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Kauma of Kenya: Eco-Spirituality and the Decolonization of Environmental Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

The coastal indigenous patches of forest serve as a testament to the role of Kauma Traditional African Religion in environmental conservation; however, colonialism led to the displacement of natives from their ancestral lands without considering their integrated resource management system. This caused a decline in their sense of stewardship for future generations. Colonial land policies exploited the political ecology of resource extraction, undermining Kauma culture and religion, and disrupting their environmental stewardship based on peaceful coexistence with nature. The Islamic sultan's rule had demarcated a ten-mile strip of coastal land for the sultanate, from where the British assumed the land was unoccupied, calling it "Terra nullius," or no man's land. Colonization silenced the voices of indigenous natives, which requires regaining control to protect the environment of Kauma land; however, this requires decolonizing environmental knowledge, as it depends on their stewardship for effective conservation. The study used cultural ecology theory. Globally, conservation agendas continue to dominate climate discussions, with mechanisms often unclear and driven by Western technocratic ideas. Worse, they tend to exclude local voices, offer limited economic benefits to Indigenous communities, and fail to address the root ecological damages at the local level. This gap is what the study aims to fill. It is the voices of indigenous peoples that require regaining and protecting their environment; however, this is subject to decolonizing environmental knowledge, philosophy, spiritual connection with nature, and community-based governance. This study will add to the ongoing decolonization of environmental knowledge conversations for effective addressing of climate change.

Keywords: *Sacred forests; Decolonization; Environmental Conservation; Knowledge*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

African traditionalist communities, since time immemorial, have had a humane and peaceful society and environment informed by sound ethics. Nevertheless, due to internal dynamics within their culture and external constraints and forces, African traditionalist communities are now facing acute developmental challenges, which have hurt their environment. Climate change is marked by increasingly intense, frequent, and prolonged episodes of global warming. The sincere repeating same activities and expecting different results has been termed insanity. The Western-centric environmental conservation mechanisms at play have been overwhelmed by the present climate change, and clinging to cling on them will yield the same result. This is the gap this study seeks to fill by advocating decolonization of environmental conservation knowledge. This decolonization will comprise three interrelated aspects that will commence with recognizing and legitimizing Indigenous land rights and governance systems; followed by reconfiguring their education to feature their Indigenous ecological perspectives; and finally, and not least, reforming policy frameworks to support co-management and intercultural dialogue. This study proposes that conservation of the remnant patches of indigenous forests in coastal Kenya risks perpetuating the same exclusions and injustices it seeks to remedy.

The evident failure of Eurocentric environmental conservation approaches is part of the trigger for the growing traction towards revisiting and revamping indigenous ecological knowledge systems as the ancient proven panacea of the grand scale of the eco-massacre that is so vast and repellent to a single solution and even a universal framework is making headways in adequately addressing all its challenges. This was spelt out by Albert Einstein, including many scholars, who argued that one could not solve a problem using the same level of thinking that created it.[1] The Kauma woes worsened with the colonial exploitation of their land; therefore, this meant that the solution could not be based on colonial policies or their post-colonial legacies. Thomas Ofcansky observed that before the British colonial occupation of Kenya in 1895, there was substantially more closed forest than there was in 1963, shortly post-independence.[2] The position of forestry within a colonial state apparatus paradoxically sought to both 'protect' Africans from modernization while exploiting them to establish Kenya as a 'white man's country'. This study, therefore, clarifies this role through an examination of the relationship between the Forest Department and its African workers, Kenya's white settlers, and the colonial government. In essence, each of these was engaged in a pursuit of their own idealized 'good forest. Kenya was the site of a strong conservationist argument for the establishment of forestry that typecast the country's indigenous population as rapidly destroying the forests. This argument was bolstered against critics of the financial extravagance of forestry by the need to maintain and develop the forests of Kenya for the express purpose of supporting the Uganda railway. This was the argument that led to the establishment of the colony's Forest Department, navigating the contradictions of colonial rule. The position of forestry within the colonial state apparatus paradoxically sought to both 'protect' Africans from modernization while exploiting them to establish Kenya as a 'white man's country.'[3]

