

Threats to the Survival of Tiriki Sacred Groves in Kenya: A Cultural Perspective

Fredrick Nyongesa Kassilly
Turkana University College
P.O Box 69-30500 LODWAR, KENYA.
Email: nkasili@yahoo.com
Tel: +254-713629149

Abstract

A study was conducted in Hamisi district of Kenya between March and May 2020 to identify not only the drivers of cultural change among local people around the Tiriki sacred groves but also how changes in their culture have impacted on their interactions with the groves and the remedial measures needed to ensure sustainable conservation of the special forests. Study methods involved participatory observation, household interviews and discussions with key informants. Geographically stratified area sampling ensured all areas with sacred groves were covered. Observed desecration of the groves was associated with changes in people's cultural links with them. Major drivers of cultural change included modern religion, rural poverty, modern education and modern lifestyle. Local people's culture alone can no longer secure a future for the groves and popular opinion supports public-private partnerships to ensure their effective protection. Opportunity for involving local people in preservation of the groves through education exists.

Keywords: culture, Kenya, sacred, tiriki, groves

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Introduction

Sacred groves constitute special forest areas imbued with super natural powers (Gupta, 1980) and are a global phenomenon. These forests commonly comprise not only special sites for ritual, initiation and other special functions and ceremonies (Posey, 1998) but also include residences of local deities (Dorm-Adzobu *et al.* 1991) and burial sites hosting ancestral spirits. By standard practice, human access to sacred groves for whatever reason is highly restricted. Continued existence of the world's sacred groves is largely attributed to taboos that underpin local people's interaction with them. Restricted human access to sacred groves and by extension the limited exploitation of the ecological and biological resources within the groves has effectively turned them into islands of biodiversity. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has recognized the special role played by sacred groves in biodiversity conservation and facilitates their preservation both as a tool and model for biodiversity conservation within the context of global sustainable development. Through its global network, UNESCO continues to play a leading role in expanding human capacity to conserve and benefit from biodiversity through protection of sacred groves the world over.

At the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, countries of the world committed themselves to reverse the rate of global biodiversity loss by the year 2010. What is often overlooked, however, is the second part of the global 2010 target wording which provides the reason for addressing biodiversity loss "as a contribution to poverty alleviation to the benefit of all life on earth" which aptly highlights the dual role of sacred groves not only as biodiversity reservoirs but also as resources for improvement of human livelihoods. The benefits of conserving biodiversity enclaves that are sacred groves cannot be overemphasized.

In principle, sacred groves lie at the centre of the culture of the local people who protect them. Available literature indicates that, globally, local people's culture as defined by the cumulative depository of their beliefs, traditions, experiences, habits, values, attitudes and material objects in relation to sacred groves is the strongest proximate driver for local people's commitment to protect sacred groves (Lucas, 1968; Malhotra *et al.* 2001; Acha, 2003; Elias, 2003; Campbell, 2004). Normally, people's culture is not practised in a vacuum but within a dynamic environment characterized by changing social, economic, political and technological factors which individually and collectively impact on it. Hence, human culture is not immutable, it changes. In the course of time, people's culture with respect to sacred groves changes and so does the way they interpret, value and interact with the groves.

The Tiriki sacred groves of Western Kenya represent remains of a rain forest much of which has been lost (Kassilly & Tsingalia, 2009). The historical role of the sacred groves in the cultural life of the local Tiriki people cannot be overemphasized. Despite their long history, these groves have suffered great neglect by researchers and not much is known about local people's past and current cultural relations with them. A council of elders from the local community oversees the preservation of the sacred groves under overall supervision of the Kenya government.

During a reconnaissance visit to the sacred groves by the author in January 2015, it was observed that local people's commitment to their protection was waning as evidenced by signs of illegal logging, desecration of special sites and livestock grazing within the groves among other activities which harm their ecological integrity (Table 1). A prologue informal mini-survey established that the disturbed condition of the sacred groves was associated with human activities within the groves undertaken in defiance of traditional cultural practices. A changing culture among local people was the plausible reason for their desecration of the groves. This study was undertaken to identify:

- (i) The drivers of cultural change among local people around the Tiriki sacred groves.
- (ii) The effect of the change in people's culture on their interactions with the groves.
- (iii) The remedial measures needed to ensure sustainable conservation of the sacred groves.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Hamisi district which consists of 2 divisions namely Tiriki West which comprises 4 locations having 20 sacred groves with a total area of 22.8 ha and Tiriki East which comprises 2 locations having 16 sacred groves with a total area of 26.9 ha. The area has an average altitude of 1500 m and a mean annual precipitation of 2000 mm. It is occupied by the Tiriki people who are a sub-tribe of the larger Luhya tribe of Western Kenya.

