

Traditional leadership and gender: Handling controversies in sacred forests

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The Coastal Forest Conservation Unit is part of the National Museum of Kenya. The long-term objective of the unit is to register all sacred Kaya forests and groves as national monuments, and to enhance the sustainability of their management. The Unit has assisted the local communities in protecting these forests for their biological and cultural values. Simultaneously they have helped to alleviate their economic problems. During this process it was learned that development which builds on indigenous knowledge, local values and traditional leadership is certainly not without controversy.

The so-called *Kaya* forests, of which 45 have been identified, are situated on the Coastal plain and hills of Kenya. Most of them are residual patches, on average between 10 and 400 ha, of the once extensive lowland forests of East Africa. The forests owe their existence directly to the beliefs, culture and history of the nine coastal *Mijikenda* ethnic groups. Around three centuries ago these groups came from the present day Somalia, and started to live in small fortified villages sheltered in the forests, or the *Kaya* - which means 'homestead' in the Bantu language. In the early part of the twentieth century, most of these villages were abandoned, though the newly formed communities have maintained the sites of their original settlements as 'sacred Kaya forests'.

Traditional council

Cutting trees, and other destructive activities in and around these sites, is traditionally prohibited by the *Ngambi*, the council of elders of each community. This council is also largely responsible for the day-to-day running of community affairs, including spiritual, social, and economic matters. The council meets regularly to deliberate on issues related to, for example, food, water and security. Elders qualified to sit in the council are mostly aged and respected members of the community, who have gone through various initiation rites.

The *Ngambi* are thus the main custodians of the sacred Kaya forests, as the Government is not managing them effectively. But the encroachment of the Kaya forests is becoming more and more common and trees are being cut down to use the land for *shambas*, or gardens. It is clear that the position of the *Ngambi* is no longer strong enough

to assure the survival of the sacred forests.

Studies done in these sacred forests have indicated that other invaluable traditional knowledge of the *Mijikenda* communities is also declining at an alarming rate. This has been attributed to the fact that this knowledge is often held secret by a small group of elders, and not passed down to the younger generations. The studies also pointed at the loss of indigenous knowledge due to influences from foreign religions, such as Christianity, the tourist industry and modern education.

Women and youth sidelined

Women are the main forest resource users in terms of fuel wood, while the young people harvest fruits, graze livestock and trap wild animals and birds in the forest. But, as control is in the hands of the *Ngambi*, and women and young people are forbidden by traditional law from taking part in the meetings of the elders, the main users of the forests are being sidelined. The reason for this controversy is that traditionally, women are considered to be impure during the menstruation period, and cannot enter the sacred site at that time. Besides, women are regarded as unfaithful, untrustworthy and too weak to uphold the top secrets of the *Ngambi*. Women

have always accepted this, though changes in attitude are apparent among the younger generations, due to, for example, the influences of a formal education system.

Kaya conservation groups

On the initiative of CFCU, an elders' workshop was organised in 1999, which brought together the elders from all the Kaya councils. This congregation unanimously recommended the formation of the so-called 'Kaya Conservation and Development Groups'. It was decided that both traditional and new management guidelines were to be compiled, to enhance effective use and conservation of the Kaya forests. The Kaya conservation groups were also to promote the culture and traditions of the local people to counter the decline in traditional knowledge, and to start development projects for poverty alleviation.

The Kaya conservation groups were registered as cultural groups with the



The council elders are the custodians of the sacred forests, women are not allowed to take part in their meetings

Photo: CFCU





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Capacity building and training of the community conservation groups is vital

Ministry of Social Services, and are therefore recognised by law. They would be different from the Ngambi or elders' councils, as the members would not have to go through any form of ritual initiation. It was decided that women and young people should be strongly involved in the Kaya conservation groups, though the responsibility for traditional rituals would stay with the Kaya elders.

Transforming traditions

CFCU's objective was to transform the traditional system of the Kaya forests management to a more defined system, able to face today's challenges, and owned by the community as a whole. CFCU formulated a draft constitution to serve as a reference document for the groups. In each Kaya forest meetings were organised with the elders. All other interested members of the community were invited to contribute to the discussion and formulation of a constitution.

In all groups formed, the constitution clearly outlined the significance and veto power of Kaya elders. In fact, the final management plan was formulated by all members of the communities. It was based on the rights of the community members to use the forests in a sustainable way. The basis of the management plan was the administration of simple biological monitoring of the status of the entire forest and its products. This was well received by the communities.

Problems faced

Several problems have hampered the functioning of the conservation groups. For example, we have found that any conservation activity by the groups

require total cooperation from the local political leaders. Related to the ownership of the forest, it has become clear that the ownership status of the forest should remain communal, like it used to be. The groups should not make the forest their own asset, and bar other stakeholders from it. We also found that active participation of the group members may require some incentives from an external source.

Moreover, we found that the traditional cultural role of Kaya elders should not be taken for granted and amalgamated into the conservation groups, but should be clearly defined. As the elders often functioned as the groups' officials, they had dual roles.

Many of the groups' officials lack formal education and only speak the local language. Capacity building and training of the community conservation groups is vital. The powers and responsibilities of the conservation groups also needs to be discussed, to encourage them to operate within the lines of the national constitution.

Some achievements

Now, three years later four pilot groups have been formed, which represent four sacred sites. It is still too early to give a full evaluation of achievements, however some positive results can already be observed. There have been tree planting activities, boundary and forest inspections, and the controlled harvesting of forest resources. The empowerment of Kaya elders and officials of the conservation groups have enhanced the cooperation with provincial administration. Due to this improved relationship, the government has now accepted the appeal from the elders to demarcate and register the sites as national monuments and to allow them to perform their traditional rituals and ceremonies here.

The groups also play a role in promoting the economic welfare of the local people through the establishment of small-scale development projects. These projects include beekeeping, dairying, community tap water supply, commercial indigenous tree nurseries, and retail shops. The gender issue has

been addressed by stimulating representation of women within the conservation groups. One example is the 'Kaya Rabai group', which to date has a membership of 68 of whom 35 are women. Other groups also have reasonable representations of women, and some of these women hold leadership positions.

No longer worried

CFCU has formed the Kaya conservation groups in order to solve the long-lived controversies between indigenous institutions and the government, while promoting the culture, values and traditions of the people. Promotion of traditional culture through ceremonies has facilitated the passing on of knowledge from the elders to the broader community, especially to women and young people.

It is worthwhile noting that these newly formed groups are based on the acknowledgement and respect for the traditional institutional rules, taboos and all other regulations. The formation of parallel institutions, such as the Kaya Conservation Groups, is not aimed at substituting but at strengthening the traditional, cultural and socio-economic status of the local traditional institutions.

According to the Kaya Rabai elders: *"The project opened up our people's minds and showed them how important our forests are. Now we meet regularly, just as we used to a long time ago, to discuss our Kayas. The project helped us to realise that we are in danger of losing our Kayas."* The Kaya Kinondo elders indicated: *"People used to desecrate the Kayas but the guards have been able to stop this. We are no longer worried about the future of the Kayas because of the project's education programme. In fact some Kayas have become even stronger as a result of education."*

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