To the British, Kenya was economically undeveloped, which consequently offered opportunities to the industrialized countries of Europe. Since its development has been comparatively late, all the new knowledge in the sciences has been available. This in itself created an interest in local problems. Marjorie Dilley propounded that it was stated that for those interested in the development of the more

[1] Albert Einstein, quoted in Richard L. Peterson, *Inside the Investor's Brain: The Power of Mind Over Money* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2007), 19.

[2] Thomas P. Ocansky, Kenya forestry under British colonial administration 1895-1963. University of Chicago press journal. Journal of forest history 1984.

[3] Ben Paul Fanstone, *The Pursuit of the 'Good Forest' in Kenya, c.1890–1963: The History of the Contested Development of State Forestry within a Colonial Settler Society* (PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 2016).

backward areas of the world, Kenya was the testing ground for economic, social, political, and racial problems; Kenya's indigenous black population required some control to develop its financial resources.[4] The problems that affected Kenya were analyzed in the 1924 British parliamentary report by the Commission. The problems of Kenya are inherent in the presence of black, white, and Asian races. The report discusses the reconciliation of white ideals of trusteeship over the natives with self-interest, alongside the responsibility shared by imperial and local governments to develop the natural resources of a sparsely populated territory. This territory includes some of the world's richest agricultural soils, mostly in districts where elevation and climate make it possible for Europeans to reside permanently. European settlement was increasing as more colonists were attracted to Kenya, particularly in highland areas, and their occupation has significantly boosted the country's productivity. This study aims to advocate for acknowledging indigenous environmental knowledge in conserving their environment. This is with acknowledging it as their 'science', where science means repeated observation of an event, then concluding. Indigenous knowledge is accumulated over a long time and is passed on orally from generation to generation, having been proven.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative and ethnographic approach, which involved field interviews with leading questions. Purposive and Snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify the native community's custodian informants of the over 4,800 hectares of indigenous forests in coastal Kenya known as the Kaya elders. These made referrals to the state and non-governmental conservation officers who were working with them. The data collected was then analyzed and processed by methodological triangulation for verification and presentation. The oral narratives from informant elders and conservation officers were compared to determine the accuracy of their data as Kauma cultural ecology. This cultural ecology was then employed to explore the precolonial times of intense environmental management, where the dynamic relationship between cultural and religious experiences ensured a harmonious and balanced environmental conservation of the native communities, which highlighted how Kauma's cultural values, such as respect for nature and communal labor, shaped their responses to environmental challenges.

3.0 Colonization as Epistemic Violence and Decolonization as Regeneration.

The colonial invasion was marked by the 'taking away'. Colonialism removed natives' access to their land and prevented them from becoming part of their earthly coexistence. Moreover, the trend in independent Kenya indicates a lively legacy of colonialism, which makes it not a matter of the past, but of the present and past, given the present capitalism, which is co-dependent on colonialism. Dispossession was 'the theft not only of the material of land itself, but also a destruction of the social relationships that existed before capitalism' and is an 'ongoing feature of the reproduction of colonial and capitalist social relations in our present'.

Colonization focused on silencing Indigenous voices, with Industrialists and agribusinesses pushing their interests. They accelerated environmental resource extraction through political policies and decisions that made the wealthy richer while the poor grew poorer. Meanwhile, the land was being sliced, drilled, mined, and drained. Extractive colonization maintained control over Indigenous people and their land, even those who stood together in solidarity. Indigenous daily lives—whether in supermarkets, kitchens, or energy systems—perpetuated colonization, destroying land, erasing stories, and reinforcing colonial disenfranchisement. The colonial silencing of Indigenous voices was rooted in their philosophy of the 'death of nature'. This idea came from mechanistic science, which saw nature as something to be destroyed, claiming

[4] Marjorie Ruth Dilley, *British Policy in Kenya Colony* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1966).

that the scientific method demonstrated power over nature. Francis Bacon summarized this view by equating the domination of nature with the interrogation of witches, using courtroom trials as a model for scientific inquiry and mechanical devices to subjugate disorder. This approach was fundamental to the scientific method as a form of power.