Methods

The study involved participatory observation, household structured interviews and discussions with 100 key informants between March and May 2020. It targeted elderly respondents aged 60 years and above who, due to advanced age had clear knowledge of the cultural life of the Tiriki people and the roles played by sacred groves in their lives. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected.

The interviews were conducted in a language best understood by individual respondents i.e. English, Kiswahili or Kiluhya. Respondents from each sub-location were randomly selected from names of elderly residents provided by the Assistant Chief responsible for the respective sub-location. Only natives with uninterrupted residence within their respective sub-locations were interviewed. To ensure equal spatial distribution of respondents, sampling was geographically stratified by selecting respondents from across all sub-locations. The researcher consistently asked the same questions in the same order to all respondents.

Respondents were asked to identify the drivers of cultural change among the local people around the Tiriki sacred groves from a list of ten options. For each named cause of cultural change, the researcher sought to know its ultimate societal influence(s) as reflected by people's valuation, interpretation and interaction with the sacred groves. Respondents were finally asked to suggest remedial measures aimed at ensuring a secure future of the sacred groves. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics.

Results

A total of 100 respondents (61 males, 39 females) were interviewed. Seven (7) proximate drivers of cultural change were identified (Table 2). Modern religion (100%) was the most dominant cause of cultural change among the local people followed by modern education and rural poverty (91%), modern lifestyle (80%) and acculturation (70%). Globalization was the least dominant cause of cultural change among the local people (50%) followed by government policy (60%).

Table 3 is a summary of the societal influences of the respective drivers of cultural change among local people. At individual and group levels, the drivers of cultural change were associated with abandonment of traditional religion and worship, increased disregard for taboos associated with sacred groves, erosion of traditional knowledge on sacred groves and introduction of new values of sacred groves among local people.

Table 4 summarizes respondents' views regarding remedial measures to save the sacred groves. The most popular remedial measure was that the government takes over the running of the sacred groves (45%) followed by the suggestion that the government takes the lead in conserving the sacred groves but with participation of the local community (30%). The other remedial measure was that the community be educated on the importance of the groves and hence the need for their sustainable preservation (25%).

Discussion

Study findings vindicated pre-survey observations on the condition of the sacred groves and agree with those of other workers (Acha, 2003; Roe *et al.* 2006) with regard to global threats facing sacred groves stemming principally from a breakdown in the cultural link between the groves and respective local people. The drivers for cultural change among local people living around Tiriki sacred groves and how they impact on local people's relations with the sacred groves identified in this study are similar to those reported by other researchers (Acha, 2003; Schaaf, 2003; Roe *et al.* 2006). Although the study acknowledges that Tiriki sacred groves have resiliently survived to date, it borrows from observations by Blench (2004) that their continued existence, like that of other sacred groves elsewhere in the world is currently under threat.

This study recognizes that when aboriginal custodians of sacred groves experience a change in their cultural link with the groves, their stewardship of the groves often suffers. The study explains the decline in local people's commitment to protect Tiriki sacred groves in terms of the gradual attrition of their age-old cultural attachment to the groves. The change in local people's interactions with the sacred groves as reported in this study is associated with a change in their cultural capital as defined by their attitudes, values and aspirations with respect to the groves which has in the course of time influenced their cultural interpretation and valuation of the groves. In practical terms, a change in local people's cultural orientation with respect to sacred groves implies that the purposes for which they want the groves protected also change. This explains cases of local people resorting to illegal logging, grazing of livestock and harvesting of grass for thatching their houses within the sacred groves as was reported in this study; activities which hitherto were unheard of in the lives of people in the neighborhood of the groves. Desecration of special sites for prayers, initiation of boys and for burying tribal heroes is further evidence that the traditional values of the sacred groves in local people's lives have diminished with time, a development which has resulted in activities reflecting high disregard for forms of human behavior initially forbidden within the sacred groves.

