

Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledge Systems:

*Towards Sustainable People-
Forest Relationships in Kenya*

By

Kendi Borona

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To my grandmother, Sarah Corõi. As our people sing:

Ûthambue na ãria/may you be bathed in milk,
Ûthambue na naicũ/may you be bathed in honey!

Your love has always brought me utmost joy.

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PREFACE

I call for Africans to discover and embrace their linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity not only so their nation-states can move forward politically and economically but so that they may heal a psyche wound by denial of who they are...It is they who must begin a revolution in ethics that puts community before individualism, public good before private greed and commitment to service before cynicism and despair.¹

This book is derived from my doctoral research work which sought to investigate how communities can leverage on their Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) to better protect their landscapes and livelihoods. My research was informed by a combination of personal and professional experience in the field of conservation. I will begin by narrating these experiences so that the reader can understand my motivation, and what shapes my thinking. I was born and raised near Njaambene [Nyambene] a natural, indigenous protected forest in the Kenyan highlands. It was only because of the waters flowing from this forest that I did not have to walk for long distances to fetch water, a task expected of girls in my community. Water is a game-changer for any woman in Africa. If you spend several hours in a day looking for water, there will be no time left to dedicate to anything else, much less education. Luckily for me we obtained access to piped water drawn from this forest just as I was about to turn five or six years old. I had just got a taste of what fetching water meant on one occasion and I clearly remember resigning myself to my fate.

There was no point of having any dreams or hopes. But the water came and that changed everything! The most important factor is that this forest and its critical watersheds were protected through application of IKS. There are designated regions in this forest in which elders performed sacrifices to appease *Murungu*/God. Coincidentally, these regions were set around springs and are absolutely out of bounds to all except the designated elders.² This system, therefore, protected critical watersheds,

¹ Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Anchor, 2010), 288

² Gloria Kendi Borona, "Exploring the Link between Forests, Traditional Custodianship and Community Livelihoods: The Case of Nyambene Forest in Kenya," *The Forestry Chronicle* 90, no. 05 (October 2014): 586–91,

hence providing water for the community. I am a beneficiary of this forest. I am a beneficiary of this traditional custodianship system. I am a beneficiary of IKS. Were it not for this forest and this knowledge system, I would probably not be writing this book. I owe it to elders and this knowledge system to do something about the devaluation of IKS. This personal experience is tied to my professional experience. Prior to enrolling in my Ph.D. programme in 2014, I worked with and learned from diverse communities on the use, valorization, conservation, and promotion of natural and cultural heritage in East and Southern Africa. During this time, I was immersed in projects that wove together spirituality, local history, an intricate fusion of cultural and natural heritage in dynamic cultural landscapes. Through this work, I had the opportunity and privilege of interacting closely with the Abasuba people of Lake Victoria's Mfangano Island, the Iteso of western Kenya, the Abagusii of western Kenya, the Turkana of northern Kenya, the Iteso of eastern Uganda, the Warangi of Central Tanzania, and the Chewa of Malawi.

My dialogues with communities interwove issues around masterpieces of art immortalized on stone, ritual, spirituality, nature, community ecological governance, livelihoods, health, peace, rites of passage, and many more aspects. I was able to glimpse into their collective memories as expressed in stories, songs, dance, folklore, proverbs, myths, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, cultural community laws, local languages, artefacts, forms of communication, and organization, experiencing a range of histories as impressive as that found anywhere else in the world. It dawned on me that all of these communities held vast reservoirs of knowledge that they themselves did not see as important, in some cases, because it is not 'modern' or informed by formal education. I started developing an interest in an appreciation of indigenous worldviews, how they structure the ways of life for communities, and how they link to resource use and livelihoods. Basil Davidson, in his documentary series 'Africa' which highlights the continent's history, says "...unwritten rules were respected because they determine community survival...civilization is not a matter of technological advancement but of social responsibility."³ Similar views are shared by Kenyan scholar and writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who writes that what prevented our cultures from being completely annihilated was that the rural masses continued to breathe life into them by refusing and resisting

<https://doi.org/10.5558/tfc2014-121>.