Bacon advocated the use of imagery drawn from the torture of witches and sorcery could reveal hidden and useful information. The use of torture rhetoric condones a transfer of methodological approaches used to extract information from the accused to extracting secrets from nature. The method of confining, controlling, and interrogating the human being becomes the method of the confined, controlled experiment used to interrogate nature. Torture should be used not on witches but on nature itself. This glorifies the experimental method as superior to that developed by magicians to control nature. A question must be asked and an experiment designed to answer it. For the experimental method to succeed, the experiment must be a closed, isolated system in which variables are controlled and extraneous influences excluded. Witnessing is critical to the process. The trial, that is, the experiment, must be witnessed by others. Indeed, it was one of Bacon's singular contributions to realize that, to be understood, nature must be studied under constrained conditions that can be both witnessed and verified by others. Bacon used metaphor, rhetoric, and myth to develop his new method of interrogating nature. Decolonization of the colonial polies and post-colonial legacies is a symbol of regeneration, evidenced in precolonial times.

3.1 The Intensive Precolonial Environment Management.

The attractive climate and environment that drew British settlers was the grass that seemed greener on the other side of the fence. However, what the settlers failed to consider was the water bill there, which must have been equally high to match the impressive work done. The bill here was for labor and resources, which, for the Kauma native, meant their commitment to their ecospirituality. Their ecospirituality promoted living peacefully with nature, where community members coexist in kinship, each taking no more than they need. This respectful relationship almost restored and maintained balance in nature. However, the arrival of colonial administration aimed at extracting raw environmental resources for their urban populations, who were living in a consumerist lifestyle. This was the opposite of the lifestyle that initially attracted them to Kenya and other native lands. Restoring native lands to their sustainable wilderness state requires reversing this colonial trend, which has continued into the post-colonial era. The foundation for this is the decolonization of environmental conservation knowledge. Colonial environmental methods have their merits, but they are not sufficient to address today's climate change challenges. The Kauma cultural way of life and religious practices offer many ecological management lessons relevant for modern times.[5]

Kauma cosmology or metaphysical worldview reflects an interdependent existence among the earth, its fauna, flora, human and non-human animals, the gods and the spirits, the ancestors or the living dead, and the unborn or future generation. This is leveraged through Kauma rituals, which make them serve as sites of ecological education, where Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (ITEK) was transmitted orally across generations through the puberty rite of passage, which acts as a "spiritual classroom," where cultural identity and values tied to land stewardship are inculcated by those who are to be inducted into various societies.[6] The knowledge embedded in Kauma rituals, such as the optimal times for planting and harvesting grains, reflects an intimate understanding of ecological systems.[7]

[5] John Mwangi, *Religious Experiences and Environmental Management of Kaya Shrine among the Kauma in Kenya* (PhD, Diss, Laikipia University, 2025), 30.

[6] Mwangi, *Religious Experiences*,129

[7] Mwangi, *Religious Experiences*,78

Table 3.1 Ecological Rituals, Their Descriptions and Purposes.