The finding that rural poverty is one of the drivers of local people's interference with the ecological and cultural sanctity of the Tiriki sacred groves agrees with findings by Kassilly (2000) that rural people in Kenya are generally poor, something which drives them to destroy forests and other biological resources within their neighborhood in pursuit of their survival needs. Tiriki sacred groves are located in Kakamega County which, according to the Kenya National Economic Survey (2013) has the highest poverty index in the country. Poverty of the local people around the Tiriki sacred groves explains their engagement in illegal logging and harvesting of grass for thatching their houses and firewood for cooking in contravention of their traditional cultural practices. Additionally, rural poverty is the reason local people enter the Tiriki sacred groves in search of mushrooms for domestic consumption.

Study findings on changing lifestyles of people around Tiriki sacred groves are a fair reflection of the national picture. The Kenya government's policy of developing rural areas through provision of electricity, health facilities, clean water, improved road infrastructure, and provision of information communication technology has resulted in changed lifestyles of rural Kenyans who have gradually abandoned some historically important cultural norms. The study posits that modernization of the rural sector by the Kenya government continues to catalyze rural people's cultural evolution which results in their abandonment of practices which constituted their historical link with sacred groves. Study findings reflect this situation.

On the whole, findings on remedial measures to secure a future for Tiriki sacred groves are in harmony with those from other sections of the study. The suggestion that the central government should play a leading role in the management of the groves to secure their effective conservation essentially translates to an acknowledgment that the local community's commitment to the conservation of the groves is waning and is no longer adequate to effectively protect them. Furthermore, the suggestion that the local people be educated on the values of the groves and the need for their sustainable conservation is important in winning their support and participation in conserving the groves for posterity.

Conclusion and recommendation

As the local people around Tiriki sacred groves adjust to the social, political, cultural and technological miasma of a modern Kenya, their culture is bound to change and is changing. This has affected the way in which they interpret, value and interact with the sacred groves. There is need for deliberate government involvement in the conservation of the sacred groves because local people's culture alone is no longer adequate to secure their future. The study recommends a strategic partnership involving the government, local people and other stake holders to ensure effective conservation of the Tiriki sacred groves. Opportunity exists for use of education to raise local people's awareness about the importance of sacred groves including the economic benefit of preserving them as a facility for promotion of cultural tourism.

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Table 1: *Observations that implied abandonment of traditional cultural values of Tiriki sacred groves*

Item number	Observation
1	Desecration of sacred sites
2	Indiscriminate cutting of trees
3	Desecration of initiation sites
4	Unlimited human entry into the groves
4	Desecration of heroes burial sites
5	Harvesting of grass for house thatches
6	Grazing of livestock in the groves
7	Collecting firewood from the groves
8	Collecting mushrooms from the groves

Table 2: *Prominence of proximate drivers of cultural change among local people around Tiriki sacred groves*

Driver	Frequency	Percent mention
Modern religion	65	100
Rural poverty	60	91
Modern education	60	91
Modern lifestyle	50	80
Acculturation	45	70
Government policy	40	60
Globalization	30	50

Table 3: *Societal influences of drivers of cultural change around Tiriki sacred groves*

Driver of cultural change	Influence on individuals/groups in relation to sacred groves
Modern religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Makes people abandon traditional religion and worship ● Makes people disregard taboos concerning the groves
Modern education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Makes people disregard taboos concerning the groves ● Makes people abandon traditional religion and worship ● Erodes people's traditional knowledge of the groves ● Introduces new values of the groves among people
Modern lifestyle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Makes people abandon cultural values of the groves ● Erodes people's traditional knowledge of the groves ● Makes people disregard taboos concerning the groves
Acculturation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Makes people disregard taboos concerning the groves ● Erodes people's traditional knowledge of the groves ● Introduces new values of the groves among people
Government policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creates alienation between people and the groves ● Erodes people's traditional knowledge of the groves
Globalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Makes people develop new values systems for the groves ● Makes people disregard taboos concerning the groves ● Makes people abandon cultural values of the groves
Rural poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Makes people disregard taboos concerning the groves ● Introduces new values of the groves among people

Table 4: *Proposed remedial measures for effective conservation of Tiriki sacred groves*

Remedial Measure	Percent mention
Government to take over management of the sacred groves	45
Government to take lead role in conservation of the sacred groves in partnership with local community	30
Local people to be educated about importance of sacred groves and the need for their preservation	25