³ Basil Davidson, "Africa Episode 1 Different but Equal," accessed June 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X75COneJ4w8>.

complete surrender in the political and economic spheres.⁴ Davidson further acknowledges that, “miraculously these cultures have survived the onslaught of missionaries, colonizers and conquerors.”⁵

This is what I witnessed in my various engagements with communities and travels around the continent. My experiences sparked my interest in concepts, such as Afrocentricity and the African Renaissance. The ideals of these concepts shine through the work of Davidson who says that:

Through their long history, Africans display their creative energy and power. The energy and power of the past can be renewed. Africa is going to overcome its crises in the measure that it develops from its own roots and draws strength from its own history and skill and enterprise and independent civilizations. And as this new development begins to flower in Africa now, will the future begin to reflect once more the manifold achievements of the past.⁶

This is a belief that I embrace. It is clear that many communities have not forgotten their history and that their cultural traditions are still important to them. In as much as these traditions have been subjugated, underdeveloped, exploited, or undergone mutations, they still retain the potential for human and social development as they continue to echo through the ages. In 2012, I got the chance to interact and work with Aboriginal communities in Australia’s northern territory. Here, I marveled at the application of IKS in the management of Kakadu National Park and other surrounding cultural landscapes. This experience strengthened my resolve to explore the potential and creativity that lies within communities through utilizing the wisdom of our coherent indigenous knowledge systems to achieve sustainable resource use and relevant development interventions.

I say ‘our’ to situate myself as an African woman who shares specific and collective heritages with the continent as a whole and my own community specifically. I am driven by the conviction that what will consolidate our strength is our intuition and creativity as a people in all spheres of engagement. My life experiences working on the African continent and my desire to contribute to resolving the challenges facing Africa drove me to conduct research that honours indigenous ways of knowing and ways of life of communities, while showing respect to community values systems and imperatives. Indeed, as Chinua Achebe writes, “I believe it is impossible to write anything in Africa without some

⁴ Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle For Cultural Freedoms* (London : Portsmouth, N.H: James Currey, 1993).

⁵ Davidson, “Africa Episode 1 Different but Equal.”

⁶ Ibid.

kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest...my role as an African ... is to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement."⁷ In essence, I perceive my scholarly journey as an intellectual voyage of discovering who I am as an African and a commitment to use my work to contribute towards the African Renaissance.

In addition to these personal and professional experiences, I am inspired by the works of several scholars who argue that reflexivity and starting from one's own experience in education and research is methodologically sound.⁸ Thus, I will draw from personal experience and write in the first person in certain chapters, as may be appropriate. As Chilisa Bagele writes, I, too, feel uncomfortable with research practices that "disconnect me from multiple relations that I have with the community, living and non-living things and my life experiences."⁹ I, therefore, have articulated my positionality and explained how my life experiences have shaped my thinking, as well as interest in this type of research. I opened this section with the words of Wangari Maathai, whose work has also greatly shaped my thinking and interest in just conservation regimes. I choose to end the way I started, with the words of this iconic daughter of Africa, because her poignant words are as pivotal today and for the future as they were during her initial efforts in sustainable forest management:

Those of us who have witnessed the degraded state of the environment and the suffering that comes with it cannot afford to be complacent. We continue to be restless; if we really carry the burden, we are driven to action. We cannot tire or give up. We owe it to the present and future generations of all species to rise up and walk.¹⁰

This call to action – to rise up and walk – is a theme and thread that is going to feature throughout this book. I will explore this theme through the lens of people-forest relationships. Forests remain a resource that is under

⁷ Kate Turkington, *Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart* (E. Arnold, 1977).

⁸ Bagele Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (Thousand Oaks, California.: SAGE Publications, 2011); Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax: Fernwood Pub, 2008); Margaret Elizabeth Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2000; Frances E. Owusu-Ansah and Gubela Mji, "African Indigenous Knowledge and Research," *African Journal of Disability* 2, no. 1 (January 16, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v2i1.30>.

⁹ Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 3.

¹⁰ Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir*, Reprint edition (New York: Anchor, 2007), 295.

siege globally. They also remain a key to unlocking some of the most protracted environmental challenges of our time.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY OF THE AGĪKŪYŪ PEOPLE

Agĭkŭyŭ¹ ancestors are believed to have arrived in Kenya during the Bantu² migrations of 1200 - 1600 AD.³ The formation of the Agĭkŭyŭ nation as we know it today was a result of complex migrations and remigration involving different groups of people. By 1800, however, the Agĭkŭyŭ people had coalesced into a distinct community.⁴ The original inhabitants of what is now known as Gĭkŭyŭ territory were Athi/Digiri hunter and gatherers. The Agĭkŭyŭ purchased land from, intermarried with, or assimilated the Athi/Digiri into their community.⁵ While Agĭkŭyŭ people are primarily agriculturalists, theirs is also a mixed economy that includes livestock-keeping. Goats, sheep, and cattle were important as they signified wealth and were used in many aspects of Agĭkŭyŭ life, such as ceremonies, sacrifices, and prayers. Gĭkŭyŭland is characterised by ridges and valleys. This topography had a significant influence on original settlement, land acquisition, and the ensuing land tenure.