RITUALS	DESCRIPTION	PURPOSE
Sadaka ya mwaka	Annual rain-prayer ceremony.	Appeasing spirits to bring rainfall and ensure seasonal balance
Matambiko	Ritual cleansing.	Exorcising evil spirits and restoring environmental harmony
Sadaka ya Kutohola	Harvest Thanksgiving ritual	Enhancing land and human fertility; gratitude for abundance
Ngoma za kutabiri	Divination dances and prophecy	Foretelling misfortunes, droughts, or wars through spiritual signs
Kiraho	Food crop fortification	Protecting crops from theft, pests, and spiritual contamination

Source: John Mwangi, PhD Thesis,2025

The notable rituals are *Sadaka ya mwaka* (rain prayer ceremony), which is held yearly in the Kaya with all the members' participation to facilitate good rains, towards a bumper harvest, and the avertion of diseases. Part of the taboo during the planting season was that no one was allowed to plant until the elders completed the symbolic planting ceremony, with nine different types of cereals planted. These nine species of cereals are *matsere* (maize), *wimbi* (millet), *ufuha* (simsim), *kunde* (peas), *podzo* (Green grams), rice (*muhunga*), and *muhama* (sorghum). The *Sadaka ya mudzi (*ceremony for the village) is held to ward off serious disease outbreaks in the community. This was followed by the *Sadaka ya Kutohola (*harvesting ceremony), performed yearly to mark the end of the year by harvesting season. It enables the community to gather the harvest in a communal celebratory spirit where none was to have while others lacked.

This study highlighted the ethical implications of these ceremonies for modern environmental management and demonstrated that the ecological wisdom embedded in Kauma rituals includes the symbolic use of grains and plant substances. This underscores the need for sustainable agricultural practices and biodiversity conservation. In a time marked by deforestation, soil degradation, and water shortages, these rituals' focus on gratitude, renewal, and stewardship provides a compelling alternative to exploitative attitudes toward nature. Additionally, the communal aspect of Kauma rituals nurtures a sense of shared responsibility for the environment. By gathering communities to celebrate the interconnectedness of life, these rituals promote cooperative efforts to protect natural resources.

The foreign invasion of the Kauma land by the British colonial government, to extract environmental resources extraction subverted their religion, which steered the stewardship role. This invasion was preceded by the Islamic sultan's rule, which demarcated a ten-mile strip of coastal land for the sultanate. When the British came in with their assumption of unoccupied land as no man's land. This had to bastardize the African culture and religion as backward and advocated Christianity and modernization as the alternative, which in turn pointed the natives to a civilization characterized by urbanization, which further eroded the Kauma cultural-religious management of their environment. This sanctioned the mass extraction of environmental resources, accompanied by enforced movements of the natives from their land to provide a labor force for the exported plantations introduced, which provided a source for the hut tax. The symbolic resistance of the WaGiriama sub-clan was met with the brute force of the detonation of their kaya shrine with dynamite, exploding their sacred trees.

3.2 Political Ecology of Environmental Resources Extraction.

The annexing of the coastal strip set a precedent for the colonial white settlers, who erroneously

perceived any tract of land left from the coastal strip as 'no man's land' and subsequently annexed it. When the colonial settlers began to move into these territories, they started creating separation buffers that hindered earlier interaction of the different societies that were already there. Then other groups, such as the Maasai, were moved from areas where land was of high potential to areas of low potential. The net effect was to increase population densities in the low-potential areas such that by 1930, some pockets had densities of up to 500 people per km, which led to accelerated land degradation. The historical development of the colonists was between the conflicting requirements of peasant and settler political economy. Lonsdale and Berman state that the colonial state is a variant of the capitalist state; we must first, therefore, consider more generally the role of the state in class societies.[8]

Environmental Colonialism's shock effect upon natives was realized by their removal from their ancestral land without factoring in their integrated resource management system, which resulted in the deterioration of the sense of trusteeship towards future generations. Their environment was the natural world on which they, their animals, and plants depend for sustenance for food, water, air, and other things that life in general needs to survive and thrive. This definition of their land as who they were is consistent with the core beliefs of all African Traditional Religions, which perceived humankind as part of the created order and not above it. The role of humanity was that of maintaining the harmonious balance between the material (the environment) and the spiritual worlds. The Kauma community natives were the gateway to the coming colonization of Kenya. By this time, they still held their cultural environmental conservation practices that envisioned the existence of an active correspondence between the visible world and an invisible realm. This correspondence meant that the boundary between self and world was so permeable, and empirical events hold personal spiritual meaning because they were worldly reflections of wider cosmic currents.

