



FEATURE

The conservation of sacred cultural and natural landscapes in Kenya: the work of National Museums of Kenya in the sacred Mijikenda Kaya forests of Coastal Kenya

by Lawrence Chiro, National Museums of Kenya, Coast forest Conservation Unit, Kilifi, Kenya

The history of National Museums of Kenya's (NMK) involvement with the coastal sacred Mijikenda forests dates back to 1986, when it commissioned two coastal forests surveys. The "Preliminary survey of kaya forests of coastal Kenya" was conducted in 1986 by Anne Robertson and was funded by IUCN and WWF. The second survey, "Kenya coastal forests: Status, floristics and options for conservation and management", was also funded by WWF and conducted in 1988 by Anne Robertson and Quentin Luke (recipient of the David Fairchild Medal for Plant Exploration in 2014).



The Moro, a traditional meeting hut within the kaya forest. Photo: Emma Shephard-Walwyn.

Both surveys alluded that coastal forests were biologically diverse with over 50% of Kenya's rare plant species found in them (Robertson and Luke 1993). These and other preceding botanical expeditions at the coast provided a scientific justification for the protection of coastal forests, including the sacred Mijikenda Kaya forests. At the local level, community members had become agitated and were seeking protection of the Kaya forests, over the wanton destruction experienced. In November 1990, the Member of Parliament for Kwale, Hon. Juma Boy, put forward a private member's motion in parliament which was approved by the house to have a number of the kaya forests protected under the NMK (Robertson 1986).

In 1990, a proposal to WWF through NMK was put forward for a five-year project to set up a unit within NMK to care for the kayas and oversee their gazettement as National Monuments (NM). It was not until February 1992 that this project, known as the "Coast Forest Conservation Unit (CFCU)" started work in the Kwale district on the South Coast of Kenya. In October 1994, the project extended operations to the Kaya forests in Kilifi District. The long term objective of the project was to gazette all the kaya forests in Coast province as NMs and introduce and enhance sustainable management practices. True to its mission, NMK obtained gazettement of 23 kayas and sacred groves as NMs in Kwale district between January and March 1992.

In 1995 the project received additional funding from Overseas Development Assistance and WWF-UK Joint Funding Scheme for an expanded conservation mandate of coastal forests. Charged with the responsibility of promoting the gazettement, protection and conservation of Kaya forests as NMs in collaboration with local communities, the unit had the following activities:

- Boundary demarcation, survey and gazettement of kaya forests as NMs
- Supporting local communities in the protection and maintenance of their sacred sites for their cultural and natural values
- A public awareness and education programme to increase people's knowledge about the Kayas and the need to conserve them for their biological and cultural heritage
- Promoting biological, sociological, cultural and other research so as to increase the knowledge for enhanced management and conservation
- Promotion in partnership with other bodies of alternative wood and other resource demands by communities neighbouring the kayas to help decrease utilization pressure on the forests
- Support the development of local community and other institutions involved with Kaya and coastal forest conservation.



Regeneration along the forest boundary at Kaya Bedida, Kilifi County. Photo: Emma Shephard-Walwyn.

This major WWF funded project came to an end in 2001. CFCU still exists with support from NMK but at a reduced capacity due to scarcity of resources.

Major achievements

Since its creation CFCU has achieved a number of key goals:

- Demarcation, survey and gazettement as NMs of 40 Kaya forests
- Elders and community are now responsive and actively participate in conservation
- Elders council adjudicate disputes and impose fines on those destroying the environment
- Ceremonies continue to be undertaken at many of the kaya sites
- Livelihood options to diffuse pressure:
 - ◊ Woodlot development at kaya Rabai, Chivara and Chonyi
 - ◊ Beekeeping at kaya Fungo, Rabai, Duruma, Kauma and Jorore
 - ◊ Ecotourism at kaya Kinondo and Mudzimuvya Rabai
- "Museums and Heritage Act 2006" now recognises the Kayas as heritage sites
- 9 kaya sites listed as World Heritage sites under UNESCO in 2008:
 - ◊ Kauma, Ribe, Jibana, Kambe, Fungo Giriama, Bomu- Fimboni, Mudzimuvya and Mtswakara Gandini
- Kaya traditions and practices were enlisted under UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage demanding urgent safeguarding
- Documentation of cultural knowledge regarding resource utilization and management
- Publicity on the kayas has greatly improved
- Upsurge of research in the kaya forests nationally and internationally
- Kaya forest elders committees registered with government department of social services giving them recognition
- Two county-wide kaya elders associations were registered with the government as Community-based Organizations giving them greater voice and unity of purpose.