In the pre-colonial period, claim to land was laid through either of two methods: first clearance of the virgin forest (*kuuna kĭrĭti*) or initial hunting rights (*mĭgŭda ya mĭtego*).⁶ Kenyatta argues that among the Agĭkŭyŭ, land

¹ The Anglicized name for the Agĭkŭyŭ is Kikuyu, which is the current name in use, but the elders I spoke to during the course of this project recommended that I use proper terminology. I will use the Agĭkŭyŭ (plural)/Mŭgĭkŭyŭ (singular) or Gĭkŭyŭ (in reference to the land) as appropriate throughout the text. The term Kikuyu will only be retained when quoting from other sources.

² A cluster of African peoples that speak closely related languages. Bantu speaking people are found in Central Africa, the Great Lakes region, and Southern Africa.

³ Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900* (Nairobi, Kenya: Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, Vintage Books ed. edition (New York: Vintage, 1962); L. S. B. Leakey, *Southern Kikuyu Before 1903: V. 2* (London: Academic Press, 1977).

⁶ Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900*; Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, Vintage Books ed. edition (New York: Vintage, 1962).

is the most important factor in the social, political, religious and economic life. He further points out that land ownership amongst the Agĩkũyũ was not communal; while the whole community collectively defended their territory, “every inch of land had its owner.”⁷ Land was owned by individuals, families, or clans. However, this form of private ownership did not give the owner(s) exclusive rights. Land was shared with other members of the community in a system that was anchored in reciprocity and pursuit of collective good. Europeans mistook this collective usage as communal/tribal ownership of land.⁸ Land was tied to rites of passage or transition from childhood to adulthood. A man without land was simply a boy. [It did not help that the British were referring to grown men, including those older than they, as “boy”]. A woman became a woman through cultivation of crops and providing for her family. Without this, she was a girl. In essence, a Mũgĩkũyũ could not become a Mũgĩkũyũ without land.⁹

Muriuki points out that:

Land was owned by the *Mbarĩ*, (a lineage or sub-clan depending on numbers, tracing its origin to a common male ancestor a number of generations back), and its administration was entrusted to a *mũramati* (guardian/custodian) who was the nominal head of the *Mbarĩ*. *Mbarĩ* ownership of land was further reinforced by the people’s religious beliefs, especially reverence for ancestors, which fostered a deep attachment to ancestral lands.¹⁰

The religious beliefs that Muriuki refers to above included pouring of libations and propitiation of the ancestors to ensure the well-being of the family. The only areas that were communally owned were saltlicks (for animals), rights of way, and areas for the collection of firewood. Landlessness was curbed by a system of *ahoi* or tenant-at-will on those that had land. Tenants-at-will were individuals who would occupy land that was owned by wealthier members of the Agĩkũyũ community. They could cultivate, raise livestock, and live on the land but they understood that they did not own it. This system of land use was tempered with the assurance that their tenancy was safe for as long as they operated within the limits of the law of the land.¹¹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o¹² writes that Agĩkũyũ people

⁷ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 27.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Caroline Elkins, *Britain’s Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London, UK: Jonathan Cape, 2014).

¹⁰ Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900*.

¹¹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* Leakey, *Southern Kikuyu Before 1903*.

believed that Ngai had blessed them with a land of abundance. This was incorporated into Gĩkũyũ teachings, and lyricized by the Agĩkũyũ as follows:

God has given the Agĩkũyũ a beautiful country
Abundant with water, food and luscious bush
The Agĩkũyũ should praise the Lord all the time
For he has ever been generous to them!¹³

Muriuki further explains that, besides adequate rainfall, Gĩkũyũ land is endowed with moderate temperatures and fertile soils. The productivity of the soil was derived from the volcanic tuffs, and was rich in humus from the cleared primeval forest. It was a perfect habitat for the Agĩkũyũ who:

For a long time made it the granary of their neighbours as well as for the European and Swahili caravans who passed by or through their country especially in the 19th century...they produced food in surplus in order to be able to trade with their neighbours. Trade was an important activity both internally and externally.¹⁴

According to Leakey, in 1885 the explorer, Thomson, travelled in Gĩkũyũland and wrote the following:

Enormous quantities of sweet potatoes, yams, cassava, sugar cane, indian corn, millet etc, are raised and the supply seems to be quite inexhaustible. On my return journey, I found a caravan of over 1,500 men, staying at ngongo [ridge] who remained there a month, and carried away little short of three months' provisions, yet it did not seem perceptibly to affect the supply or to raise the ridiculously low prices. Extremely fat sheep and goats abound while they (the Kikuyu) have also cattle in considerable numbers.¹⁵

This was the land of plenty, abundant with all the good things. It is this goodness that drew non-Gĩkũyũ people to Agĩkũyũ territory.

¹² I will use the full names of Gĩkũyũ scholars who have chosen to be named the Gĩkũyũ way whenever I refer to their work(s) in the text. The use of just a surname is inappropriate for these individuals because there is no surname as such. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o means – Ngũgĩ, the son of Thiong'o. The two names are joined together and cannot be separated. If I use “wa Thiong'o” that would mean any of the other children of Thiong'o or, indeed, Thiong'o's wife

¹³ *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* (Random House Inc, 2010), 65

¹⁴ Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900*, 33.