The political ecology of resource extraction was premised on the contrary philosophizing of the African culture. Where Africans believed they were kin to their environment, which had a personality that could allow them to refer to it as Mother Earth, Western-centric philosophy rolled a philosophy that nature is dead. The Kauma seeks to live in harmony with nature. Sobonfu Somé asserts that Africans pursued a peaceful existence with their entire world, particularly with the spirit world.[9] The Kaumas perceive their world from an organic perspective, viewing it as a complex structure of interdependent and subordinate elements. These elements' relations and properties are largely determined by their function within the whole." This holistic or organic view of the world is governed by the law of harmony**,** which means "a state of agreement or peacefulness." "The world interacts with itself. [10] In the place where Africans respect certain spaces as habitation for spirits of ancestors and divinities, Western philosophy claimed that god was dead.

Environmental conservation decolonialism involves reclaiming indigenous environmental knowledge, governance, and practices that were disrupted by colonial and neocolonial influences—models that indigenous people resisted and detested as exploitative, as they sought to restore their relationships with nature. The Kauma community is environmentally sensitive, observing their indigenous religions and directing their interactions with their environment. These relationships cannot be fully understood if separated from their surroundings. This study highlights how Kauma ecological spirituality influences their environmental management and how colonialism interrupted these practices, which can now begin to be reclaimed through

[8] John Lonsdale and Bruce Berman, "Coping with the Contradictions: The Development of the Colonial State in Kenya, 1895–1914," *The Journal of African History* 20, no. 4 (1979): 487–505.

[9] Sobonfu Somé. *The spirit of intimacy: Ancient African teachings in the ways of relationships*. Sobonfu Some, 2000.

[10] Mwangi, *Religious Experiences*,107.

environmental knowledge decolonization. The remaining patch of coastal indigenous forests stands as evidence of the Kauma Traditional African Religion's commitment to environmental protection and preservation in the face of massive deforestation.

3.3 Post-colonial Decolonization Challenges

In a very crafty way, the colonialists contributed to the contestation of administrative spaces, which involved the administrative chiefs they had installed against Kaya elders. They have challenged the Kaya elders' legitimacy in environmental conservation, which they viewed as sacred spaces. The administrative authorities often usurp traditional cultural leaders because they lack formal structures, which was a type of environmental conservation colonialism that requires to be decolonized by recognizing cultural elders as the natives' custodians of their sacred forests.

Post-colonial times aimed to eliminate the undesired colonial practice of unsustainable extraction of environmental resources; however, the reality of climate change and the shift from an agricultural economy to an unregulated mineral economy are undermining all efforts to decolonize environmental resource management. This decolonization faces challenges due to the persistent effects of colonial environmental political ecology centered on extraction and capitalism. European colonization marked the arrival of early settlers who introduced foreign plants and animals and sought to transform the land, all while operating under the myth of 'terra' and 'aqua nullius'—land and water belonging to no one.

Environmental resources colonialism includes land, forests, and water. This entails past and present acts, institutions, and discourses of land, forests, and water management that exclude Indigenous populations. Contemporary agricultural norms and practices that appear as economically neutral and beneficial perpetuate past colonial injustices that underpin and exacerbate water colonialism. Past injustices, such as displacement, dispossession, and environmental racism, increase the difficulty for indigenous people in the to access their fertile agricultural fields and which lock them out of the food markets, and undermine the recognition and legitimacy of indigenous land, forests, and water rights that are seen to stand outside of, or as irrelevant to, the formal economy.

