

SACRED GROVES: BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION HOTSPOTS

A POLICY BRIEF



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INTRODUCTION

Sacred groves are regarded by some adjacent forest communities as the first temples of God; they are seen as manifestations of spiritual powers of deities and areas through which the people can communicate to their gods and departed ancestors. Sacred groves are institutions that have evolved over the years through employment of sanctions in such societies.

Ramogi sacred forest has for a long time been managed by the local community though the County Council of Bondo had held it in trust for them. However, the Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI), the national Museums of Kenya (NMK) and Kenya Forest Service (Formerly FD) have played a big role in its management. The forest was recently gazetted as a National Monument.

NMK started a project in 2003 where a National Committee for Conservation was formed. A Community Based Organization (CBO) and Village Development Committee (VDC) were initiated and registered to manage development activities on behalf of the community.

Significance of the forest

The forest has a tremendous degree of flora and fauna diversity within a small area. It is believed to be the place where the patriarch of the Luo ethnic group, Ramogi, the elder established the first fortified settlement, *gunda-bur* when he led a branch of migrating Luo from Sudan.

There are several sacred sites in the forest containing many sacred trees including the "*Omuonyo lee*" Luo words translated to "it swallowed the ax" which refer to a large Mvule tree (*Milicia excelsa*) which has been conserved over the years; and, the *Loch* (Luo word for "harness", again referring Mhugu tree (*Brachylaenia huillensis*) which has existed in the

forest for several years. The local people revere both of these rare and valued tree species.



A glimpse of the Ramogi Hill from a distance

Observations by IFRI Kenya research team indicate that even the illegal harvesters do not cut trees within the sacred sites. These parts of the hills are governed by cultural beliefs in the spiritual powers of the departed ancestors and especially the supposedly father of the Luo - Ramogi AJwang.



Omuonyo Lee the sacred tree

MAJOR OBSERVATIONS BY THE IFRI TEAM

Got Ramogi forest has been conserved because of the unspoken existence of a council of Elders. Though working in the background, the council of elders has an age-old community mission to conserve and regulate the utilization of the sacred forest. This guarantees the sustainability of this forest.

Traditional healers with deep knowledge of the secrets of this forest and the ancient art and use of medicinal trees live adjacent to the forest.

Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI) opened a research Station in Ramogi forest in 1971. Since then it has established several species and provenance trials aimed at enriching the forest species composition and providing the forest adjacent communities with forest products; this is by introducing appropriate tree species on their farms.

IFRI Collaborating Center in Kenya (IFRI CRC-K) a project within KEFRI established Ramogi site in 2001 and revisited it in 2004 to study the role of Sacred Groves as a cultural institution. The Project also carried out training in 2005 to build their capacity in Natural Resource Management.

There are other traditional healers who come from all over the country sometimes as far as southern Zambia to make occasional pilgrimage to the Got Ramogi Sacred Forest to commune and to restock their inventory of rare medications before returning to their foreign-based homes.

Harvesting levels in the forest are minimal and restricted mainly to domestic use. Apart from being respected by the local people, the forest has a unique protective setting whereby Lake Victoria, Lake Kanyaboli and the snake/crocodile invested Yala swamp border more than half of it. The other parts are surrounded by primary schools (Ojola and Ramogi), Ramogi Polytechnic and KEFRI Forest Research Station. These provide excellent points for controlled movement of people and products in and out of the forest.

The major sacred sites as a result of the settlement the Patriarch, Ramogi left six historical landmarks, which are an attraction to date. These include:

- ✿ *Pong'*- the first grinding stone of Ramogi's wives
- ✿ *Loch*, Muhugu (*Brachyllenea huilensis*) – the tree marks an entrance of Ramogi on the hill from Uganda
- ✿ *Omuonyo lee*- A sacred tree, Mvule (*Milicia excelsa*) protected by a big snake. Whoever tries to cut the tree, the cutting tool disappears into the tree.
- ✿ *Lwanda thiang*- a stone where Ramogi offered sacrifices to ancestors. It resembles a cow with its young one.

- ✿ Sacred lake- believed to be at the top of the hill
- ✿ *Agulu dhoge ariyo* (Asumbi rock)-bath hole, which never dries up with medicinal value. Legio Maria sect church elders use it as a place for retreat and meditation. Local and national politicians from this region pay visits to the forest's sacred sites to get blessing especially during election time.



The Asumbi rock

Importance of the forest to the people

Ramogi Hill has always held a central position within social and cultural life, inspiring respect through a great number of taboos and norms. The sacred groves, where the remains of royal ancestors lie, are the sources of many medicinal plants and have therefore been zealously protected for centuries.

Although the FD has set rules to govern the forest, the local people due to their cultural and religious attachment to the forest have their own rules and regulations to ensure that the forest is protected. They follow these rules more strictly than those set by the FD.



This rock, with remnants of candle wax is the sacred site where the *Legio Maria* sect holds their prayers among other people.

The people adjacent to the Got Ramogi forest use it for harvesting of firewood, medicinal plants, poles and posts and in some cases game meat. The important conservation point to make here is that even though people who live around Ramogi forest exploit the forests for these products, they never harvest from those sites which are considered sacred by the local adjacent forest communities.

EFFORTS BY THE COMMUNITY AT CONSERVING THE FOREST

The forest has been threatened with deterioration, which has been attributed to increased demand for forest products, population growth and declining cultural values.

However the people are willing to assist in the conservation and management of the forest through adopting energy saving stoves, community awareness, establishment of nurseries, development of income generating activities, ecotourism among others.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Causes of deforestation in the area are attributed to unemployment, increasing demand for forest products, and shortage of water for domestic purposes and for seedling production, inadequate knowledge on appropriate trees to plant and inadequate rainfall.

Studies indicate that indigenous knowledge and culture play a major role in natural resource management. Policies should thus recognize indigenous rights to forest resources. In the case of Ramogi forest, this has been demonstrated by less levels of degradation within the sacred areas compared to those which are not considered sacred.

The Government should also develop forest conservation policies geared at improving and enhancing capacity of communities who should capitalize on their cultures and religions in conserving important biodiversity areas, especially those areas that are isolated from the main forests.

With the current weakening of social cohesion among homogeneous communities especially as demonstrated in the youth, the Government should combine utilitarian modern knowledge with spiritual or traditional indigenous knowledge and use this to enhance forest conservation efforts in parts of the country where traditional systems are still practiced. This initiative will encourage people

to conserve sites whose reasons for conservation may not necessarily be based on provision of forest products but to conserve biodiversity.

Although parts of Ramogi forest have been registered as a National Monument, NMK should put more effort in setting up mechanisms of managing the forest on a sustainable manner, such a strategy should use the available community cultural and religious resources. Further, concerted efforts to make the monument visible to the outside world should be put in place. These will ensure its sustained conservation.

Finally, the abundant Aloe species should be exploited and utilized as a way of generating income for the local community.



Aloe species abundant in the forest

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