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Knowledge Gap: Sacred Forest Conservation and Generational Shift in the North Pare Mountains, Tanzania

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Abstract
This article focuses on the (dis)continuity of sacred forests' management in the Pare Mountains, Tanzania, and questions the reasons behind the big generational divide when it comes to forest conservation. Studies show that sacred forests in North Pare are better preserved than national forest reserves and scholars suggest that the reasons for such high biodiversity are the communities' local traditions and conservation methods. Because local caretakers enable well-organized conservation with low economic expenditure, sacred forests' management has been thus recently considered a new favoured type of conservation model. However, the results of my ethnographic fieldwork show that at stake in this context, is much more the basic question of how this traditional knowledge can be gained in the first place. While it is commonly accepted that the main causes of forest destruction are farming, the cutting of building poles, etc. this paper highlights that the biggest concern regarding sacred forests' conservation for people in North Pare is the young generations' distance from sacred forests. I suggest therefore that changing worldviews have to be considered in the debate of sacred forest conservation and that knowledge transfer to the next generation of custodians (and mechanisms to ensure this happens) can complement recent conservation efforts, which typically neglect such generational issues.

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Introduction

> "One thing that I see and that brings, and will continue to bring damages, is that our children do not want to be investigative like you have been asking here. It is possible that I tell you [about sacred forests] but my children would not ask me, because they stick to their books, I mean, to the things of the contemporary world." (Interview with Mzee Auni Mshana, Mwanga District, March 2016)

This paper focuses on the generational divide quoted above and it analyses the subtle dynamics behind the (dis)continuity of sacred forest conservation in North Pare, Tanzania. Sacred forests in North Pare are not primarily conserved because of their ecological services, but to preserve Pare customs and traditions, or "mila na desturi za Wapare", as elders (wazee) put it in Kiswahili.

These groves, like similar sacred forests elsewhere in Africa and the world, have a high level of endemism and a rich biodiversity. Several global analyses of biodiversity priority show that the Eastern Arc Mountains (EAM), of which the North (and South) Pare Mountains are part, rank among the most important areas of the world for the conservation of endemic birds, endemic plants and a combined set of taxonomic groups, with 96 vertebrate species, 800 plant species and many hundreds of invertebrates being endemic (Burgess et al. 2007: 209f). So much so that in 1998 Conservation International declared the Eastern Arc Mountains range one of the world's 25 "biodiversity hotspots" (Myers et al. 2000: 853ff). Many other studies also agree that sacred forests in North Pare are better preserved and have a higher level of biodiversity and a more unique vegetation than forests gazetted by the state (Mwihomeke et al. 1998; Ylhäisi 2004; Sheridan 2009).

Religious and spiritual beliefs are the motivation for forest conservation in many sites throughout Africa and elsewhere. Cocks, Dold and Vetter from Rhodes University in South Africa emphasize in their study on Xhosa forests how "the natural landscapes and the associated biodiversity are closely linked to the strong nature-based religious beliefs, including a strong interconnectedness with nature." (Cocks et al. 2012: 6) In Nigeria, socio-cultural and religious practices in Asanting Ibiono sacred forests have also been reported to enable sacred groves to harbor a rich biodiversity of flora and fauna (Umazi et al. 2013: 696ff). In India, over 10,000 sacred forests represent an important long-held tradition of conserving specific land areas that have cultural, and often religious, significance and other studies have also shown that these sacred groves have higher species

richness and diversity, presence of global endemics and higher basal area[1] (Ormsby/ Bhagwat 2010: 320ff; Rao et al. 2011: 84). In earlier research on the North Pare mountains, it has been also commonly understood that it is the local traditions and conservation methods, based on the management systems of pre-colonial Pare society, which help decelerate external processes that serve to diminish the size of these small forest patches (Ylhäisi 2004, 2006). The exceptional losses of habitat that these natural resources are undergoing is, however, undeniable and the future of sacred forests is uncertain. The EAM contain the majority of endangered and endemic plant and animal species in mainland Tanzania, with 70% of their original habitat lost and highly fragmented forests (Newmark/ McNeally 2018: 387ff). Because of this threat to diversity and the cheap, well-organized, local conservation systems, the international conservation community has thus made protecting sacred forests worldwide a global conservation priority (Myers et al. 2000; Ylhäisi 2006) and 'traditional caretakers and customs' are seen as new forest conservation models.

Yet, while it is true that communities in North Pare have conserved and managed these natural resources since they established themselves in the area around the 13th century (Kimambo 1969), the current mission statement on sacred forests perpetrated by environmental institutional businesses as successful and new conservation models serves as a poor foundation for conservation policies. In development planning, although there is growing understanding of the historical roots, legacies and impacts of traditional resource management, this vast pool of socio-ecological know-hows still remains largely untapped and void of context in human lives. On one side, the worldviews themselves that drive human-environmental relations remain ignored when pushing the 'traditional' element in conservation discourses. On the other, the term 'traditional' is assumed to equal static realities since ancient times. This article explores the discontinuity in the way older and younger generations associate themselves with sacred forests in North Pare and how this association informs conservation and sustainability of forests resources, in the attempt of redirecting aspirations for sustainable development (and specifically forest and biodiversity conservation) which are disconnected from the attitudes of local communities.