Tsuma Nzai**,** a Kaya elder, the coordinator, director, and custodian of Mijikenda traditions at Magarini Cultural Centre in Kilifi County, testified that "Forests have been an integral part of their lives for centuries. The forests protect them, soothe them, and listen to them, and without them, they would lose their soul and identities. Marion Kithi observed Kaya elders guard have taken their position in decolonization of environmental conservation against effects of climate change and this study seeks to have the fast tracking of the decolonization process. [11] Mijikenda traditional elders have been known to have taken up their positions on the front line in combating climate change through the conservation of their sacred forests. And as pressure continues to mount from intruders hell-bent on encroaching on the vast forests, the Kaya elders are now pleading with authorities of the state and other non-State to lead from the front by reinforcing the traditional kaya elders and prevent what an informant, Kadenge feared were attempts to reverse the gains made so far in protecting Kaya forests, which are considered sacred sites since time immemorial. To preserve the forests, Kaya elders now want the post-colonial government to decolonize their environmental knowledge in use, which they say faces destruction by charcoal burners and land developers.[12]

Random spot check indicates that the once-thick canopies encircling the sacred Kaya forests that shielded the Mijikenda people against attacks from their enemies until the 1940s, when the community began living outside the forested sites. They took the

[11] Kithi, Marion. *"Kaya Elders Guard Sacred Forests to Fight the Grim Effects of Climate Change."* Standard Newspaper, February 18, 2023. globalissues.org+15standardmedia.co.ke+15mwakwere.blogspot.com+15

[12] Mwangi, *Religious Experiences*,173.

initiative to reciprocate the stewardship of protection to their ancestors' habitation. The trees helped the community escape the negative effects of climate change, such as drought and land degradation. Kaya elders lamented that protecting the forests during the ongoing drought and widespread hunger on the Coast is a great challenge, especially in Kaumaland, Kilifi County, where residents are grappling with poverty and the glaring effects of climate change.

The elder, although they have taken voluntary measures to protect the Kayas because of their religious and cultural significance. However, there are still violations and exploitation of their sacred forests by other communities, which not only threaten their livelihoods but also their spiritual well-being and way of life. According to Mijikenda beliefs, any act of desecration on these forests could spell a curse to the whole community. This is what has pushed the Kaya elders to enforce laws to protect the sacred Kayas. The enforcement of rules is based on inflicting curses and other spiritual sanctions that have a powerful effect on the rural community associated with the Kaya forests. The rules include a ban on cutting down trees, restricted access of livestock inside the Kaya forests, and the prohibition of defecating or urinating within the forests, says Nzai.[13]

The forests, dominated by indigenous trees, are not only sacred for the Mijikenda Community, but are also valuable habitats with many rare plant and animal species. But the once lush green forests are now threatened by climate change, development, land grabbing, and other human activities. For a long time, Kaya forests have played a critical role in the culture of the Coastal people. The forests, more like shrines, are highly protected areas and are regarded as sacred sites. The forests, dominated by indigenous trees, are not only sacred for the Kauma part of Mijikenda Community, but are also valuable habitats for many rare plant and animal species. But the once lush green forests are now threatened directly by climate change, urbanization developments, land exercising for private ownership, and other human activities, a move that has led to the accelerated disappearance of many indigenous trees. Prolonged drought has equally led to land degradation in the forests.

The indiscriminate logging of trees has since raised great concern among Kaya elders, who not only fear losing their culture but also say that deforestation is causing calamities such as drought and floods. Kaya elders are revered members of the Mijikenda community who provide blessings and interpretation services to locals. They are tasked with protecting the shrines (Kayas), and they occasionally meet in Kaya forests, which are sacred places where prayers and cultural rituals are done. A spot check by concerned conservation whistleblowers found that most of the Kaya forests in Kauamaland in Kilifi County have suffered massive destruction and are disappearing, with many trees cut down and other forest areas hived off in readiness for development. This degradation of indigenous trees, coupled with harsh climate change effects, has led to the launch of Kaya Connect, which seeks the community's help in the restoration project of an indigenous tree nursery from where Kauma natives can plant trees in their farms.

