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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE ROLE OF ISUKHA RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN MITIGATING DEFFORESTATION IN KAKAMEGA FOREST

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ABSTRACT

The paper is set to establish the role of African religion in environmental conservation. Specifically, it intends to determine the role of Isukha religious beliefs and practices in the conservation of vegetation in Kakamega forest. The paper also sets out to recommend ways of disseminating African indigenous knowledge on flora. The research revealed that African religion has employed various techniques to conserve natural vegetation in the said forest. Such methods include taboos, rituals and their knowledge of sacred and profane.

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INTRODUCTION

Setting and samples

This article is informed by data from the Kakamega forest and the surrounding populace. Most of the respondents are from the Shinyalu division, where the Isukha dialect of the Luhya tribe - the second largest of the forty-two tribes of Kenya is primarily spoken. Shinyalu is one of seven divisions that constitute the Kakamega district.¹ The area is relatively densely populated with an average of 600 persons per square kilometre. An abundant annual rainfall averaging 1,737 millimetres supports the forest's more than 300 species of birds, 32 species of snakes, 7 species of primates, and 400 species of butterflies on less than 22,000 hectares of land. Purposive sampling was used to survey elders, medicine men, religious leaders, Isukha religious specialists, local government administration officials, environmental conservation groups, and forest guards. The research utilized snow ball sampling procedure Nairobi Government printers 2002-2008 in which one person or group points the way to others who might be able to provide information. This method led to the sampling of six Isukha elders, four religious leaders, three Isukha religious specialists, seven local government administration officials, five environmental conservation groups, and six forest guards or waders. In total, the respondents numbered thirty-one.

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¹Kakamega DDP, government printers, Nairobi, 2002-2008.

Theoretical framework

The research here falls under the structural-functional theory associated with Emile Durkheim, and more recently Talcott Parsons. The theory holds that the society consists of parts, which have their own functions and work together to promote social stability.² All aspects of a society serve a purpose and are indispensable for the long-term survival of the society. These parts usually work together in an orderly manner, without conflict, somewhat like the heart, lungs, kidney, and the alimentary canal of the human body. If one part fails, the body ceases to function normally.³ The theory examined here presumes that society is a system composed of various social elements, or units, African religion being one of them. If African religion is disrespected, society's functioning will be disrupted, forcing it to readjust to seek equilibrium. African religion in this case is a vital tool within the structure of society. The theory also asserts that if society's needs are to be met, social structures must be shaped. African religion therefore is assumed to help society operate smoothly. In relation to structural functionalism theory, values and norms of African religion provide for a strong measure to unwise utilization of flora.⁴ The wants and desires of people are not randomly distributed but are socially derived through values

²G. Mashall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* (London, Routledge, 1994), 190-191

³D. Mitchell, *A Dictionary of Sociology* (London, Routledge, 1968).

⁴ P. Knapp, *One World-Many Worlds: Contemporary Sociological Theory* (New York, Harper-Collins, 1994), 191-2

and norms, which, in this case, includes taboos.⁵ The theory therefore affirms that African religion has a functional role in society. One of these roles is conservation of natural vegetation.

Need for conservation of vegetation of Kakamega forest

In 1995, the International Union of Conservation of Nature (I.U.C.N.) ranked the Forest as the third highest priority for conservation among forests in Kenya due to both species richness and habitat rarity. It is highly valued by the local community as it has provided numerous valuable resources to the surrounding people for hundreds of years. The forest acts as a source of fuel wood, grass for thatching, medicinal plants, a worshipping site and land for grazing⁶. Over a long period, the forest has undergone a series of physical changes. Formally, in 1900 the forest covered the whole of Western Kenya.⁷ Currently, it has reduced to a small patch. Its' degradation started in 1920 when the British colonial government found gold in the forest and declared it a 'county forest'. The foregoing led to the eviction of Indigenous Luhya People who lived in the forest. The discovery of gold in the forest further paved way for logging of valuable hardwoods embracing, Elgon olive, and African satinwood. They logged the oldest and 'best' trees in the forest.⁸

The Kenya government developed policies in late 1920's to protect the forest and even afforest it. Government policies stressed on the importance of the forest on climate and water regulation. Conversely, with time, later on the policies were minimized in favour of Agriculture and economic returns. As such in 1933, Kakamega Forest was gazetted as a national forest under management of the Kenya Forest Department, which planted exotic species of trees. Areas of indigenous forest were completely cleared for plantation and most of the early plantations consisted primarily of fast growing non-indigenous softwood species such as pine and Cyprus to meet demands for firewood and timber for export.⁹ High forest depletion rate in Kenya (245 ha of forest) was noted in the years between 1972 and 1980. A freeze on plantation area expansion in the forest was supposedly imposed.¹⁰ As a reaction to the former, the natural forest along the main road was replaced with plantations in 1984, and timber exportation from the forest was banned. Correspondingly, in the following year the Shamba System was banned by the government to limit overexploitation of remaining indigenous forest by the communities living in the forest. Later in the same year, the northern side of the forest was declared a national reserve to be managed by Kenya Wildlife Services. All extractive uses of the forest were banned and at the same time, a ministerial ban made it illegal to cut indigenous tree species. Nyayo Tea Zones were established in 1986 at the forest edges to prevent further encroachment.¹¹ To limit the number of pastoralists relying on the forest, the forest department enacted a fee of ten

