



FEATURE

Natural Sacred Sites in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Myth or Reality?

by Joel Kiyulu



Zongo Falls in the Bas-Congo province. Photo: J. Kiyulu

Nkwini, Ntolize, Ngalu, Mukpele, Ntweyi, Mutyo, dwale, Esey, Wu, mubu at Teke, Mbatakuluzi in Bas-Congo, Lake "kum'ldyph" in Kuba territory, river "mbamba" located in Batwa forest in Mweka territory.

Many people are attracted to the magnetic power of caves and rocks: to places like Milye at Teke, to the Ndimba and Ngoyo caves. Some even marvel at telluric vibrations of mountains like Loyo Mountains, Bangu, Nkumb'awungudi, the Lemba Mountains in Bas Congo, Mangengenge (Mabye) mountain in Bateke tableland at Kinshasa, Biega in Kahuzi Biega Park, and Bulumiza Mountain in North Kivu.

At the local scale, the sacredness is intertwined with rituals involving ancestors' spirits or genies. The sites are not purely symbolic, and this is shown in the two most common ways in which their use is controlled: Either, a) through total restriction of use - i.e. the sites cannot be accessed by anyone, ever, for any reason; or b) restrictions as to who is responsible for their protection and management - for example at some locations regulatory bodies allow these sites to be managed by traditional chiefs.

A pastor snaps back, "Since traditional chiefs are sorcerers and these restrictions come from evil spirits, these sacred sites must be destroyed". He sparked a debate on "holy" and "haunted" places. What smell of colonization behind dialectics between God and Devil!

For the urban people, the worst sites appear to be those that incorporate the traditional restrictions. But without those restrictions, no sacred places would have been preserved.

People often confuse African customs and evil practices. Above all, they accuse rituals of being evil or "from the devil". In this context of intolerance, the Teke people have lost 94 % of their sacred forests around Kinshasa town (not including cemetery-based forests). It should be borne in mind that to preserve sacred places is to preserve the ritual heritage of local and pygmy communities and their historical memory.

What a pity the symbolism of restrictions is not known by a large majority of the population. In fact, restrictions function as a policing mechanism distinguishing secular places from sacred ones. There are three common types of restrictions related to sacred sites:

- (i) Restrictions of traditional authorities.
(ii) Restrictions regulating access to sacred sites and rituals dealing with the sacred.
(iii) Restrictions related to natural resource exploitation.

A brief inventory of natural sacred sites in DRC shows that, while the traditional ones are almost destroyed, Christian ones (usually damaged ancient buildings) are preserved.

For instance, Nkamba City that immortalizes Prophet Kimbangu's memory and the historic sites of Bakanja and Anuaritch which offers good fortune to travelers and pilgrims who travel there for purification, to be cured of deep or critical grief, to be freed from personal internal conflicts, and to seek inner peace.

By visiting these sites one opens the history pages of the prophet's life and that of other individuals who died in the embrace of sanctity. Natural sacred sites: myth or reality? They appear to be those spaces where the invisible world meets the visible one; where spiritual beings interact with living ones.



Kimbangu's tomb in Kamba City in DRC. Photo: J. Kiyulu

warning people not to sell their souls for the lure of money offered by external pressure groups or lobbies. With recurrent armed conflicts, historic monuments are destroyed, tourism is suffering and a culture of violence spreads out through the sacred forest where rebels are hiding. Every day, local and pygmy communities in the DRC write the black book of the condition of natural sacred sites with the ink of their tears.

The second answer relates to a loss of identity by black people. As long as the Congolese refuse to be reconciled with their story through strong cultural symbols, the yoke of acculturation will go from generation to generation. Then it will come as no surprise that devalued sites grow in proportion to valued ones.

The last question dealt with sacred sites and youthful expectations. "What are the advantages of scared sites to the youth?"

Many interesting responses bring new hope to develop a more fraternal and responsible society echoing the vision of happiness, peace and blessing. By reconciling historical memory, the discovery of symbolic trees and aquatic beings in Wuya forest in Bas - Congo, an opportunity is presented to boost the strength of traditional knowledge holders' within their communities. In other sites, it is necessary to bring the love of natural beauty and the creation of the environment up in a context that people understand and trust. These three elements may help to provide a grounding upon which people can discuss and begin to relate to the sacred as well as fruitful and authentic relationships with symbolic sites.

I believe that all types of sacred sites must be preserved to serve as a gateway to knowledge, know-how and being. This is the joint responsibility of present and future generations. But first, an objective identification and critical re-appropriation is needed in the DRC and elsewhere.

Joel Kiyulu is Professor of at the University of Kinshasa. His work is mostly focused on traditional local knowledge and sustainable development.

OPPORTUNITIES

6 February 27th International Congress for Conservation Biology and 4th European Congress for Conservation Biology

Montpellier, France. August 2-6 Abstracts submission deadline

The joint International and European Congress of the Society for Conservation Biology "Mission Biodiversity: Choosing new paths for conservation". Call for abstracts and conference website here.

13 February 6th World Conference of the Society for Ecological Restoration

Manchester, UK. August 23-27 Abstracts submission deadline

The conference has the title "Towards resilient ecosystems: Restoring the urban, the rural and the wild". Conference website and call for abstracts here.

15 February 5th International Conference of the European Forum for the Study of Religion and Environment

Munich, Germany. May 14-17 Abstracts submission deadline

Organized in collaboration with the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, this conference has the title "Religion in the Anthropocene: Challenges, Idolatries, Transformations". More info and details are available here.