¹⁵ Leakey, *Southern Kikuyu Before 1903*, 55.

The coming of “outsiders”

It is trade that brought Agĩkũyũ people into contact with the first “outsiders”, the first of these being the Arabs/Swahili traders who travelled in caravans into the interior in search of ivory. The Agĩkũyũ had an immense respect for trade and were willing to supply the caravans with food. The Arabs and Swahili were later joined by European traders. While these relations started off as cordial and mutually beneficial, bad relations crept in when the “outsider” caravans started raiding the Agĩkũyũ. This opened up space for warfare between the two groups, especially after the establishment of Imperial British East African Company (IBEAC) in 1895. The IBEAC was established at the 1885 Berlin conference, during which European countries met to share what the Belgian King Leopold referred to as the “magnificent African cake.”¹⁶ The IBEAC was the precursor to the establishment of British Colonial rule in Kenya. It was this contact with the British that was to change the trajectory of the Agĩkũyũ people forever. Legend has it that Mũgo wa Kibiru and Cēgē wa Kibiru (Gĩkũyũ seers) had warned the Agĩkũyũ people about the coming of people who looked like:

Small white frogs because of their oddly-coloured skins, their dress would resemble the wings of butterflies, they would carry sticks that spit fire, and they would also bring an iron snake which would belch out fire.¹⁷

The IBEAC set up its first trading fort south of Gĩkũyũ land in 1895. This served as the base from which the British infiltrated in Gĩkũyũland inch by inch, and completely subdued a community, which up until then, had absolute authority over their lives. The Agĩkũyũ resisted British invasion for several years, but a combination of factors worked against them. The first of these was internal divisions and competition for power and wealth. As Elkins reminds us:

The Kikuyu certainly did not live in a pre-colonial socialist utopia without class divisions. The competitive environment that spawned the chiefs was a direct result of the intense internal competition for resources and wealth that peaked at the time of colonization.¹⁸

Tied to the above factor is a second factor, underlined by the fact that that the British misunderstood the Gĩkũyũ system of governance. The Agĩkũyũ

¹⁶ Davidson, “Africa Episode 1 Different but Equal.”

¹⁷ Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900*, 137.

¹⁸ Elkins, *Britain’s Gulag*, 14.

did not have a centralised system of governance, rather there were *athamaki*/leaders in every ridge. People who were considerably wealthy (by way of holding large tracts of land), such as Waiyaki wa Hinga, were accorded a lot of respect by the Agĩkũyũ.¹⁹ The British assumed that Waiyaki was the king/leader of the Agĩkũyũ people, but this led to disastrous consequences for Waiyaki and the community as a whole.

Waiyaki swore blood brotherhood with the empire builder, Captain Lugard, in 1890 to establish a trading post for the IBEAC on Gĩkũyũland. The agreement was based on the understanding of mutual respect especially that the IBEAC would not take away Gĩkũyũ land or property. According to Maathai “this was quickly reneged by Lugard’s porters who were then raiding nearby settlements and raping women.”²⁰ A series of battles were fought which culminated in the capture and eventual expulsion of Waiyaki wa Hinga. It is widely believed that he was buried alive – head first! The pain and betrayal was and is still palpable among the Agĩkũyũ, and memorialized in songs that are sung to this day. As Maathai further explains:

The Kikuyu were stunned by Waiyaki’s humiliation and death. In Kikuyu culture, everybody had a right to shelter and space. People who had land were expected to share with people who did not. It was profoundly shocking that the British did not recognize the oath.²¹

This event became entrenched in Agĩkũyũ people’s consciousness and Waiyaki was later transformed into a martyr for the nationalist cause. Emotive songs of protest featuring Waiyaki were composed during the Mau Mau period to memorialize his death and inspire the struggle against colonial rule.

The third factor is that Gĩkũyũ resistance was weakened by a series of natural disasters (locusts, drought, famine, and cattle plague) between 1894 and 1899, with a mortality rate estimated at between 50-95%. Those who survived moved further north. This combination of disasters account for the “empty land” which was alienated for European settlement in 1922/23.²² This was probably the biggest setback to Gĩkũyũ resistance. The fourth and last factor is that, at this point, Gĩkũyũ weaponry and bravery were no match for the “stick that spits fire”. Besides, as Elkins succinctly puts it, “imperial warfare more resembled big game hunting

¹⁹ Leakey, *Southern Kikuyu Before 1903*.

²⁰ Maathai, *Unbowed*, 62.

²¹ *Ibid*, 62.

²² Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900*.

than it did combat.”²³ And, thus, began the enslavement of the Gĩkũyũ nation on their own land. Pax Britannica was now in full effect. The Union Jack fluttered in the air – a symbol of conquest, control, and oppression. For the Gĩkũyũ nation, the physical defeat was as devastating and as catastrophic as the psychological one. Loss of land was the chief lens through which the Agĩkũyũ viewed their now unfortunate state of affairs. Kenyatta sums up the loss of Gĩkũyũland through this pithy anecdote:

Once upon a time an elephant made a friendship with a man. One day, a heavy thunderstorm broke out, the elephant went to his friend who had a little hut at the edge of the forest and said to him: “My dear good man, will you please let me put my trunk inside your hut to keep it out of the torrential rain?” The man seeing what situation his friend was in replied: “my dear good elephant, my hut is very small, but there is room for your trunk and myself. Please put your trunk in gently.” The elephant thanked his friend, saying: You have done me a good deed and one day I shall return your kindness.” But what followed? As soon as the elephant put his trunk inside the hut, slowly he pushed his head inside, and finally flung the man out in the rain, and then lay down comfortably inside his friend’s hut saying: “My dear good friend, your skin is harder than mine, and there is not enough room for both of us, you can afford to remain in the rain while I am protecting my delicate skin from the hailstorm.”²⁴

Yes, the elephant was in the hut. The British were in Gĩkũyũland. And the Agĩkũyũ were out in the rain. In the following section, I discuss how the elephant made himself comfortable in the Gĩkũyũ hut.

British settlement on Gĩkũyũ territory

The white man cannot speak the language of the hills and knows not the ways of the land.²⁵

By the 1920s, there was a steady inflow of settlers coming into Kenya in search of fortunes and prosperity. Substantial effort was directed towards encouraging settlers to migrate to the new colony. Adverts such as the following were disseminated widely:

Settle in Kenya, Britain’s youngest and most attractive colony. Low prices at present for fertile areas. No richer soil in the British Empire. Kenya

²³ Elkins, *Britain’s Gulag*, 4.

²⁴ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 48.

²⁵ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *The River Between*, 1st edition (East African Educational Publishers, 1965), 8.

colony makes a practical appeal to the intending settler with some capital. Its valuable crops give high yield, due to the high fertility of the soil, adequate rainfall and abundant sunshine. Secure the advantage of Native labour to supplement your own effort...Eventually, thousands of settlers responded to the call, migrating to Kenya in search of their fortunes. They came determined to forge “white man’s country.”²⁶

It is estimated that, by the time the settlers arrived, the central highlands were home to a million or more Agĩkũyũ people. Many of these were displaced to create land for British settlement. The temperate fertile highlands – [later renamed] the ‘White Highlands’:

Became the enclave of white immigrants (some Britons, but mainly white South Africans) engaged in large scale farming and dependent on African laborers who were mainly Kikuyu, but also Kalenjin, Luhya, Masaai, and Luo. Settlers with 1,000 British pounds in assets could receive 1,000 acres (4 km²) for free.²⁷

According to Maathai, the settlers chose to settle in strategic locations near emerging town centres, in areas that had the potential for large-scale farming and livestock keeping.²⁸ They were issued title deeds for their newly acquired land and those that were displaced were absorbed either into the settler farms as tenants-at-will or relocated to the Rift Valley as labourers on settler farms. This tenure system recognized private ownership of land through freehold title. While this was ideal in securing private land for settlers, it conflicted with the customary land tenure system that was already in place. Customary tenure was anchored on a complex system of nested and overlapping individual rights which was not compatible with individual ownership of land. As a result, most customary land was not registered and inevitably fell into the category of ‘empty land’.²⁹ Settlers were attracted to the highlands because of the same reasons that the Agĩkũyũ were. The weather was perfect (not too hot or cold), the soils were fertile, and there was no malaria.³⁰

²⁶ David Koff and Anthony Howarth, *Black Man’s Land: Images of Colonialism and Independence in Kenya* (Van Nuys, CA: Bellweather Group, 1979); Elkins, *Britain’s Gulag*, 3.

²⁷ Peter Veit, “Focus on Land,” Focus on Land, 2, accessed June 25, 2018, <http://www.focusonland.com/countries/kenya-history-of-conflicts/>.

²⁸ Maathai, *Unbowed*.

²⁹ Veit, “Focus on Land.”

³⁰ Maathai, *Unbowed*.