shillings per cow for those cattle grassing in the glades.¹² It was reported by the Kenya Indigenous Forest Conservation Programme (KIFCON), that logging took place despite the preceding measures up to 1994. In response to the former, Kakamega Environmental Education Programme (KEEP) was established by Forest Guides in Isecheno to educate the local community on conservation of the forest.¹³ In the year 2000, it was realized that the forest had grown by 5%. Much of this was due to the enactment of strict laws on forest use, eviction of forest residents, and educating the local population, abolishing the Shamba System, and inclusion of local population in forest management. However, the government remains the major decision maker in forest management. There is need to involve the surrounding community at large as stakeholders or partners in forest management so that the forest growth percentage rate should rise. This can be achieved by utilizing valuable traditional religious knowledge of surrounding community on environment conservation.

Indigenous vegetation of cultural importance found in Kakamega forest and their significances to the surrounding Luhya community

The forest has over 380 species of plants. It has 150 species of woody trees, shrubs, and vines. Of these, 90 species are dicotyledonous herbs and 80 monocotyledons of which 60 are orchids (nine of which are endemic), 62 species of ferns.¹⁴ Local people surrounding the forest use almost 150 species of plants for herbal medicine or ritual purposes.¹⁵ Some plants species are conserved due to their significance to the community. Some plant species are treated with reverence and protected for future use due to their sacred value. Some are protected for their medicinal value, while others utilized for rituals. The following table indicates some types of plants, conserved by the Luhya and cultural significances associated with them.

WAYS OF REGULATING UTILIZATION OF VEGETATION

The community members have devised various methods of regulating utilization of vegetation. Such ways include; totems, knowledge of sacred and profane, use of religious specialists

Taboos

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, a taboo is a cultural or religious custom that forbids people not

⁵E. C. Cuff et al., *Perspectives in Sociology*, 3d edn (London, Routledge, 1984), 40.

⁶ An interview with Wilberforce Okeka on 1/04/2005)

⁷ Omare, 'Role of Isukha religious beliefs and practices in the conservation of Kakamega forest (Master thesis Maseno University, 2000), 71.

⁸ An interview with Munhayo on 2/04/2005

⁹ Wass P., *Kenya's Indigenous Forests. Status, Management and Conservation*. (Cambridge, 1995).

¹⁰ (Glenday, 2003)

¹¹ An interview with Lukoye on 28/03/2005.

¹² An interview with Munhayo on 30/03/ 2005.

¹³ An interview with Wilberforce Okeka on 1/03/2005.

¹⁴ An interview with OKallo on 4/4/2005.

¹⁵ L. Emerton, *Summary of Findings on Forest Utilization in Kakamega Forest*. Kenya Indigenous Forest Conservation Programme, Nairobi: Forest department, 1992.

Table 1. Indigenous vegetation of cultural importance found in kakamega forest and their significances to the surrounding luhya community

