This is why the problem of the circularity of African traditional architecture can be so consuming to a theorist. Historian Susan Denyer gives a taxonomy of house forms from all over Africa and has carefully documented the what and when of a good part of African Architecture but does not address the issues in terms of the why. Her book contains many rich details that cry out for a deeper analysis. (Fig 14 )

Fig 14 (left). Drawing of the interior of a roof on a Fulani house, Futa Jalon, Guinea, 1956. The apex of the roof was filled with a basketwork panel.



Why should anyone go into such lengths in creating a ceiling of a hut? Don't we see Borobudur here yet again? Is this not the Gicukia? Compare this to an illustration of the Omega Point below.

Fig 15 (below). The Omega Point, The navel of the Kiondo, The central Buddha in Borobudur, The World Tree of the Gicukia, The Centre Pole of the Kikuyu Hut, The Eye of the Galaxy Fig 16, The Christ, Axis Mundi, and divine link of heaven and earth.



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Historians Anyamba T.C. and Adebayo A. A. in their landmark book 'Traditional Architecture: Settlements, Evolution and House Form' give the issue a passing remark by attributing the cone on cylinder form to climatic factors. Kaj Andersen's work 'African Traditional Architecture' goes farther and poses the question, "Why is the traditional form of the Kenyan house in the countryside - as in an number of other African countries - round?"<sup>13</sup> He presents the cosmological theory that the circularity was in keeping with the Kikuyu view of the physical cosmos, the sun moon, and horizon, but concludes that in his opinion, the cone on cylinder theme was due to practical considerations of technology. Paul Oliver in several of his books on the subject goes furthest in his studies on symbolism and how it is directly linked to the generation of house form. Unfortunately his scope is too wide to discuss the specific issues we are looking at here. Richard Hull in his book on African history also deals with the question head on. In chapter seven of the book, 'African Civilization Before the Batauree', he discusses the form of the cone-upon-beehive theme and writes,

Many contemporary observers cannot understand the preponderance of circularity in building design. The solution to this puzzle lies in the widespread availability of thatch as a building material. Thatch can most expeditiously be used by weaving it into a conical form. Indeed the very nature of thatch renders it capable of spanning an open space only if woven into a cone-like shape. This explains why round dwellings were so common, especially in the timberless grasslands that cover so much of the subcontinent<sup>14</sup>

This technological argument is the one mainly taught in architectural schools although it does not explain the reason why the coming of the mechanically minded Batauree should have had such an immediate impact on the ground plan. It does not also explain how and why the thatch was forced on the square plan before the introduction of iron roofs. The hypothesis that this grass/square problem was a manifestation of the clash of "World Views" to me seems to have more merit. Why??? Because it would explain why the conical huts at Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga, the mythical origin of the Kikuyus are roofed in iron sheets forced into a circular plan making nonsense of the technological theory!! I ask, "What are they trying to say?" It also explains why a leading cultural figure like the Kikuyu literally giant, Ngugi wa Thion'go, would go to such lengths to build round huts in stone and concrete, throwing away the technological theory out of the window. He is trying

to tell us that they are not mere huts but constitute a powerful symbol of his mind-set. It is perfectly clear that what replaced the gicukia, was a mind-set represented by the drill exercises in fig 18 below. This is the message Ngugi wants us to get!



Fig 18. The drill exercises introduced to the Kikuyu to replace the 'ungodly' Gicukia.

Stanley Kiama Gathigira, writing in 'Miikarire ya Agikuyu', (Kikuyu Culture) in 1934, explains that building a house is a communal function. The men cut the main wall posts (mirugamo, warp) and put up the structure. The women carry the lighter timbers, (which become the weft). The boys prepare the strings and the girls prepare the thatch. The symbolism in this whole exercise is a mirror of the cosmos as represented in the gicukia dance (fig19, - 21) This tentative analysis of the kiondo is pointing towards a conclusion that the world view of the Kikuyus, the Kikuyu Kiondo Kosmology, had a powerful if not an overriding influence on the geometry of their Architecture. Architecture of course is here being seen with a capital A - All their constructions, both physical and mental. Whether a construction is made to last only a few hours as in the gicukia, does not make it any less architecture than a hut built to last ten years. The kiondo is the quintessential architectural masterpiece among the Kikuyu.

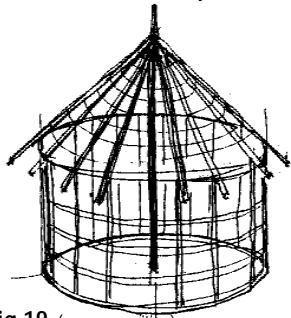


Fig 19 (case sensitive)  
The man standing stiff with the hands pointing to the World Tree. The woman holds him tightly.

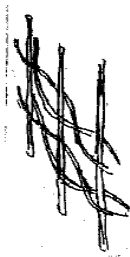


Fig 20  
The man & woman



Fig 21(case sensitive)  
The poles erected stiffly on the ground with the rafters pointing to the Centre Pole. The weft holds tightly on the sides.

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## Notes.

- <sup>1</sup> [www.iicm.edu/thesis/aholloi\\_html/node1.html](http://www.iicm.edu/thesis/aholloi_html/node1.html) 2001
- <sup>2</sup> Jung, Carl G., Man and his Symbols. Dell publishing co., New York, 1964.
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- <sup>4</sup> op cit, Jung, 1964
- <sup>5</sup> Bakhtier Laleh, SUFI: Expressions of a Mystic Quest. Thames and Hudson, London, 1976
- <sup>6</sup> [www.lucs.lu.se/People/Christian.Balkenius/Abstracts/Symbols.html](http://www.lucs.lu.se/People/Christian.Balkenius/Abstracts/Symbols.html), 2000
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- <sup>10</sup> Purce, Jill, The Mystic Spiral. Thames and Hudson, London, 1974
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- <sup>12</sup> op cit, Jung 1964
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## List of Illustrations.

- Fig 1: [www.fleurdelis.com/symbols.htm](http://www.fleurdelis.com/symbols.htm)  
Fig 2: op cit, Bakhtier, 1976  
Fig 3: Lundquist, John M. The Temple: Meeting Place of Heaven and Earth. Thames and Hudson, London, 1993  
Fig 4, 6,15,16: Ibid. Purce, 1976  
Fig 7: [www.theafricanimage.com/handbags.htm](http://www.theafricanimage.com/handbags.htm)  
Fig 13, 18: op cit, Cagnolo, 1933  
Fig 14: op cit, Denyer, 1978