As the colonial project progressed, the Gikūyū people found themselves “hemmed in on all sides.”³¹ Prior to the colonial affront, people moved according to the prevailing conditions or needs. If there was too much pressure on land, for example, young men moved to other places and established homesteads. With the coming of the British, they found themselves locked in; “to the south, east and north were settler farms, to the west were government-controlled forests of the Aberdares [Nyandarwa] and to the south east was the expanding urban centre of Nairobi.”³² The British introduced a policy to settle Africans on ‘native reserves’ which were structured around ethnicity. The reserves resembled the homelands in South Africa or Native American reserves. Divide and rule was the cornerstone of the colonial administration. The Gikūyū, consequently, lived in the Gikūyū Reserve. Traditional farming practices, such as crop rotation and resting land/fallowing, were abandoned. These changes had a major impact on the people in myriad ways, including the overexploitation of the land base leading to severe soil erosion and food shortages. The former was to later become key focus of colonial conservation policies, such as terracing, which the Agikūyū loathed and equated with oppression.

The conditions in the reserves, coupled with the colonial government’s introduction of taxes, created a monumental humanitarian crisis. For the first time, a people who were self-sufficient found themselves in conditions of extreme poverty. They were now locked into a monetary economy in a race to the bottom. Money could only be obtained by working for the *Beberu*³³/colonizers in their settler farms in the ‘White Highlands’. As

³¹ Elkins, *Britain’s Gulag*, 25.

³² Elkins, *Britain’s Gulag*, 14.

³³ There are various terms that Agikūyū people used to make reference to white settlers: *Nyakeru*; *Athungu*; *Comba*; and *Beberu*. While they all mean the same thing, *i.e.*, white man or white people, the Swahili term ‘*Beberu*’ is a better metaphorical encapsulation of colonial oppression and domination. Male goats are also known as *Beberu* and are known for their legendary sexual greed. They are to be found mounting one female goat after the other or the same goat over and over again. They are dictatorial; they are uncompromising. The British *Beberu* could not have enough or looting, raping, murdering, torturing. They were the epitome of gluttonousness. The term *Beberu* is also a more apt description of the true nature of colonialism – that colonialism was a ‘one armed bandit’ (Rodney, 1972) that extracted without ever giving anything back. Rodney (1972) came up with this expression to challenge the unfortunate and surprisingly still pervasive notion that Africans were better off during colonialism and that they benefited from colonialism. A good case in point is Bruce Gilley’s article ‘the case for colonialism,’ which was published (and later withdrawn), by the Third World

such, the colonial experiment was launched through a two-pronged approach: the colonization of land and of labour. This is further exemplified by Veit who argues:

To protect their land, the settlers banned the growing of coffee by Africans, introduced a hut tax, and granted landless Africans less land in exchange for their labor. As the ability of Africans to provide a living from the land dwindled, there was a massive exodus to the cities. Beginning in the late 1930s, the government further intruded on ordinary Africans through marketing controls, stricter educational supervision, and additional land changes.³⁴

As early as the 1920s, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the policies of the colonial government. Harry Thuku led the establishment of the Young Kikuyu Association, the very first protest movement in the colony. Their aim was to fight oppression and this was encapsulated around the recovery of Agĩkũyũ land. Harry Thuku³⁵ was deported to Somalia, after which a massive protest broke out and several hundred people were killed. This was the second strike (in terms of the humiliation of Gĩkũyũ leaders) for the Agĩkũyũ in their already thoroughly embittered relationship with the colonial government. When World War I and World War II broke out, Africans were forcibly recruited into the ‘King African Rifles’ to fight for the British. When both wars ended, the British soldiers were rewarded with huge tracts of land for their service to the crown. The African soldiers who had fought alongside the British soldiers in Burma, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and other locations in the British Empire got nothing, and to make matters worse, some of their land was given to their British counterparts. As Kariuki states:

The African soldiers were rewarded with the colourbar, unemployment and the kipande. [Yet] there had been no colour bar to prevent us from dying for Britain in the war. Those who had been stagnant in their misery now began to look for happiness.³⁶

Quarterly Journal in 2017.

³⁴ Veit, “Focus on Land”, 5. It is important to add that several strategies were instituted to sabotage African agriculture, including burning of crops to the ground to prevent Africans from competing with white settlers.

³⁵ It should be noted that Harry Thuku was later to take a strong anti-Mau Mau stance.

³⁶ James Mwangi Kariuki, *“Mau Mau” Detainee: The Account By a Kenya African of His Experiences in Detention Camps, 1953-1960* (Oxford University Press, 1963), 27.



Fig. 1.1 *Kipande*.

The *kipande* was a form of identification enclosed in a metal container that had to be worn around the neck by those who worked on *Beberu* farms. According to Edgerton, the *kipande* had to bear the names and fingerprints of the wearer, the past employer's recommendation and the present employer's signature; "It jingled like a bell as a person walked. The Kikuyu called it *Mbugi* (goat's bell), and detested it as a mark of their servility."³⁷

Apart from the obvious livelihood consequences, there was a bundle of other social and psychological consequences of what Elkins aptly describes as the "British land grab."³⁸ All of these events and issues, starting with the death of Waiyaki, land dispossession, racial discrimination, infantilization of the African, innumerable humiliations, pauperization of the Agĩkũyũ people, and more, coalesced and birthed the Mau Mau³⁹ revolt, described by Elkins as "one of the bloodiest and most protracted wars of decolonization fought in Britain's 20th century empire."⁴⁰ The central tenets of the revolt were *Ithaka na Wĩyathĩ*, or land and self-rule. I

³⁷ Robert B. Edgerton, *Mau Mau: An African Crucible*, First Edition edition (New York: London: Free Press, 1989), 15.