Luhya Name	Botanical Name	Believed Significance
<i>Mukumu</i>	<i>Ficus Thoningii</i>	Sacrifice, prayers, initiation, planted in homesteads marking graves of elders and warriors.
<i>Murembe</i>	<i>Erithrina abyssinica</i>	Chasing demons, swearing, elder's meetings were done under it, healing mumps, making beehives and drums.
<i>Mukhuzulu</i>	<i>Albisa gumifera</i>	Religious meetings done under it, incest cases were solved under it, making indigenous plates for ceremonies.
<i>Lusiola</i>	<i>Markhamia lutea</i>	Planted on graves, elder's stools and used as a family tree.
<i>Mutsulio</i>	<i>Spadotea capanulata</i>	To drive away evil spirits, remedy against swollen legs.
<i>Musembe</i>	<i>Endata abyssinica</i>	To welcome spirits to a homestead, ripening bananas, used by rainmakers.
<i>Mughuvambo</i>	<i>Tautra savvolense</i>	Swearing and punishing evil doers.
<i>Luvambo</i>	<i>Nuxia congesta</i>	Killing wrong doers and used after birth to protect lives of children from evil eyes.
<i>Shinakozi</i>	<i>Euphobia tirucalli</i>	Demarcating boundaries, solving land disputes, fencing compounds and covering mourner's bodies at funerals
<i>Muhalia</i>	<i>Penplocia linearifolia</i>	Circumcision ceremonies
<i>Lumetsani</i>	<i>Leucas argentea</i>	Medicinal. Leaves cure stomach-ache.
<i>Shikuma</i>	<i>Hoslundia opposita</i>	Leaves make tea for ceremonies, making elders' stools.
<i>Itikwa</i>	<i>Rutinidea orientalis</i>	Making drinking straws used in religious ceremonies.
<i>Morabe</i>	<i>Kigelia moosa</i>	Ferment beer used in religious ceremonies (<i>Busaa</i>).
<i>Lingubingu</i>	<i>Ipomoea kithiensis</i>	Curing stomach-ache.
<i>Shisimbari</i>	<i>Clausena anisata</i>	Expelling demons, healing whooping cough and malaria.
<i>Lukhuwu</i>	<i>Dracaena fragrance</i>	To make fierce animal adamant in bull fighting ceremonies and making fences.
<i>Omunyofwe</i>	<i>Elaodendron</i>	Punishing evildoers by poisoning them to death.
<i>Mukhuyu</i>	<i>Ficus sur</i>	Medicinal, stomach-ache, diarrhoea, making elders' stools.
<i>Lubino</i>	<i>Senna didymobotrya</i>	Initiation to cover initiates, to treat wounds.
<i>Likhomo</i>	<i>Chaetame aristata</i>	Sap used as poison for spears during wars.
<i>Shilulu</i>	<i>Datura sauroense</i>	Killing criminals.
<i>Mghobari</i>	<i>Acacia montigena</i>	Medicinal, roots kill worms.
<i>Kusilamosi</i>	<i>Sienna singueana</i>	Medicine, stomach medicine.
<i>Luvini</i>	<i>Cacia didymobotrya</i>	Leaves used for fishing, treatment of ringworms, and to chase demons away from possessed people.
<i>Lisitsi</i>	<i>Emerete ventricosum</i>	Punishing criminals.
<i>Mubonebone</i>	<i>Rinicus comunis</i>	Used at after birth to bleeding mothers and seeds used as traditional candles for lighting.
<i>Kisasari</i>	<i>Flueggea visora</i>	Twigs used as toothbrushes.
<i>Lundua</i>	<i>Euphobia calendabrum</i>	After birth medicine to women to prevent, death in cases of witchcraft and cementing broken pots.
<i>Enguu</i>	<i>Microglossa pyrifolia</i>	Powder to heal wounds on initiates circumcised malaria treatment.
<i>Mukobelo</i>	<i>Mondia whytei</i>	Root given to women at childbirth heals potency-stimulant, used in marriage ceremonies.

Source: Beetje, H. (1994), Olembo, N.K. et al (1995), Okallo, (2005), Okeka, (2005).Kokwaro, J.O. (1993), Shikame, (2005), Kamunje, (2005).

Table 2 . Taboos associated with vegetation of Kakamega Forest

Plant Name in Luhya	Scientific Name	Taboo	Belief
<i>Mukumu</i>	<i>Ficus Thoningii</i>	Not cut	Hail stones would fall or lightening will strike.
<i>Likhomo</i>	<i>Chaetame aristat</i>	Not cut	Can lead to development of a rough skin on the cutter's body.
<i>Mutsulio</i>	<i>Spadodea canopanulata</i>	Not cut	Can lead to development of a rough skin on the cutter's body.
<i>Omuseno</i>	<i>Ficus exasperate</i>	Not used as firewood	Smoke would lead to blindness.
<i>Isambakhulu</i>	<i>Boehmeria marc</i>	Women not allowed to cut it	Would lead to miscarriage during pregnancy.
<i>Murembe</i>	<i>Erithrina abyssinica</i>	Not cut	Evil spirits would punish the cutter.
<i>Murave</i>	<i>Kigelia moosa</i>	Not cut	The cutter's body would swell.
<i>Mulundu</i>	<i>Antaris toxicana</i>	Not cut	Demons would attach the reaper.
<i>Musine</i>	<i>Crotons megalocapus</i>	Not used as firewood	Smoke can lead to blindness.
<i>Mutere</i>	<i>Maesopsi eminii</i>	Not cut	Can lead to the disappearing of other trees.
<i>Kukomosi</i>	<i>Maytenas hete</i>	Not cut	People in the family of the cutter would become infertile.
<i>Omutoto</i>	<i>Ficus anibela</i>	Not cut	Would bring a curse from ancestors.
<i>Lusiola</i>	<i>Markhamia lutea</i>	Not cut	Ancestors would be annoyed.
<i>Mukhomoli</i>	<i>Markhamia platyalx</i>	Not cut	Evil spirits would attack the harvester.

Sources (Mchiri, 3/04/2005) (Injehu, 1/04/2005) Luseno, 3/4/2005(Mjinji, 6/4/ 2005). Greiner, 1991 Ngazi, 25/3 2005).

to do, touch, use or mention a certain article. Taboos are passed from generation to generation, orally and have a functional role to the society. They vary from place to place due to environmental determinism, depending on the social, cultural and economic organization of a particular community.¹⁶ Taboos in the Isukha community touch on all-important aspects of life. They are associated with birth, initiation, marriage, food, death, socialization, economic activities, agriculture, and hunting. They influence relationships between human beings, humanity versus animals, humans versus plants, and humans versus the supernatural world. In this community, taboos are accompanied with reasons and a belief. Among the functions of taboos in the Luhya community is the mitigation of deforestation through conservation of vegetation. The Isukha community adjacent to Kakamega forest has formulated a variety of taboos associated with plants. The following are taboos formulated by the Isukha religion to conserve plants of religious importance.