[1] The basal area of a stand of trees is the sum of the cross-sectional surface areas of each live tree, measured at diameter at breast height (DBH), and reported on a per unit area basis. Basal area is a measure of tree density (Bettinger et al. 2017). A higher basal area often indicates larger and potentially older trees.

On the Concepts and Importance of Tradition and Worldviews

Pare ecological knowledge is always adapting in response to challenges and intersecting knowledge systems, as it is the case for local knowledge systems worldwide. Even if they appear changeless, sacred forests represent dynamic social and spiritual constructions that are constantly adapting to new conditions. Their sacredness is the result of cultural values, which are also subject to changing contexts. Social institutions shaped and continue to influence ecological dynamics and assuming that sacred forests embody a pre-colonial era balance of nature and culture is not only inadequate from a historical and palaeoecological perspective (Finch et al. 2017: 796ff), but it also precludes the historical investigation of the role of people in the formation and management of these natural phenomena (Sheridan 2009: 89ff). Anthropologist Michael Sheridan, who has extensively investigated sacred forests in North Pare, further clarifies this concept by quoting Ranger: "current African religious practices, even those declared 'traditional', are now understood not in terms of pre-colonial patterns but rather as recombinations, reinventions, and reconfigurations of belief systems" (Ranger 1988 quoted in Sheridan 2009: 89ff). In view of this, rather than reinforcing the unsuitable conservation approaches of global conservation programmes (which view sacred forests as static and 'authentic' (pre-colonial) entities), this article explores how the changing worldviews that drive human-forest relationships in North Pare result in a generational divide that impacts sacred forest conservation. This is a key but neglected aspect in the current debate around sacred forest management and biodiversity conservation.

Relying on 'traditional caretakers and customs', despite sounding like a new global approach, shows that these conservation models are still based on Western Eurocentric discourses and reproduce false boundaries. The common narrative blames low-income farmers for destroying the forests and considers an increased population pressure and the privatisation of forests[2] the main drivers of deforestation. At the same time, it seeks to recapture and preserve the 'traditions' that presumably guide forests conservation. The results of my fieldwork in North Pare show that at stake in this context, is the much more basic question of how this knowledge can be gained in the first place.

Understanding the dynamics behind the age-stratified differences in forest knowledge can offer new ways of understanding and articulating sacred forest conservation, which consider the meanings in which people's lives are embedded and in which environmental values can exist (De Groot et al. 2011: 25f). This

[2] On low-income population destroying the forests: Hall et al 2009; on population pressure and forest degradation: Mwihomeke et al 1998; on privatization of forests: Ylhäisi 2003.

discourse is thus, inevitably, related to worldviews – these, being the images that we hold about the fundamental structure of the world and how we relate to it, lend indeed the basic consistency to our acts (incl. environmental ethics that promote ecologically sustainable sacred forest conservation, in this case) and self-account (Kamanzi 2014). Pare people have been widely associated with a worldview that considers nature organistic and morally responsive – as do many African and other indigenous holistic visions of creation worldwide. This has been essential for ecologically sustainable outcomes in the area. However, the mechanistic worldview and modes of social life and organisation which emerged in Europe from the 17th century on, became global in their influence and eventually had significant implications also on how people interacted with sacred forests in North Pare. Although the role of sacred forests remained unchanged until the late 19th century, in 1900 the first German Lutheran missionaries arrived in North Pare. As Kimambo (1991) explains, missionaries became the most important colonial agents in the area. The colonial mindset derived from the values of the European Enlightenment, which highlighted the "capacity of the rational human mind to order and conquer all – suggesting a superiority of humans over 'non-rational' nature" (Adams/ Mulligan 2003: 3). As a consequence, the environmental philosophy of the colonial powers, Germans first and British later, was deeply rooted in economic and imperialist interests and a utilitarian view of nature. They prioritized the extraction of valuable resources, such as timber, and introduced new crops in North Pare, such as cassava, cotton and coffee to be monetized as agricultural products. The introduction of new socio-economic, political and ideological-religious elements brought to a new conceptualization of the mode of perceiving individual and group relationships with the forces of nature and with each other. As such, the advent of foreign rule in Tanzania had rather destructive environmental impacts, destabilizing established relations between people and nature (Kjekshus 1977).