The global environmental crisis, captioned climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity, has prompted renewed debates on the adequacy of dominant environmental conservation paradigms. At the center of this discourse is the urgent need to decolonize environmental knowledge systems, an act that involves challenging Eurocentric approaches while restoring, validating, and integrating Indigenous ecological knowledge. The failure of Western conservation frameworks to sustain ecosystems equitably, especially in postcolonial contexts, reveals deep-rooted colonial legacies that continue to marginalize local communities and their environmental ethics.

[13] Marion Kithi, *"Kaya Elders Guard Sacred Forests to Fight the Grim Effects of Climate Change,"* Standard Newspaper, February 18, 2023.

Environmental conservation as practiced globally has largely evolved from European Enlightenment philosophies, with a strong emphasis on the dichotomy between humans and nature. Protected areas, for instance, were conceptualized under the assumption that nature thrives best when isolated from human activity, a notion that led to the creation of national parks and game reserves that often displaced Indigenous peoples. In Africa, such colonial models were enforced with violence and dispossession, discrediting Indigenous land stewardship practices in favor of technocratic management by the state or foreign NGOs. This legacy persists today, with many conservation programs failing to recognize the knowledge, rights, and spiritual relationships that Indigenous communities maintain with their environment.

Decolonizing conservation knowledge, therefore, entails dismantling these colonial ideologies and re-centering Indigenous cosmologies, oral traditions, and ecological ethics in environmental governance. This is not merely an academic exercise; it is a political and cultural process aimed at restoring agency, sovereignty, and dignity to communities historically excluded from conservation discourse. Anthony Githitho of the Coastal Conservation Forest Unit and National Museum of Kenya, in his face-lifting mission of the 4,080 hectares of Kaya indigenous forests, observed that the 'forest was pedagogical' as a sacred site and a fountain of wisdom for practical living to the Miji Kenda, who had crystallized it to be the much-coveted ecological philosophy. [14] For Indigenous communities such as the Kauma of Kenya, whose sacred Kaya forests embody centuries of ecological wisdom, decolonization means returning to a worldview where land is not a resource to be exploited but a living ancestor to be honored and preserved.

Kaya Chivara in Kilifi County is a clear illustration where post-colonial state-led infrastructural projects, including road construction and the erection of a communication satellite, have desecrated the forest's spiritual core. This interference not only disqualified Kaya Chivara from UNESCO heritage status but also disrupted cultural rituals and ecological balance. However, elder members of the Kauma community have taken steps to reforest and revitalize the site, asserting their custodianship over a landscape they believe has existed for more than five centuries. The replanting of indigenous trees, the return of birds, and the resumption of traditional ceremonies mark a profound act of ecological and cultural decolonization. The feeling that carbon credits can be used to pay African debts or stabilize Africa economically is misplaced.[15]

Efforts as those supported by institutions like the Kaya Connect initiative and the Coastal Forest Conservation Unit under the National Museums of Kenya are pure decolonization acts. These bodies, while state-linked, collaborate with local custodians to conserve sacred forests not as museum artifacts but as living ecosystems embedded in oral memory and ritual practice. Their work demonstrates that decolonizing conservation is not about rejecting science, but about broadening the epistemological base of conservation to include Indigenous 'science', storytelling, and spirituality. The decolonization challenges mainly feature the commodification of environmental resources. Nevertheless, even the global conservation agenda, driven popularly by carbon credit markets, is shrouded in darkness with donor agendas inclined to reduce ecosystems to quantifiable services, which overlook their cultural and sacred dimensions. Kauma indigenous knowledge systems, that is, premised on a kincentric perception of nature, by contrast, emphasize relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility. To Kauma, part of the Mijikenda of the Kenyan Coast, the forest is not simply an ecological zone but a *Kaya*, a sacred home to them after migration from Singwaya, then after dispersal it turned a habitation for the spirits and ancestors, which makes it to be jealously protected through well-pronounced taboos, songs, and spiritual

[14] Mwangi, *Religious Experiences*,89

[15] Francis Mureithi. *"Why Carbon Credits Could Manage Africa's Debt Burden, Spur Growth." Daily Nation*, December 10, 2023

codes that function as biodiversity conservation cum ecological regulations.