Taboos associated with vegetation of Kakamega Forest

The Isukha do not cut trees found at sites called *Khuluhya*. *Khuluhya* are sacred sites where elders sit to solve communal issues. The place is believed to be the dwelling places of ancestors. Therefore, no body is allowed to cut any vegetation from the region. If one does it is believed to run mad as a punishment from the ancestors.¹⁷ The community taboos the harvesting of herbs during daylight. Harvesting is done at mid night while naked. If one harvests them during the day, the medicine would lose its curing power.¹⁸ The community taboos the cutting of trees by women. Only men could cut trees and more especially trees permitted by the clan elders.¹⁹ By employing the preceding taboos, some tree and places where the trees are found were protected. This promoted ecological biodiversity, since animals residing in the ecological niches conserved were not disturbed.

b) Totems

A totem is a natural object, an animal or plant regarded as a symbol by a given tribe or family.²⁰ In relation to this study, a totem is a plant that people regard with special awe, reverence, and respect.²¹ It is a class of plants regarded with superstitious respect believing that, there exists between individual members of the society an intimate obligatory and altogether special relationship.²² It is a symbol that binds people who believe to be of one blood, descended from one ancestor and bound together by a common responsibility to each other. A totem is only a symbol of something more fundamental.²³ Totems are symbols of the supernatural powers on earth. It is the personification and the representation of the invisible

under the visible form of plant. Durkheim opines that, totems are symbols that symbolize God and the clan. Thus, they can be equated to flags that represent a given nation or religious organization. They do not worship the objects but what is important is what the objects represented. The idea of clans owning totems in the Luhya community lead to the protection of plant species of ecological biodiversity.²⁴

The Isukha have totemic sites deemed sacred which members of the community are commanded to respect. Special ceremonies are conducted from these sites. The idea of respect of totemic sites has functionally led to increase of flora and fauna species in numbers.²⁵ Maximum ecological biodiversity and increase of species in numbers can be felt because African religion validates and gives meaning to human organization in totems.²⁶ Durkheim (1961), in his study on the indigenous Australians noted that totem objects are associated with initiated men who meet to perform rituals at totemic sites that are deemed to be sacred. The preceding is the same to the Isukha surrounding Kakamega forest.

To the Isukha, every person is born into a clan and each clan is given the name of an animal, or fish, or plant. Leading Luhya clans had their totems. The totems include those animals, birds, or plants that they do not kill or touch due to their religious significance.²⁷ It is sacrilegious for a clan member to cut a totem plant. Clan members protect their plants, because the survival of the clan depends on them. In this way, animals are protected. Members of one totem refer themselves to the nickname of their totem. In such circumstances, humans treat their totem with reverent respect. The totem being plant, one is not allowed to destroy it.²⁸ The Luhya take the palm tree (*Olukhindu*) as their totem plant. It is forbidden to cut the tree. Swearing is done under the plant to prove whether one is lying or not. It is believed that if one lied, the totem could bring him or her bad luck or kill him.²⁹ Palm trees are not destroyed; hence, conservation.

c) Knowledge of sacred and mundane

Durkheim defines sacred as those things, situations, and places that are set apart, very special, and emit an aura of the holy.³⁰ It means all sorts of collective states, common traditions and emotions, feelings, which have a relationship to objects of general interest. For the purpose of this study sacred means places regarded with respect as they are connected with the supernatural and thus considered 'holy'. By mundane means 'the ordinary'. Long before, official organizations were established to carry out sustainable forest management and conservation in Kakamega forest, there were traditional communal resource management systems. A prominent feature of such systems is the setting aside of patches of forest by traditional authorities for sustainable resource use and the

¹⁶ J. Crowther, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (New York, Collins, 1998)

¹⁷ An interview with Emily Amutabi, 8/4/2005.

¹⁸ An interview with Wilberforce Okeka, 1/4/2005.

¹⁹ An interview with Mjinji, 9/6/2005.

²⁰ J. Crowther, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (New York, Collins, 1998), 1263.

²¹ S. Kurgat, 'The Catholic Church and social change in Busia district, Kenya, 1925-1995' (Ph.D. thesis, Maseno University, 2004), 38.

²² Ochieng, W.R. *Apré-colonial History of the Gusii of Kenya (C.A.D 1500-1914)*. (Nairobi. East African literature Bureau. 1974), 55.

²³ Omare, G.S. Religion and Environment: Isukha religious beliefs and practices in the conservation of Kakamega forest (Saarbrücken: Lap Lambert, 2010) 65.

²⁴ E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York, Free Press, 1961), 236.

²⁵ R. Morris, *Fauna and Flora in Kakamega Forest* (Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers, 1987), 117-118.

²⁶ Omere, G.S. Religion and environment: The role of Iswcha religion betrep and praenees in the conservation of Kakamega forest, Kenya (Saarbrücken, Lap Lambert, 2010), 66.

²⁷ J. Osogo, *The Baluhya* (London, Oxford University Press, 1965), 15.