Worldviews are therefore also a fundamental part of the social causes of environmental degradation, and they must have a central place when contributing to discussions on nature conservation. For sacred forests to be truly 'new' conservation models, the Pare understanding of non-human nature cannot be ignored, nor can the fact that Pare traditions have mixed with and incorporated foreign and alternative conceptions of reality. This approach can enlighten new ways of linking the communities and the forests that are socially-just and not abstracted from their context. Clearing for agriculture, overgrazing, wildfires, charcoal making, persistent reliance on wood fuel for energy, over-exploitation of wood resources and lack of land use planning are all by-products of changing cosmologies (apart from results of failing world markets and public policies) and

treating them as the root cause of deforestation will only superficially reverse environmental degradation.[3]

Despite the remote location, young generations in North Pare are exposed to external customs and increasing globalization, its technology and new ideals and, as a consequence, most are unaware of the rules and beliefs governing human interaction with sacred forests (Mwihomeke et al. 1998; Ylhäisi 2004; Sheridan 2009; Jones 2013). The linkages between biodiversity and worldviews are partly acknowledged when referring to the detriment of longstanding human-forest relations in North Pare. It is for example widely accepted that with the demonisation of local religions by Christian missions, the religious significance of sacred forests has diminished for Christians, while Muslims continue to use the groves for different purposes (Sheridan 2000). However, this divide is also not analysed in-depth and changing religious beliefs, worldviews and related generational aspects are rarely comprehensively addressed in contemporary academic research.

Methodology

Description of the Study Area

The village where the study was conducted is situated in Mwanga District, Kilimanjaro Region (North Eastern Tanzania), within the North Pare block of the Eastern Arc Mountain (EAM) range, at an altitude of 800-2000m. Regarding the biogeographic context of the study area, the EAM were formed about 100 million years ago and consist of 13 large mountains that stretch from South-Eastern Kenya through central Tanzania. They are among the world's 25 biodiversity hotspots and rich in endemic species, therefore globally important (Myers et al. 2000: 853ff). While the Taita Hills are located in Kenya, the rest are situated within the borders of Tanzania.

[3] On common cited causes of deforestation according to national reports: Blomley/ Iddi 2009; on failing market policies as causes for deforestation: Barraclough/ Ghimire 1995.

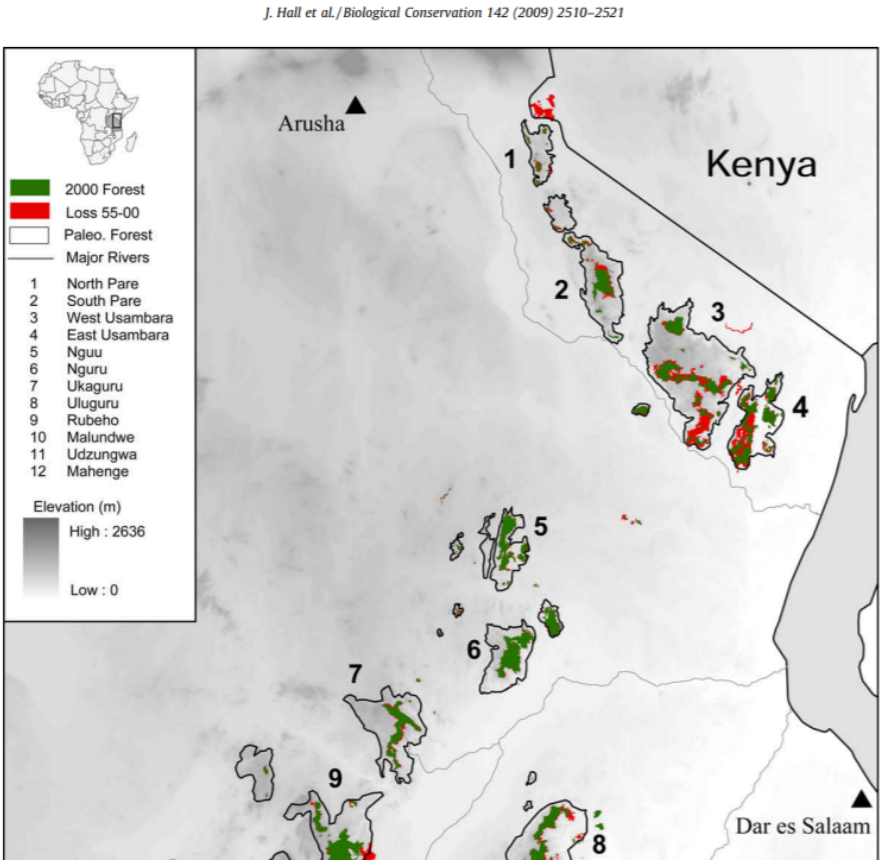

Figure 1: Map of the Study Area (Hall 2009 et al.).