Research workshop conducted in 2013 with elders from across Kilifi county. Photo: Emma Shephard-Walwyn.

Continued work

Whilst the capacity of CFCU is somewhat reduced since the cessation of the WWF-funded project, its work still continues. The ongoing projects include:

- Continued external research projects co-operating with CFCU
- A research project partnering with CFCU investigating human rights issues associated with the use and conservation of the kayas
- Continued work with the elders and local communities on the protection of the sites
- Continued work on the publicity of the kayas
- Continued support for use of the sites for traditional ceremonies
- Attendance at the International workshop on World Heritage and Rights led by the advisory bodies to the World Heritage Convention (IUCN, ICCROM and ICOMO) in April 2014
- A new kaya forests strategic management plan is in the final stages of preparation to replace an outdated one.

References

Robertson, S.A., 1986. Preliminary floristic survey of the kaya forests of coastal Kenya. Unpublished report to the Director National Museums of Kenya and WWF International. Nairobi, Kenya.

Robertson, S.A., Luke, W.R.Q., 1993. Report of the coast forest survey. Unpublished report to the Director National Museums of Kenya and WWF International. Nairobi, Kenya.

Additional literature on the Mijikenda Kaya Forests

Githitho, A.N., 1998. Institutional Challenges in Conservation: The Case of the Sacred Kaya Forests of the Kenya Coast. National Museums of Kenya, Mombasa.

Githitho, A.N., 2003. The sacred Mijikenda kaya forests of coastal Kenya and biodiversity Conservation. In: Lee, C., Schaaf, T. (Eds.), *The Importance of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation*. UNESCO, Paris, pp. 27-35.

Hackel, J.D., 1999. Community conservation and the future of Africa's wildlife. *Conservation Biology* 13(4): 726-734.

Matiku, P., 2003. *The Coastal Forests of Kenya*: Forests data, threats, socio-economic issues, values, stakeholders, challenges, strategies, investment and enabling environment. Nature Kenya & WWF, Nairobi.

Metcalfe, K., French-Constant, R., Gordon, I., 2010. Sacred sites as hotspots for biodiversity: the Three Sisters Cave complex in coastal Kenya. *Oryx* 44(1): 118-123.

Morton, R.F., 1972. The Shungwaya myth of Mijikenda origins: a problem of later nineteenth century coast history. *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 5(3): 397-423.

Nyamweru, C., Kibet, S., Pakia, M., Cooke, A., 2008. The kaya forests of coastal Kenya: 'remnant patches' or dynamic entities? In: Sheridan, M.J., Nyamweru, C. (Eds.), *African Sacred Groves: Ecological Dynamics and Social Change*, James Currey Ltd., Oxford, pp. 62-86.

Spear, T.T., 1978. The Kaya complex: A history of the Mijikenda Peoples of the Kenya Coast to 1900. Kenya Literature Bureau, Nairobi.

UNESCO 2008. *Nomination dossier for inscription on the World Heritage List: The sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests (Kenya)*. UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Paris.

Walsh, M.T., 1992. Mijikenda origins: a review of the evidence. *Transafrican Journal of History* 21: 1 - 18.

Wanza, N.C., Njuguna, M.B., 2012. *Designing for sustainability in cultural landscapes: The Kaya Kinondo for of the Mijikenda community, Kenya*. Presented at: Sustainable Futures, Architecture and Urbanism in the Global South, Kampala, Uganda, 27th - 30th June 2012.

Zeleza, T., 1995. Mijikenda. The Rosen Publishing Group, New York.