²⁸ Were, G.S. *Western Kenya Historical Texts: Abaluhya, Teso and Elgon Kalenjini*. Nairobi. East Africa Literature Bureau. 1967.

²⁹ J. Osogo, *The Baluhya* (London, Oxford University Press, 1965), 15.

³⁰ Durkheim (1975:95)

preservation of vital biodiversity.³¹ These areas are often referred to as sacred groves, fetish groves, local forests or community forests. Some sites of such forests are designated as burial grounds for chiefs or as the home of local deities. Nevertheless, in most cases they are intended to protect watersheds, fragile ecosystems, as well as plants and animals of conservation importance to the local community.³² Traditional authorities are the titleholders of such areas, and exercise general administrative functions over them. The management, defence, and preservation of such lands are the responsibility of the entire community.

The Isukha sub ethnic group living next to Kakamega forest hold some sites in the forest as Sacred. These particular spaces are not destroyed but conserved for future use.³³ The main reason for the protection of these sites was the fear of annoying the living dead. Religious specialists and elders protect these sacred sites through the enactment of rules and regulations governing the utilization of resources found in these sites.³⁴ Following are examples of sacred places in and areas surrounding Kakamega forest by the Isukha.

Kakamega forest is an important place for traditional ceremonies and worship. Certain natural phenomena are held sacred.³⁵ Some specific sites of the rivers in the forest are held as sacred. They are specifically used for cultural functions. The Rivers include *Lukisitsi*, *Isiukhu*, *Ikuywa*, and *Yala*. Religiously, some sites of these rivers are used to cleanse murderers and widows, initiation, sacrifices and baptism. Such sites are considered 'holy' to the specific groups of people who conduct the foregoing rituals. People do not frequent the actual spots utilized for ritual of purification.³⁶ The habit of hindering the frequent use of the foregoing sites facilitates maximum ecological biodiversity at the same sites. The social control of the use of natural resources found at these sites makes sure that degradation, pollution or contamination are minimized or avoided hence maximum forest growth.

The forest has two hills regarded sacred by the Luhya neighbouring Kakamega Forest: *Lirhandanda* and *Mahiakalo* hills. *Mahiakalo* is used for rituals conducted before battles.³⁷ Before wars, people used to sleep and sharpen their weapons from the place. The community members used the hill to give sacrifices, offerings, and prayers. Sacrifices are made in case of communal disaster such as hunger, drought, and out-break of a peculiar disease. Offerings are be given to God to thank Him for the good harvest, helping them triumph in wars, good health, and after a good return from a raid.³⁸ Prayers were done to make requests for the whole community. These religious acts are performed annually or when pressing issues arose. Therefore, these sites are of religious significance to the community as a whole. The two places are left as natural as possible in order to gratify God; hence, cutting of the vegetation found at the point is banned. Currently, *Lirhandanda*

hill is used as a worshipping place to various new religious movements including Legio Maria and African Church of the Holy Spirit. During the month of August members of the two religions assemble at the hill for fasting and prayers.³⁹

Another sacred site is the 'Crying Stone', a granite stone found along Kakamega- Mukumu highway. Nobody is allowed to demolish the stone. It is believed that the residents of the place are *Abamilonje*, the largest clan in *Isukha* today. It was founded by Chibololi Arap Roti.⁴⁰ It is believed that at one time Kalenjins went to pluck off the rock, but died from mysterious causes.⁴¹ Since then, the rock is held to be sacred. Today, Legio Maria worshippers hold the rock as Sacred. They make pilgrimage to the rock annually. The concept of sacredness extends to plants. Some specific fauna species are regarded sacred by the Luhya. These plants and animals are conserved for religious functions. Sacred plants take account of *Mukumu (figus thoningii)* and *Murembe (erithrina tomentosa)*. Such examples of sacred flora species are protected by a line of taboo, beliefs and practices.⁴²

d) Belief that some plants have mystic powers

Mystic powers are the forces that cannot be understood and influence human affairs. The Isukha believe that the universe is full of powerful forces that directly connect to plants. The source of the powers is not well known because its nature is not well grasped, although they are believed to have vast effects on human affairs. However, some people tend to opine that the forces are the living dead. The Isukha neighbouring Kakamega forest classifies mystic forces into two, those who influence good, and those who influence evil. To them, these supernatural forces have a place of residence in the cosmos and come into sight to humans in form of spirits. The fear of mystic powers validates their religious practices and beliefs about the natural environment. Community members view the living dead as their representatives in the supernatural world; therefore, acting morally upright to what the ancestors had set aside as sacred. The Isukha fear getting in touch with evil spirits. This gives reason why they fear getting in contact with any plant presumed to belong to evil spirits.⁴³ Some of these mystic forces can be seen in humans who perform strange acts such as, walking on fire, lying on thorns, or spitting on snakes and causing them to die.⁴⁴ Mystic forces can be seen in sorcery, witchcraft, and magic. All these have led to the shaping of attitudes of the Isukha towards vegetation. Some plants are dreaded because they are portended to be artefacts of evil people; hence, no one destroys them. If one interferes with them, it is believed that he or she will die or be affected negatively by mystic forces concerned.⁴⁵ By fearing getting in touch with certain plants they are not disturbed by humans; hence, left as natural as possible leading to maximum ecological biodiversity. The forest is a homestead of *Were*. People are not supposed to go to certain points in the forest. In the older days, people believed that were lived in the forest at