Research methods

This paper stems from my Master research on sacred forests in the Kilimanjaro area, which I started in 2016 and analyses in depth one aspect that emerged from the fieldwork: the main concern behind sacred forests conservation in North Pare. The first fieldwork phase was conducted from February to April 2016, as part of my Master studies, but subsequent independent research periods followed in 2020 and 2022. The study employs a qualitative ethnographic research approach, as it is not aimed at generating numeric data for quantification and measurement. Rather, as environmental and social scientists suggest, studies on human-environmental relationships lend themselves well to open and semi-structured interviews as the core research method – they uncover in fact the qualitative richness of people's visions at specific locations (De Groot et al. 2011: 26). In-depth and semi-structured interviews were held in 2016 with four key informants, mostly wazee, both Christians and Muslims, but also with a land surveyer and former Professor at the Institute of Rural Development Planning (IRDP) in Dodoma and with a Government official from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism (MNRT, Dodoma Branch). Wazee are male or female

elders (65 years or older) who have substantial knowledge on sacred forests, their resources and related practices. These key informants were consulted on more than one occasion, until reaching saturation for the information needed on specific subjects. Two out of four of these in-depth and semi-structured interviews were digitally recorded in Kiswahili, transcribed from Kiswahili and extracts are cited in English in this paper.[4] The other two were conducted orally and the author relies on her detailed notes. From 2020 onwards another Muslim elder started collaborating with me for this research and we spent several hours doing walking interviews around the sacred groves of his family. During, but mostly after such interviews, I summarized in my notes the main takeaways. One longer semi-structured interview with five Christian teenagers (aged 13-16) and many spontaneous conversations with young boys and girls, both Muslim and Christian, were conducted in 2020 and 2022. As social scientists De Groot and Drenthen (De Groot et al. 2011: 26) contend, participant observation of daily life interactions has been the most consonant way to uncover the qualitative richness of people's visions on sacred forests. Hence, fieldwork notes are essential in my work to supplement structured interview data. In my experience, it was possible to have conversations on sacred forests in different villages and under various circumstances (at the market, at funeral ceremonies, at family gatherings and visits etc.) thanks to the opportunity to live with a host family for different lengths of time since 2016. Secondary data consists mainly of an analysis of various documents relevant to the study. These include not only (Tanzanian national) institutional reports and records (Akida/ Blomley 2006), such as publications by the Tanzanian Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, but also books, articles and papers that provide information for this specific research and have been analysed and used as part of the theoretical framework, hypothesis formulation and background.

Sacred Forest Categorization & Utilization

Legally, forests in Tanzania can be divided into reserved or unreserved forests. While the former include central and local government forest reserves, government-owned industrial plantations, and village land forest reserves (VLFRs) gazetted by the state, the latter are to be found on „general"or „village" lands, where forests and woodlands are not formally classified as reserves (Winrock International 2006: 3). Given the background, forest areas that are not established on a national or district level with a top-down management, like sacred forests,

[4] All key informants (3 men and 1 woman) have given written consent to mention their name. The digital recordings are stored with the researcher and author of the article.

are not mentioned in national laws or district-council by-laws. Instead of being managed by professional foresters and officials, their management relies on local communities and institutions. In the case of North Pare, the land tenure system is customary, and clans own the land – they nominate a (male) guardian for each sacred forest. In terms of conservation sustainability, the implications here are two-folded. On one side, sacred forests are too small to be of (economic) interest for the Government. The average size of these forests is ca. 2 ha (Mwihomeke et al. 1998: 279ff). However, the Government does acknowledge the ecological importance of these forest patches and at the same time it respects the different customs and traditions of Tanzanian people. Hence, it does not oppose local conservation practices and mechanisms that indirectly enable biodiversity conservation at no cost. On the other side, sacred forest management by the Pare communities is more efficient than national or district laws because people tend to respect prescriptions imposed by their own customs and traditions more than prohibitions imposed by the Government, as one mzee told me during a visit to give condolences to a neighbour who had lost a relative. This is because Government human resources are not sufficient to ensure that all transgressions of natural resources can be rightly prosecuted. In North Pare though, if someone is caught damaging the forest, she or he would be immediately reported to the caretaker, or head, of the sacred forest (and the case could also be escalated to the district Government). Additionally, the elder explained to me, governmental institutions and restrictions tend to lack moral authority, while ancestors' spirits (mizimu) can inflict permanent punishments in case of violation of sacred sites. For this reason, while the majority of key informants mentioned that measures such as demarcating sacred forest boundaries help preventing violations, there are differing views in regard to formal forest management mechanisms, which are less restrictive than customary law. Nevertheless, encroachment for agriculture is a reality in North Pare and it is commonly recommended to support the legal protection of sacred forests as community or village forest reserves in order to strengthen their protection and clarify their management (Ylhäisi 2006). This divergence could be elaborated further, as it highlights yet another aspect in which Western conservation approaches are detached from the lived experiences of (Pare) communities.

In North Pare there are two different types of sacred forests: mbungi and mshitu forests (Kipare[5] terms). While this categorization has been personally discussed with the people I interviewed during my own fieldwork, it has also been previously reported by other studies in the area (Ylhäisi 2000; Sheridan 2001; Jones

[5] Language of the Pare people.