³⁸ Elkins, *Britain's Gulag*, 14.

³⁹ The actual name of this movement was 'Kenya Land Freedom Army.' There are several explanations regarding the origin of the Mau Mau. According to the Mau Mau themselves, there was no such thing as Mau Mau. But the name has attained discursive currency and will be used throughout the text.

⁴⁰ Elkins, *Britain's Gulag*, 28.

now turn to a discussion of the evolution of land tenure in the Kenyan context.

Land tenure: A national perspective

Land is a highly complex and emotive issue in Kenya. Beyond serving as a means of production or supporting community livelihoods, it embodies the social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of the over 40 communities that call Kenya home. Land tenure in pre-colonial times was governed through the application of customary laws that varied among the different ethnic groups. Supreme power in overseeing land related issues, such as regulating use and excluding and negotiating rights with outsiders, was vested in the council of elders or equivalent leadership structures of the respective communities.⁴¹ Kenya was declared a British protectorate in 1895. To pave the way for the alienation of land for British settlers, the Crown Lands Ordinance was crafted. This piece of legislation declared “all waste and unoccupied land” as “Crown Land.”⁴² The *terra nullius* concept was at play in Kenya as in other colonized parts of the world although:

In actual sense these empty tracts of land were pasture lands, salt licks, public meeting and dance places, the woodlands including big forests along the frontier of the Agĩkũyũ and the neighbouring tribes...big tracts of land were used for purposes other than cultivation and were equally important to the community.⁴³

An amendment of the Crown Lands Ordinance in 1939 created native reserves (also known as trust lands) which were overseen by the Native Land Trust Boards. In 1959, alienation of land to individual community members in native reserves was instituted, setting in motion private ownership of land through title deeds. This created a situation where heads of households (mainly male) became the sole owners of the land, often at the expense of spouses, female relatives, or those with customary rights of

⁴¹ Dr J Odera, “Lessons Learnt on Community Forest Management in Africa,” n.d., 74.

⁴² S. Aggarwal and C. Thouless, *Land Tenure and Property Rights Assessment: The Northern Rangeland and Coastal Conservation Programmes of USAID/Kenya* (ARD, 2008).

⁴³ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 37.

use.⁴⁴ As a result “by 1934, European settlers, who represented less than a quarter of one percent of the population at that time, controlled about a third of the arable land in the country.”⁴⁵ The colonial period marked the beginning of systematic dispossession, disenfranchisement, and land-related conflicts which continue to plague the country to this day. After independence, the un-adjudicated trust lands were managed by the county councils/local governments and the Crown Land became government land (it should be noted that the majority of forests fall into this category). The fundamentals of the colonial land tenure system described above, especially state control over land and the undermining of customary tenure, continued after independence. Land became intrinsically tied with politics, ethnicity, and massive corruption exemplified by extensive land grabbing of forestlands in the 1990s.

As a result, Kenyans have been pushing for reform in land governance and the 2010 constitution is seen as a critical step forward in setting in place significant reforms on land governance, land use, and land ownership.⁴⁶ Of note is the recognition of customary land tenure. The constitution states that “all land in Kenya belongs to the people of Kenya collectively as a nation, as communities, and as individuals” and that “community land”, which includes ancestral lands, “shall vest in and be held by communities.”⁴⁷ All other land is either government land or private land, which can be held under freehold or leasehold tenure.

Geographical settings – Nyandarwa [Aberdare] Forest Reserve: Forest management: The Kenyan context

Kenya boasts of some of the most diverse forest ecosystems in East Africa, comprising coastal, rain, riverine, and montane forests that are biologically diverse and contain numerous local endemic species.⁴⁸ Prominent in Kenya’s landscape are five major forest ecosystems known as ‘water towers’: the Mau Forest Complex; Mount Kenya, the Aberdare [Nyandarwa];

⁴⁴ Judi Wangalwa Wakhungu, Elvin Nyukuri, and Christopher Huggins, *Land Tenure and Violent Conflict in Kenya: In the Context of Local, National, and Regional Legal and Policy Frameworks: Consultative Conference Proceedings Report* (Nairobi: African Centre for Technology Studies, 2008).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Liz Alden Wily, “Land in the proposed constitution of Kenya: What does it mean?,” n.d., 14.