³¹ An interview with Paul Okwara on 4/4/2005

³² An interview with Odhiambo on 2/4/2005

³³ An interview with Otunga on 7/4/2005

³⁴ An interview with Benjamin Okallo on 1/4/2005

³⁵ Emerton, L. *Licensed utilization of Kakamega Forest*. Kenya Indigenous Forest Conservation Programme, Nairobi: Forest Dept. 1991.

³⁶ An interview with Paul Okwara on 4/04/2005

³⁷ An interview with John Lukoye on 3/4/2005

³⁸ An interview with George Shikame, 6/4/2005)

³⁹ An interview with Esther Kenyanya, 8/4/2005)

⁴⁰ Osogo, J. *The Baluhya*. (London. Oxford University Press. 1965), 14.

⁴¹ An interview with Benjamin Okallo on 1/4/2005)

⁴² An interview with Haron Shiravika on 6/6/2005

⁴³ An interview with Emily Mbole on 3/4/2005)

⁴⁴ Mugambi, J. et al *The African Religious Heritage*. (Nairobi. Oxford University press. 1982), 119

⁴⁵ An interview with Victoria Kamunye on 3/4/2005

a particular point, which, they were not allowed to reach. They could call God with the help of stones. Blood from a chicken was shed on a stone, then one hand beat the stone with a stick, while the other was held up in the air.⁴⁶ By not going to particular points in the forest, ecological niches were not disturbed, leading to high ecological biodiversity.

The Isukha neighbouring the forest traditionally threw dead bodies of people into the forest whom they believe later turned into ghosts. It was believed that these ghosts took the form of snakes and wild creatures. The ghosts take control of the forest, they punish those who destroy forbidden flora.⁴⁷ Therefore, people feared tampering with what was forbidden even if the ghosts were not seen by the living. If one was to go into the forest to cut trees or to hunt, he was to offer a sacrifice, prayers, or seek permission from the village diviner. If one ventured into specific forbidden sites, a curse befell him and would be attacked by wild animals.⁴⁸ This belief in ghosts as mystic powers led to the conservation of some forest species of plants.

Some serious infections such as leprosy and measles were associated with the invasion of evil spirits. To avoid contamination, the victims were thrown into some specific sites in the forest. People were forbidden to go near as they could be infected by evil spirits responsible for the ailments.⁴⁹ By not getting to some points in the forest, natural environmental resources were not disturbed. Such a belief facilitated ecological biodiversity in the forest. On its part, the community adheres to traditional norms and regulations governing management of this forest, as well as local norms and beliefs governing sacred or fetish groves, which prohibit harvesting forest products. Entry is allowed only on specific days or periods for the performance of specific rituals. Most of these groves are believed to contain the "earth god" or spiritual beings that promote peace as well as prosperity. They have checked antisocial behaviour, and have resulted in remnant patches of primordial forest even in densely populated areas. In all, African philosophy on resource utilization and environmental protection is spiritually based. Major conservation efforts and control of resource use is influenced by this spirituality. Religious beliefs and taboo systems are at the centre of life as a whole. The Isukha spiritual world-view creates respect for nature, reverence for hills, forests, animals, and rivers. Out of reverence, environmental resource conservation is born and from it, sustainable resource utilization practices.⁵⁰

e) Influence from religious specialists

A specialist is a person who is an expert in a particular branch of work. African religious Specialists are those people who are experts in particular branches of religion such as worshipping, medicine, divining, prophecy, soothsaying, rainmaking and

initiation.⁵¹ In the Isukha community, religious Specialists assist in promoting the conservation of some natural vegetations. This is achieved by the specialist's command for conservation of certain natural resources. Religious specialists are believed to have accumulated their powers from the Creator *Were*.⁵² They act as mediators between man and ancestors. Therefore, their command on the nature of environmental resources to be conserved is followed. It is believed that, failure to submit to their commands could invite curses to oneself or the whole clan. Through the preceding, certain aspects of flora are conserved. Some religious specialists have their own sacred sites. They ensure that the places are well taken care of in order to facilitate efficacy in their work. They ensure liturgy is well met during functions to promote the religiosity of rituals.⁵³

In the Isukha sub-ethnic group, different specialists conserve different aspects of nature. Medicine men enact rules, beliefs, and taboos to regulate the utilization of herbs from certain trees. For example, Isukha herbalists (*vashilishi*) forbid the extraction of herbs during daylight. They believe that herbs would lose their potency if extracted during day time. They are supposed to be extracted at night while nude.⁵⁴ The foregoing practice leads to the control of extraction of herbs from the forest as people feared going to extract herbs. Herbalists prohibit the local population from getting to certain places of the forest with a claim that they will be infested with evil spirits. Similarly, they deter people from touching some plants or cutting them with specific claims, this has led to the conservation of such plants.