2013). A mbungi is a small forest that shelters the skulls of an (isolated) lineage of ancestors. Here the people who are still alive ask the ancestors to bless them and to alleviate misfortune through different types of sacrifices and rituals. Both respected men and women's skulls are conserved inside the mbungi, with the men's skulls in the center and the women's near the periphery. Many respondents have pointed out that each clan (ukoo) uses (as in performs rituals inside) the mbungi in different ways and every forest is considered to have its own characteristics. The mbungi serves also as a reminder of a lineage's legitimate land tenure, as the skulls show the length of a lineage's occupation of that land. The second type of forest is called mshitu. These forests represent the ancestors of the entire Pare peoples (kabila), not only one family, and here young men are initiated into adulthood.[6] Initiation ceremonies take place every year for boys (ca. 15-year-old), usually during school holidays, when most youngsters return to their home villages. In the past, initiation ceremonies in North Pare could last up to six months, but in the South Pare Mountains they took only one week (Kimambo/ Omani 1972 cited in Hellermann 2016: 371). The actual practices of these ceremonies were and are kept secret.

Sacred forests in North Pare are also gendered – men and women have separate groves because they are taught different things separately during their initiation rite, hence having different groves helps keep these secrets from the opposite gender group. This means that only men can enter the mshitu forests, although I was told of some exceptions where women do enter accompanied by men.[7] The majority of women with whom I interacted in North Pare reported that women initiation rites, called mperi in Kipare, (used to) take place inside a house.[8] Some referred to women initiation ceremonies carried out in smaller forests, called kirimu. This highlights again how every clan, even every lineage, has indeed its own ways of reproducing its customs and traditions. Those who teach and lead the initiation ceremonies are the eldest men of the clan, together with the caretaker or head of the forests (mkuu wa mshitu). All teachers must be initiated, 'complete people/full adults' (watu kamili). For women it is the same. The eldest mother of the clan (mshenga) leads the mperi ceremony.

[6] This initiation ritual does not include circumcision, which happens at a younger age.

[7] Like in the occasion where the clan of one of the main informants gained its mshitu back from a rival clan.

[8] While for boys it is still possible to do the initiation rite in the mshitu, for girls it has become more difficult to carry out such ceremonies. Bibi Koko, one of the main informants, explained that there are no leaders for the initiation rite living in the village anymore, who are able to conduct the ceremony properly. The closest elder lives in the city of Mwanga, distant 20 km from the mountains, which makes the organization of the ritual very complicated.

In terms of vegetation and fauna the mshitu look like the mbungi, but the mshitu are bigger in size and less in numbers. Access to both sacred forests is limited to the responsible elders and the initiated men or women of the clan or lineage. Strict access and use regulations keep the forests intact – not even deadwood can be collected inside these forests. Most youngsters, especially Christians, are not aware of this categorization nor sacred forests utilization patterns. Yet, youngsters and adults, Christian and Muslims alike, commonly accept (albeit expressing it to different degrees) that according to customary law, sacred forests shall not be transgressed.

Results and Discussion

Although the relevance of sacred forests as religious and political institutions has diminished dramatically, they are still an integral part of the landscape in North Pare, and people continue by and large to respect them, independently of their religious inclinations. Yet, the conversations I had with elders in North Pare reveal that the detachment of younger generations from sacred forests does represent one of the biggest threats to their conservation. In parallel, a few conversations I had with younger people (aged between 13-16 years) during my fieldwork periods confirmed that they are aware that they are not allowed to enter some groves, often referred to as the 'forests of our grandparents', but they ignore any further related concepts. The next paragraphs discuss to which extent age stratification reveals emergent changes in the beliefs and practices associated with sacred forests in North Pare, providing interesting insights into the constantly evolving functional role and significance of forests, as Samantha Jones has also hinted in her thesis on sacred forests in this area (Jones 2013: 53).

Elders Vs. Youth: Epistemic Distance

Changes in worldviews introduced by Christianity and Islam from the middle to the end of the 19th century have distanced the population in North Pare from sacred forests practices and have inevitably weakened and reduced in scope the transmission of related knowledge to younger generations to date. Conversations with my research partners revealed that both Christian and Muslim younger generations are epistemically distant from sacred forests, but for different reasons linked to the nature of the two different faiths. This paragraph sheds more light on these dynamics and discusses the generational divide on the basis of the different faiths of those who are in charge of transmitting (sacred forest) knowledge – the elders.