PUBLICATIONS

Bauman, W.A., 2014. Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic. Columbia University Press, New York

Bohannon, R., 2014. Religions and Environments: A Reader in Religion, Nature and Ecology. Bloomsbury Academic, London

Cox, M., Villamayor-Tomas, S., Hartberg, Y., 2014. The role of religion in community-based natural resource management. *World Development* 54: 46-55

Globus Veldman, R., Szasz, A., Aluza-DeLay, R. (Eds.), 2013. How the World's Religions are Responding to Climate Change: Social Scientific Investigations. Routledge, New York

Grim, J., Tucker, M.E., 2014. Ecology and Religion. Island Press, Washington, DC

Jenkins, W., 2013. The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity. Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC

Johnston, L.F., Bauman, W.A. (Eds.), 2014. Science and Religion: One Planet, Many Possibilities. Routledge, New York

Li, J., et al., 2014. Role of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in snow leopard conservation. *Conservation Biology* 28(1): 87-94

Onyekwelu, J.C., Olusola, J.A., 2014. Role of sacred grove in in-situ biodiversity conservation in tropical zone of south-western Nigeria. *Journal of Forestal Science* 26(1): 5-15

Ray, R., Chandran, M.D.S., Ramachandra, T.V., 2014. Biodiversity and ecological assessments of Indian sacred groves. *Journal of Forestry Research* 25(1): 21-28

Sponsel, L., 2014. Spiritual ecology: is it the ultimate solution for the environmental crisis? *Choice* 51(8): 1339-1348

Stikker, A., 2014. Sacred Mountains: How the Revival of Daoism is Turning China's Ecological Crisis Around. Bene Factum Publishing, London

Tankou, C.M., de Snoo, G.R., de Jongh, H.H., Persoon, G., 2014. Variation in plant biodiversity across sacred groves and fallows in Western Highlands of Cameroon. *African Journal of Ecology* 52(1): 10-19

EVENTS

April 28-May 3, Antananarivo, Madagascar
2nd International Conference on Sustainable Alternatives for Poverty Reduction and Ecological Justice

More info and registration [here](#).

April 30-May 4, Assisi, Italy
15th European Conference on Science and Theology

The conference is promoted by the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology (ESSSAT) and is titled *Do Emotions Shape the World? Perspectives from Science and Theology*. For more info, please visit the [conference website](#).

May 16, Warwick, UK
Interdisciplinary conference: Geographies of Man - Environmental Influence from Antiquity to the Enlightenment

The conference is organised by the Humanities Research Centre at the University of Warwick. More info and registration [here](#).

June 25-27, University of Kent, UK
BES and DICE Joint Symposium: Considering the Future of Conservation

The symposium is co-organised by the British Ecological Society and the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology of the University of Kent. Registrations are open. More info [here](#).

ISSUE 3(2) AT A GLANCE:

FEATURE

The conservation of sacred cultural and natural landscapes in Kenya
by Lawrence Chiro

UPCOMING EVENTS

April 28-May 3, Antananarivo, Madagascar
2nd International Conference on Sustainable Alternatives for Poverty Reduction and Ecological Justice

April 30-May 4, Assisi, Italy
15th European Conference on Science and Theology

May 16, Warwick, UK
Interdisciplinary conference: Geographies of Man - Environmental Influence from Antiquity to the Enlightenment

June 25-27, University of Kent, UK
BES and DICE Joint Symposium: Considering the Future of Conservation

ON THE BOOKSHELF

List of relevant publications issued in the last three months

OPPORTUNITIES

April 30. Application deadline
Anthropocene Campus

May 15. Call for abstracts
51st Annual Meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation

ABOUT SSIREN



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

For inquiries about the newsletter, to submit an article, or to contribute in any other way, please contact the editors:

Emma Shephard-Walwyn
es307@kent.ac.uk

Fabrizio Frascaroli
fabrizio.frascaroli@ieu.uzh.ch

Sacred Sites Research Newsletter
ssirennewsletter@gmail.com

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

SNSI – The Sacred Natural Sites Initiative



Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas

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

OPPORTUNITIES

April 30

Anthropocene Campus
Application deadline

The campus will take place November 14-22, 2014 at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin, and will provide a transdisciplinary co-learning space for young scholars from a wide range of disciplinary, academic, and professional backgrounds. More details [here](#).

May 15

Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture
Call for abstracts

Paper proposals with the theme *Ecological Resistance Movements in the 21st Century: The Continuing Global Struggle for Biocultural Survival and Multispecies Justice* are currently sought for an edited volume by this title and a special issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*. More info [here](#).



We warmly thank the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale and Alliance of Religions and Conservation for their precious updates and contributions to this newsletter

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.