Diviners have powers to communicate with the supernatural world. They know the language of the living and of the dead. They helped in the conservation of certain plants through, the idea of mystic powers. They forbid people from going to some particular places with a claim that, they would be invested by evil spirits. This idea led to the conservation of particular plants in the forest.⁵⁵ When new ideas, technologies, or new land uses are being introduced in or the area neighbouring the forest, depending on the nature of the activity, certain issues are referred to the spirit medium. The spirit medium communicates with ancestors for consultation because the consequences and impact of such actions are not known.⁵⁶ It is essential to make sure that mystic world approves these innovations. It is believed that, introducing new ideas or technologies would result in 'bad things' happening. The foregoing controls land uses, use of resources and the introduction of technologies or practices whose impacts on the environment are not known.⁵⁷ It gives the community opportunity to examine innovations more carefully, slows the pace of introducing new practices that might prove harmful and creates consensus in the community

⁴⁶ Omare, S. and Susan Kilonzo. The role of taboos in the conservation of Kakamega forest for peace building in Africa Peace and Conflict journal volume 2 number 1. (Addis Ababa: University for peace, 2009),⁵⁰

⁴⁷ An interview with Maureen Mbugani on 4/4/2005)

⁴⁸ An interview with Simon Imbayi on 2/4/2005)

⁴⁹ An interview with James Achevi on 28/4/2005)

⁵⁰ B. Sibanda, *Environmental Policy: Governance, Religious Traditional Practices and Natural Resource Management in Zimbabwe* (Harare, Southern Africa Political and Economic Series Trust, 1997).

⁵¹ J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi, Heinemann, 1969), 216-88.

⁵² S. Kurgat, *The Catholic Church and Social Change in Busia District, Kenya 1925-1995*. Unpublished (Maseno University). 2005),⁶⁷

⁵³ An interview with Peter Erakho on 6/6/2005

⁵⁴ F. Haupt, *Traditional Use of and Reliance on the Forest among the Luhya People with Special Regard to the Traditional Medicine System and the Use of Medicinal Plants in Kakamega Forest* (London, Retch Publishers, 2000), 23.

⁵⁵ An interview with Benjamin Okallo on 1/4/2005

⁵⁶ An interview with John Lukoye on 5/4/2005

⁵⁷ B. Sibanda, *Environmental Policy: Governance, Religious Traditional Practices and Natural Resource Management in Zimbabwe* (Harare, Southern Africa Political and Economic Series Trust, 1997).

by seeking the permission of a more Superior Being. This practice has ensured that natural environmental resources of significance in Kakamega forest are in their original state.

Rituals (f)

According to *the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, a ritual is an action that is always done at a fixed time in the same way as part of a religion or a community. A Religious ritual is, a prescribed performance of conventionalized act manifestly directed towards engagement of non-empirical or supernatural agencies in the affairs of the actors.⁵⁸ Rituals in the Isukha exist in one's life from birth, initiation, marriage, and death. Rites of passage as a way of celebrating life accompany each stage of life. Most of rituals entail the natural environment where people live. Due to environmental determinism, rituals vary from one part of the universe to another.

The Isukha have a series of rituals that are related to the environment from cradle to death. To them, almost all rituals involve aspects of flora. In the Forest, thirteen plant species have been identified as being used in ritual or witchcraft events.⁵⁹ These flora species are protected for future purposes as the rituals recur after a given period at specific sacred sites. Environment related rituals in the Isukha sub-ethnic group can be seen after child birth, during initiation, during marriage, at burial, after death, once someone has offended the ancestors or God, thanks giving, worship, making judgment, before wars, before journeys and before planting. Various rituals had designated specific sites preserved for them.⁶⁰ Rivers *Yala*, *Isukhu*, *Ikuywa*, and *Lukusitsa* are held as sacred sites. Some spots of river *Lukusitsa* are used to cleanse murderers. During cleansing, a sheep is sacrificed and its blood was smeared on the initiate who takes bath from the river. Widows undergo cleansing from the river.⁶¹ People in a state of ritual impurity undergo purification rituals from preserved sites in the forest. For example, widows or mothers who have delivered twins or warriors who have killed their first enemy in wars could be cleansed from specific preserved rivers in the forest such as river *Lukusitsa*. It was a tradition of the Luhya not to greet widows before cleansing.⁶²

People fear going to the places of cleansing rituals due to the fear that they can be invested with evil spirits. They do not fish from the site. This has led to the conservation of flora and fauna found at the region. These other rivers have specific spots preserved through rituals. The Isukha community practiced some rituals during the burial of elders that led to the concept of environment conservation. When an elder died, various types of trees were planted on their graves such as *mugumo* (*ficus cycomosis*), *Lusiola* (*Markhamia lutea*), and *Lusambwa*. These trees were not supposed to be cut, as they were believed to contain the souls of the dead. It was a taboo to use them as for firewood.⁶³ This ritual of planting trees on

graves led to the preservation of various tree species, which in turn supported various forms of biodiversity such as micro organisms, birds and rodents; thus, environmental conservation. The forest is ritually used by the Isukha to appease their ancestral spirits by performing certain ritual ceremonies. Livestock and poultry are sacrificed in the forest to keep away misfortune. Certain ceremonies had specific places under sacred trees. For example, if somebody is a criminal, he is taken to the *Erythrina abyssinica* to swear that he or she will change the behaviour after spearing the tree. It is believed that, breaking the oath means lightning would strike the person, or he will become sick and die.⁶⁴ Such kind of trees was preserved specifically for such rituals.