Around the Kilimanjaro area, Swahili and Arab traders from the coast were active in the interior mostly due to external demands for elephant ivory and slaves from the mid-19th century onwards (Håkansson 1998). This long-distance trade penetrated also North Pare and, as new economic ideas emerged, economic rivalry was stimulated in the area (Maghimbi 1994: 20ff). Instead of relying on the chief for livestock, members of the chiefly lineage could now obtain wealth through trading and tolls charged for those exchanges. As the flow of wealth increased, so did the system of political clientage (Håkansson 2007: 143ff). In the research area, formerly the Ugweno state, this translated into assaults to accumulate slaves and cattle (for political and ritual control), shrinking political scale of the state and scarcity of food throughout the region. All this brought to an unstable political situation, fragmented political unities and intensified rivalry. As a consequence, opposite to what happened in the majority of the so-called colonial encounters, when the Germans arrived in the Kilimanjaro area at the end of the 19th century (specifically in 1891 in North Pare), it was the Pare chiefs themselves who contacted them and sought their assistance to help them recognize their own local political interest (Kimambo 1969). The social changes that this shift brought, together with the introduction of Islam from Arab traders, affected the role and meaning of sacred forests, related practices and knowledge. Due to the accounts of North Pare violent initiation rituals, mshitu initiation ceremonies, repeatedly condemned by missionaries were even banned first by the German and then by the British colonial governments from before the First World War until 1952 (Sheridan 2009: 85). In the past, as the mshitu served also as tool to unify the Ugweno state and form loyal youth, rivals could be eliminated under the pretext that the forest 'swallowed' them during the initiation rite and left in the forest without a proper burial. Nobody could question what had happened or how they died. So, for the Pare people who converted to Christianity, sacred forest rituals became associated with "primitive practices", which allowed people to be killed (either because of diseases, violence, or as a result of death rituals) against the will of "the true [Christian] God". As by the 1960s the majority of the population in North Pare identified themselves as Christian (or Muslim) (Sheridan 2000: 14), sacred forests also stopped delineating the boundaries of the society and determining who belongs and who does not belong 'to the clan'.

However, due to the speed of environmental degradation, conservation discourses in Tanzania (and in the wider British Empire) led by the colonial government began surfacing since around the 1930's (Adams/ Mulligan 2003: 16-50). Colonial conservation efforts remained based on the premise that nature is a resource for human use (Adams/ Mulligan 2003) but in North Pare, the laws

implemented to fight deforestation, centralized power in the Pare chiefs, who could fine people for cutting down trees in the sacred forests (Sheridan 2001: 303). As a result, a sense of ownership of the forests was not fully dismantled and some sacred forests did remain intact, despite the earlier clearing of forested land by missionaries and the banned forest practices outside of God's will. Imperial utilitarian attitudes towards nature endured after independence. Additionally, during Ujamaa[9], although the colonial political institutions had reinforced the conservation of common property resources in North Pare, local conservation methods were nullified, and local people remained excluded from mainstream decision making and management of natural resources (Sheridan 2004). This only changed in the late 1990's, when the Tanzanian Government started recognizing that local communities are able to manage their environment – but the traditional responsibility of Pare local communities for their environment had been gradually eroding throughout the decades (Ylhäisi 2003).

Today, two different and coexisting dimensions exist. Muslim key informants contend that religion and the preservation of Pare customs and traditions are two separate concepts, which serve different purposes. They do not see any contradiction in being 'good' Muslims and continuing their forest practices. Although initiation rites were banned for a period of time, and the content of forest teachings has inevitably adapted along with socio-cultural, religious and political contexts, the mshitu rite still represents an important institution to pass relevant wisdom to the young members of the community. In their view, the concept of Pare customs and traditions is specifically associated with the valuable teachings (mafundisho/mafunzo) that boys receive during their initiation rites in the mshitu forest (and girls mostly at home), which keep reproducing Pare values and moral behaviour, and maintain Pare identity and origins alive. It is for this reason, to receive important teachings which are not part of the school curriculum, that also very few Christian youth attend the mshitu initiation, but in an extremely discrete manner, as I was told on a few occasions by Muslim elders. As Pare customs and traditions involve the concept of ancestors' spirits (mizimu), they allude not only to offering teachings to the youth, but also to specific rituals carried out in the mbungi forest that the ancestors claim to bring (back) good fortune – following the same logic by which Christians attend mass at church to pray and ask for blessings from those who passed away. In Pare cosmology, it is in fact believed that the souls of the deceased in contrast to God, who brings only goodness, can bring also evil and have the power to help or to

[9] Ujamaa is the Swahili for 'familyhood'. It was the social and economic policy developed by Julius Kambarage Nyerere, first president of Tanzania (1964 – 1985). Nyerere set out his policy in the Arusha Declaration of 1967.

punish those who are still alive (Lebulu 1979). The living keeps a connection to their ancestors by means of sacrificing, making offerings and rituals which are carried out inside the sacred forests. In a nutshell, this research too shows that the Muslim population is closer to sacred forests, as previous studies suggested (Ylhäisi 2004; Sheridan 2009; Hellermann 2016). However, the challenge highlighted here is that nowadays the shortened initiation rites reproduce and confirm only partially the roles of individuals in Pare society and are insufficient to keep the youth well informed about sacred forests practices and meanings. Mzee Jackson Msuya, an elder who converted to Christianity but was initiated in the mshitu, explained to me: "in the past, men spent six months inside the forest, my grandfathers were inside the forests for four months and me only for one week. Nowadays it [the initiation rite] lasts only one day". During my fieldwork, teenagers did enter one of the mshitu in the area from 28 – 29 February 2016. Once inside the mshitu, I was told that the elders who lead the ceremony explicitly ask the spirits to forgive the children who come from the cities (and therefore are not used to that environment) for spending only one night in the forest. Given the limited amount of time and information passed on, the customs and traditions which are reproduced and maintained through such community ceremonies cannot be taken as a proof of intact and unchanged precolonial life standards and beliefs of the population in North Pare. This also challenges the assumption of the modern conservation agenda to go "back to tradition", as the traditions themselves have adapted to social changes. Forest teachings and the underpinning traditional Pare elements persist until today but have adapted to the current contexts and reduced in scope.