⁴⁷ Government of Kenya, “The Constitution of Kenya 2010,” 2010, 42, 45, <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/ken127322.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Piritta Peltorinne, “The Forest Types of Kenya,” 2004, 6.

Mount Elgon; and Cherangani forests. These forests deliver vital services, such as clean water, timber, fuel, and food, directly to rural communities. In Kenya, over 90% of all water comes from these forested mountains and 70% of electrical power generation is derived from rivers that flow from these forests.⁴⁹ Forest management challenges in Kenya have, to a large extent, been linked to policy formulation. From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, for example, there was an unprecedented acceleration in the destruction of forests in Kenya, which was largely blamed on a lack of appropriate and all-inclusive forest policy and legislation.⁵⁰

The policies and legislation used to manage forest resources were developed in 1957 by the colonial government, changing only slightly after independence in 1968.⁵¹ This approach to forest governance was considered repressive and inconsiderate to less advantaged members of the various communities living in and around forest ecosystems. Thus, local communities yearned for policies and laws that would recognize and include them in the governance of the country's forests. As an attempt to address this yearning, the new Kenyan constitution promulgated in August 2010 has formulated a new resource management system which significantly alters Kenya's socio-cultural, political, legal, and economic spheres.⁵² The constitution now explicitly requires the government to involve communities in conserving and managing lands and ecosystems, thus opening more space for dialogue and deeper recognition of communities and their respective cultures.⁵³ In 2007, Kenya underwent a major change in the operationalization of the Forests Act 2005, creating an opportunity for communities to be involved in forest management through Community Forest Associations (CFAs) by embracing the participatory forest management approach.

The Forests Act 2005 has been replaced by the Forests Conservation and Management Act of 2016, which aligns itself with the provisions of the 2010 Kenyan Constitution. This legislation is a welcome paradigm shift from command-and-control towards greater participation and stakeholder

⁴⁹ Gyde Lund, *UNEP. 2009. Kenya: Atlas of Our Changing Environment. Nairobi, Kenya. United Nations Environment Programme, Division of Early Warning and Assessment (DEWA). EarthPrint. 160 p. On Line at <http://www.unep.org/dewa/africa/kenyaatlas/> and <http://na.unep.net/africa/atlas/kenyaatlas/chapters.html>, 2009.*

⁵⁰ Paul O Ongugo, "Participatory Forest Management in Kenya: Is There Anything for the Poor?," 2007, 10.

⁵¹ Kenya Forest Service, *Participatory Forest Management Guidelines*, 2008.

⁵² Adam Hussein Adam, "Recognising Sacred Natural Sites and Territories in Kenya:" n.d., 96.

⁵³ Wily, "Land in the Proposed Constitution of Kenya: What Does It Mean?"

engagement in forest management and conflict resolution over forest resources. CFAs are expected to play a critical role in safeguarding forests through protection and conservation activities. They are, in turn, supposed to receive revenues from timber and non-timber products, as well as from community-based industries ecotourism, recreation, scientific, and educational activities.⁵⁴ This community engagement model is expected to contribute to poverty reduction, employment creation, and improvement of livelihoods through sustainable use, conservation, and management of forests. There is vast potential in the indigenous knowledge of the members of the CFAs, since they have lived in and adjacent to the forest for a long time. The elders in the community often know the tree species in the forest, their uses, abundance, and diversity; such knowledge is important in education, research, and ecotourism. This, in addition to other local knowledge on timber and non-timber products, can position the community better as co-managers of the forest ecosystems with the Kenya Forest Service.⁵⁵

There is growing recognition that the use and promotion of conventional scientific methods of forest conservation alone are not sufficient. Perhaps the answers to the environmental challenges we face reside with communities and within knowledge embedded in IKS and other local knowledge systems working alongside and/or with scientific management regimes. This calls for honest engagement with local communities in a constructive manner to establish a common ground and long-term solutions. This is especially critical in the African context, where environmental resources still remain a sophisticated pedestal around which culture, religion, livelihoods, and governance are constructed.⁵⁶

The study site: The Nyandarwa Forest Reserve within the Aberdare Conservation Area

The Aberdare Conservation Area (ACA) is a volcanic, mountainous, and forested landscape that forms the easternmost wall of the Great Rift Valley, to the east of the high Kinangop/Laikipia plateau in central Kenya.

⁵⁴ Esther Mwangi et al., “Communities, Property Rights and Forest Decentralisation in Kenya: Early Lessons from Participatory Forestry Management,” *Conservation and Society* 10, no. 2 (2012): 182, <https://doi.org/10.4103/0972-4923.97490>.

⁵⁵ Ongugo, “Participatory Forest Management in Kenya: Is There Anything for the Poor?”

⁵⁶ Borona, “Exploring the Link between Forests, Traditional Custodianship and Community Livelihoods.”