g) Rites of passage

A rite is a religious ceremony performed when a new member joins a certain group. A rite of passage is a ceremony or event marking an important stage in a person's life. Rites of passage in traditional Isukha community bound the initiates with the natural environment. They are oriented to their future roles to environmental resource conservation. Initiation is a major rite of passage that protects natural environment resources to the Isukha neighbouring Kakamega forest. It is the most effective method that has been applied by African religionists to conserve natural resources. In the forest, some spaces have been set aside for initiation purposes.⁶⁵ These areas are protected by a series of taboos. Nobody is allowed to go to these sites, as it is believed that, he or she will be cursed. Flora and fauna found at these sites should never be disturbed. During seclusion, the initiates are provided with future survival tactics and natural environmental resource conservation techniques. At this stage, youths are taught about their totems and their expected relationship with the totems.⁶⁶ To the Isukha initiation is an obligatory puberty rite to all young men. During the occasion, initiates are taught on sacred flora. The secrets of the community are unleashed to them. Later, they are given new roles towards the development of the society. Among the new roles is their contribution towards the sustenance of ecological resources of cultural importance. In the process, they are taught environment conservation techniques. This contributes to the preservation of species of flora. The practice makes environment conservation a pursuit by all members of the society as it offers a chance to young people to acquire new knowledge.⁶⁷ Initiation as a rite conserves natural environmental resources by ensuring that some sites are conserved for the practice. It also offers a chance to the initiates to be conversant with environmental conservation techniques. By setting aside specific sites for initiation in the forest, the Isukha ensure that these places are protected against destruction through taboos, beliefs and practices.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that African religion has a role towards the conservation of vegetation as it regulates utilization of vegetation.

⁵⁸ Cole, 1988:390)

⁵⁹ L. Emerton, *Summary of the Current Value of Use of Kakamega Forest*. KIFCON, Nairobi: Karura Forest Station, Natural Resources Institute. 1994.

⁶⁰ An interview with Kamunje on 7/4/2005

⁶¹ F. Haupt, *Traditional Use of and Reliance on the Forest among the Luhya People with Special Regard to the Traditional Medicine System and the Use of Medicinal Plants in Kakamega Forest* (London, Retche Publishers, 2000), 23.

⁶² An interview with Khamonya, 8/4/2005)

⁶³ An interview with Anduro, 28/03/2005)

⁶⁴ Haupt, F.M. *Traditional use of and reliance on the forest among the Luhya people with special regard to the traditional medicine system and the use of medicinal plants in Kakamega forest*. U.K.: Retche Publishers. 2000:38.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*,38

⁶⁶ An interview with Benjamin Okallo on 1/4/2005

⁶⁷ An interview with Francis Moseni on 7/6/2005

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM LESSONS LEARNED

The following recommendations are based on the observations of the strengths and obstacles associated with the Isukha taboo system:

- Whereas globalization resulting from current patterns of urbanization, socialization, and modernization should not be totally condemned, these secular points of change should not on their part condemn African culture. Positive aspects of African cultures, such as taboo systems, should be maintained and respected by western worldviews.
 - Educational curricula that shut out Indigenous Knowledge System should be revised. This will encourage the integration of positive traditional beliefs that in the long run could contribute towards building community's peacekeeping capacities.
 - The proliferation of African independent churches that propagate the return of traditional African culture should not be condemned but supported as a way of renewing cultural elements that encourage communal living and revival of Indigenous Knowledge System.
 - Every society must have regularized procedures that can be used to deal with alleged breaches of societal rules and the injuries they cause.
- In Africa, the principal means to this end are contained in the complex of political authorities, police courts, judges, lawyers, and codes of law. In many African nations, most of these laws are manipulated or misused by those in power, the reason the taboo system promises instant punishment to the perpetrator, and this can be applied to deter people and enhance peace in the community.
 - Governments should be ready to learn from the local populace's belief systems. This aids in joint efforts towards biodiversity conservation and consequently reduces conflicts that disrupt peaceful relations in communities.

African religion has functions similar to those of formal institutions for nature conservation in contemporary society but have not sufficiently been recognized in many African societies in this capacity. It has also not been used efficiently as a unifying force among warring communities. It is suggested therefore that designs for conservation of biological diversity and its sustainable use in developing countries focus more on informal institutions, such as taboo systems. Formal education systems should also attempt to find a place in the curriculum for traditional African culture and religion that have implications for peace-building. This would represent a milestone in challenging political systems that in most instances fail in peace-building processes.