On the other hand, Christians strongly state that they have completely abandoned forest practices that relate in their view to other deities. The generation of the Christian eighty/ninety-year-old key informants in this research is the first to praise the conversion to Christianity and emphasize how 'better off' they are after abandoning the "abominable rituals" (matambiko ya haramu) carried out in the sacred forests. Aligning more to the Western mechanistic worldview that entail a separation from and dissection of nature, Christians affirm to respect sacred forests because they remain important family or clan properties (mali wa ukoo). More recently, the (national and international) emphasis on the ecological value of sacred forests has also fostered belief in their significance. Christian informants also explained that since religion and education were introduced in North Pare, people refrain from entering sacred forests because they may fear the animals or diseases that one could catch in the forests, such as malaria or tuberculosis.

While it is true that Christians have abandoned forest practices and mostly deny any ontological value of the forests, it was not uncommon for Christian neighbours during my fieldwork in 2016, 2020 and 2022 to explicitly state that people do not enter the sacred forests because "they are afraid of spirits". On another occasion in 2016, when a tree from a mshitu fell down right in the middle of the road, nobody removed it until, a few days later, the responsible caretaker of the sacred forest was found and came personally to help remove the tree with the proper ritual, with his (and thus the ancestors') permission and authorization. Conceptions about the dangerous (supernatural) punishment(s) for those who violate the strict access rules of the groves seem thus to persist, although not readily admitted. Fear of, rather than knowledge on sacred forests remains a strong form of protection and a reason also for Christian youth to keep their distance from damaging sacred forests. In this context, Mbiti's 'two-thoughts system' concept can be relevant. Islam and Christianity have been in fact introduced in North Pare as alternative faiths and they brought inevitably new paradigms. However, Mbiti suggests that although people in Africa converted to Islam or Christianity, they never fully abandoned their traditional religiosity and its elements. This preposition clarifies also why the dichotomy Islam/Christianity perpetuated by academic research is not so co clear-cut and reflects only partially the more nuanced realities on the ground.

Another important aspect to consider is that the lack of knowledge transmission is also due to the youth migration to major urban centres for education and better employment opportunities – they no longer have contact with elders who know the stories and meaning behind sacred forests and the rules about restrictions on resource use. Consequently, they often leave their villages and associated local environmental knowledge behind.

Elders Vs. Youth: Lack of Interest

Muslim respondents, albeit drawn from Muslim families that carry on initiation rites and rituals for the ancestors' spirits inside sacred forests, acknowledged and explained to me that Western education (elimu ya Magharibi – referring to formal education) and increasing globalization are also factors that disconnect the youth from sacred forests and threaten their conservation. As well as missionaries, educational institutions introduced by Western colonization reinforce the idea that nature is separate from human life and are also carriers of a worldview that is antithetic to African holistic visualizations of reality, which acknowledge the interconnectedness of all elements of the universe. Tanzanian Rev. Dr. Aidan Msafiri notes that the harmonious interconnection of all vital forces in

nature constitutes a common holistic vision and edifice of African cosmological understanding, whose ultimate goal is abundant life defined spiritually, physically, psychologically, communally and ecologically (Msafiri 2007: 44f). However, nowadays, the impact of Western discourses and worldviews have diluted such concepts (Kamanzi 2014). Youngsters "stick to their books", as Mzee Auni Mshana puts it, because they are not spared from the global discourses that Western (so called modern) science has been declared the only reliable source of knowledge, but they have also anchored the belief that the only valuable meanings in and of life are those materialistic in essence. In this way, the concept of the 'intrinsically valuable' (and the non-human realms and benefits behind it) has been weakened and, consequently, the idea of ecosystems as a form of capital which humans should invest in or which provides services that have to be evaluated in monetary terms only in order to be of usefulness, has been reinforced. In practice these beliefs are exemplified by Hellermann's work in South Pare, where the planting of neobiota[10] for conservation purposes is rooted in ideas of rational resource management, planning and profit rather than any spiritual explanation (Hellermann 2016: 376).

This point was also raised during an interview at the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism (MNRT), when a Government official mentioned that nowadays the youth want "tangible things: they do not believe in the stories of their babus (grandfathers)". Poverty, failing world markets and public policies do remain very big challenges to nature conservation. In other words, if people are lacking the basic means to thrive financially, it is more difficult to put resource conservation at the first place in a hypothetical value scale. People would rather be more inclined towards disregarding local moral norms in favour of, for example, cutting down trees from sacred groves for timber sale and a cash revenue.