23 February 20th Postgraduate Religion and Theology Conference

University of Bristol, UK. March 13-14 Abstracts submission deadline

The conference is organized by the Department of Religion and Theology and the Graduate School of the University of Bristol, and has the title "Nature and Religion". More info and call for papers here.

3 March International Scientific Conference: "Our Common Future under Climate Change"

UNESCO, Paris, France. July 7-10 Call for contributions deadline

The Conference will address key issues concerning climate change and offer an opportunity to discuss solutions for both mitigation and adaptation. The conference is organized under the umbrella of ICSU, Future Earth, UNESCO and major French research institutions, with the support of the French Government. Conference website here.

PUBLICATIONS

Böhm, S., Bharucha, Z.P., Pretty, J. (eds.), 2014. Ecocultures: Blueprints for Sustainable Communities. Routledge, London

Borona, G.K., 2014. Exploring the link between forests, traditional custodianship and community livelihoods: the case of Nyambene forest in Kenya. Forestry Chronicle 50(5): 586-591. doi:10.5558/tfc2014-121

Brunn, S.D. (ed.), 2015. The Changing World Religion Map: Sacred Places, Identities, Practices and Politics (5 vol.). Springer, Berlin

Bu, N.C., Chi, Y., 2014. The Christian and Buddhist environmental movements in contemporary Korea: common efforts and their limitations. Korea Journal 54(4): 52-79

Dietzel, I., 2014. The Ecology of Coexistence and Conflict in Cyprus: Exploring the Religion, Nature, and Culture of a Mediterranean Island. De Gruyter, Berlin

Frascaroli, F., Bhagwat, S., Diemer, M., 2014. Healing animals, feeding souls: ethnobotanical values at sacred sites in Italy. Economic Botany 68(4): 438-451. doi:10.1007/s12231-014-9290-7

Mallik, B., 2014. Science, philosophy, and policy on the Yamuna River of India. Environmental Ethics 36(3): 283-301



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ISSUE 4(1) AT A GLANCE:

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UPCOMING EVENTS

March 10, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK 'An Inordinate Fondness for Beetles' Presentation by P. Sochaczewski

ON THE BOOKSHELF

List of relevant publications issued in the last three months

OPPORTUNITIES

February 13. Call for abstracts deadline 6th World Conference of the Society for Ecological Restoration

February 15. Call for abstracts deadline 5th International Conference of the European Forum for the Study of Religion and Environment

February 23. Call for abstracts deadline 20th Postgraduate Religion and Theology Conference

March 2. Call for abstracts deadline International Scientific Conference "Our Common Future under Climate Change"

ABOUT SSIREN

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The Sacred Site Research Newsletter (SSIREN) was conceived at the symposium "Conserving nature at sacred sites", held at the University of Zurich on the 25th October 2011, as a means to inform and aggregate the community of researchers working on sacred natural sites. It is aimed not merely at scholars but also practitioners and policy-makers coping with specific issues, as well as anyone with a general interest in the interaction between people and nature.

SSIREN is an acronym from the title Sacred Sites Research Newsletter, but as a creature a Siren is also a convincing symbol of the connection between beliefs, culture and nature, which is characteristic of sacred natural sites.

The Newsletter is issued quarterly and is literally "made" by its members: everyone is warmly encouraged to submit news, events, opportunities, and recent relevant publications, or to introduce their work in a feature article. Relevant contributions from all academic disciplines, as well as NGO practitioners and other institutions, are warmly welcome.

All past issues of SSIREN are currently hosted by the Sacred Sites Research Initiative's website and are available for download.

CONTACTS

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FRIENDS



SANASI - World Database on Sacred Natural Sites



ARC - The Alliance of Religions and Conservation



ISSRNC - The International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture

SACREDNATURALSITES

NSNI - The Sacred Natural Sites Initiative



CSVPA - IUCN-WCPA Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas

Osuri, A.M., Madhusudan, M.D., Kumar, V.S., Chengappa, S.K., Kushalappa, C.G., Sankaran, M., 2014. Spatio-temporal variation in forest cover and biomass across sacred groves in a human-modified landscape of India's Western Ghats. Biological Conservation 178: 193-199. doi:10.1016/j.biocon.2014.08.008

Ray, R., Chandran, M.D.S., Ramachandra, T.V., 2015. Hydrological importance of sacred forest fragments in Central Western Ghats of India. Tropical Ecology 56(1): 87-99

Riley, M.T., 2014. 2014. The democratic roots of our ecological crisis: Lynn White, biodiversity, and the Earth Charter. Zygon 49(4): 938-948. doi:10.1111/zygo.12139

Salick, J., Ghimire, S.K., Fang, Z., Dema, S., Konchar, K.M., 2014. Himalayan alpine vegetation, climate change and mitigation. Journal of Ethnobiology 34(3): 276-293. doi:10.2993/0278-0771-34.3.276

Tucker, M.E., Grim, J. (eds.), 2014. Thomas Berry: Selected Writings on the Earth Community. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY

EVENTS

March 10, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK An Inordinate Fondness for Beetles: The Hero's Journey of Alfred Russel Wallace in Southeast Asia A presentation by P.S. Sochaczewski and D. Hallmark

The lecture is hosted by the Royal Geographical Society in cooperation with Bournemouth University. More info and reservations here.

You receive this newsletter because you have previously participated in initiatives on sacred natural sites. Tired of it? Please contact the Editors. Think it's fantastic and would like to involve a colleague or a friend? Contact the Editors all the same.