In addition, respondents also pointed out that since independence, with the introduction of the modern state and therefore a national Government and administration, rituals aimed at protecting the own kingdom against foreign rivals became useless. From around the 15th century onwards, as new immigrants arrived in the area, the number of clans coming together increased, so that the need for a more efficient organization emerged and the Wasuya rulers started combining ritual and political powers to keep the ten districts of the Ugweno state united and eventually centralised. Sacred forests served thus to unify whole clans, even into a political system. It was also in this period that the initiation rituals were extended to six months, as mentioned above, in order to assure an

[10] Organisms that occur in an area that is not their native distribution region.

intensive political, military and cultural training and the formation of loyal youth (Sheridan 2009: 78ff). But nowadays the security mechanisms enacted and reproduced through specific ritual performances inside sacred forests are not necessary for the survival of the community anymore. As a result, the youth do not see any advantage in investigating rituals that do not have a direct impact on their lives.

Accordingly, new generations have very limited information on the customs and tradition practices and logic related to sacred forests and, as times goes by, those elders who still keep Pare customs and traditions alive, not only have been influenced by Islam and Christian faiths and formal education themselves but are also dying. While the conservation agenda puts sacred forests at the focus of conservation programmes due to their 'traditional' management, which has kept them intact until today, the biggest local concern is that children are most probably not going to receive any report about sacred forests and all the related knowledge, practices, management and ownership standards could be lost. By looking at such dynamics, I argue that it is fundamental to reshape the narrative of the modern environmental conservation agenda, which misses the socio-economic dynamics behind these processes and neglects the dimension of ethos, which is the distinguishing character or guiding belief of a person, group or institution that pushes for (environmental) practice (Kamanzi 2014: 12).

Conclusion

This article emphasizes the unsuitable approaches of modern conservation programmes, which often view sacred forests (and their traditional management) as static (precolonial) entities. Relying on 'traditional caretakers and customs' for new forest conservation models, despite sounding like a new global approach, shows that these models are still based on Western Eurocentric discourses and reproduce false boundaries. The results of my research confirm that, far from being intact 'relics' since precolonial times, Pare customs and traditions (and thus Pare worldview) have merged with and integrated Western scientific concepts and philosophical categories giving new meanings and (ir)relevance to the forests and their preservation. Changing worldviews resulting from the introduction of Christianity and Islam in North Pare, as well as Western education, have led to a lack of knowledge transmission on sacred forests and related practices to the younger generations. Ultimately, according to the elders, for the youth, globalization and the mechanistic and materialistic worldview that the Western ways of life praise, translate into a lack of interest on sacred forests and the intangible benefits of their conservation. However, while it

is widely accepted that Western development and Eurocentric knowledge have distanced people in Africa (but not only) from their sacred knowledge of the land and an environmental ethos based on interconnectedness, this study suggests that new ways of linking the community and the forest can be a valid alternative for creating a new basis for sacred forest conservation. Reversing current religious and cultural trends is neither achievable nor desirable. But, given that sacred forests are still partly relevant to family and community identity in North Pare, notions that see the society as constitutive of nature and vice versa could be revitalised and re conceptualised (plus eventually complemented with scientific data) to help in ecological preservation. Given that there is no formal resistance from the local or national government to forest rituals and it explicitly invites their revitalisation for the purpose of nature conservation, the State should support these initiatives. This discussion includes significant insights for a number of discourses, most relevantly for education models in North Pare. Education seems, in this context, the area that could reach the majority of the (young, future) population, whose lack of interest and knowledge of sacred forests is identified as the main concern regarding forest conservation. For this reason, at a practical level, teachers and trainers might want to include and encourage Pare forms of knowing that focus specifically on the relationship between sacred forests and the community. Talks with students from the primary and secondary school in the village, during the research periods, showed me that students are highly aware of the ecological benefits of "normal forests" (msitu ya kawaida), such as their contribution to shade, temperature, rain pattern, erosion etc., however they lack further insights into sacred forests and related practices. It might be worth exploring if re-engaging with Pare ways of thinking and understanding of such human-environmental relationships, but also acknowledging that this "other way of knowing" is as equally valuable as "modern" conservation strategies and science, can give another perspective from which to approach the biodiversity threat caused by sacred forests degradation, and alternative ways to understand this crisis and how to find sustainable responses. It is not the scope of this article to give or debate a detailed curriculum and its implementation, but to stress that this study case in North Pare shows that recognizing the generational divide in regard to sacred forests conservation serves as a meaningful departure point to help preserve the invaluable ecological knowledge in the area and rethink conservation policies which can bridge the gap between modern environmental businesses, NGOs' imagination and local realities and environmental meanings. In-depth interviews with younger generations themselves and elders are fundamental to complement and expand the generational aspects highlighted in this paper and

start approaching the issues discussed in an efficient, inclusive and sustainable way.

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