The aged neighbors of the revered Kaya forests have old childhood memories that are reminisced about by many who recall the days when they used to see their grandparents visit the shrine for rituals, whose effects would almost immediately be experienced. The negative impacts of climate change as a result of deforestation are evident to both the young and the old, who used to experience very predictable rainfall patterns followed by sunshine's which made the region very therapeutic for various manners of illnesses. Mr. Githitho smiles from ear to ear as a conservationist who has championed Kilifi County as first among equals in decolonialization of ecological practices, which is evidenced by having seven of its Kaya shrine forests listed as UNESCO Sites for cultural heritage. [16] The Kaya Connect is a leading practical decolonization project where natives are actively collecting the indigenous seeds for the nursery from which the rest can acquire tree seedlings from the National Museums of Kenya and the Coastal Conservation Forest Unit. These new partnerships with other conservation organizations have injected fresh air and blood that's promoting the mission to restore the degraded forests. Other than cultural practices, the community and the cultural elders are negotiating to put some of the forests into use by practicing ecotourism. For instance, they will be taking visitors around the Kayas while showing them their culture.

The Mijikenda community uses the Kaya shrines to appease their gods and ask for divine powers for prosperity and for curing diseases,[17] however, of late, there has been an overwhelming wave of political ecology diseases that are environment degradation related, which makes an accurate understanding of the magnitude of the environmental crisis among the Kuama within sub-Saharan Africa, that is threefold; firstly, Political conflict, including international economic pressures, secondly, Science and technology, and lastly, Ignorance and poverty. There is a need to understand how both traditional and modern social structures have led to Kauma environmental degradation. Ignorance and poverty account for the majority of traditional Africans' living conditions in the rural areas, where the people wallow in poverty, and without basic amenities such as good water supplies, adequate lavatories, and proper energy use.

The sources of water, the rivers, consequently get polluted with human waste, exposing the community to waterborne diseases such as dysentery, typhoid, and cholera. And the excessive use of fuel wood and constant bush burning, which is a predominant practice in traditional Africa, increases air pollution, exposing the community to respiratory illnesses. This factor of poverty cum ignorance on the part of traditional Africans does not necessarily exonerate our people from their contribution to environmental hazards. This is particularly so given that the relevant patterns of behavior may come, at least in part, from an inability to exploit nature because of low levels of economic and technological development.[18]

The community has been repeatedly plagued by diverse political ecology of diseases in which the health of the Kauma community has been affected by these interconnections of factors that involve environmental degradation, socio-political marginalization, and cultural influences.[19] The desecration and destruction of the Kaya forests, once thriving ecosystems that provided essential natural barriers against the spread of diseases. The destruction of these forests deprived the community of essential resources and significantly undermined their overall health and well-being, leading to increased food and nutritional insecurity and exposing them to environmental degradation that fosters the emergence of new disease vectors.

[16] Mwangi, *Religious Experiences*,119

[17] Siago Cece, *"Kaya Elders Embark on Restoration of Degraded Sacred Forests,"* Daily Nation Newspaper, May 23, 2024.

[18] Siago Cece, *"Kaya Elders Embark on Restoration of Degraded Sacred Forests,"* Daily Nation Newspaper, May 23, 2024

[19] Mwangi, *Religious Experiences*,147

Table 3.2 Political Ecology Diseases, Descriptions, and Environmental Change Causes.

DISEASES	DESCRIPTION	ENVIRONMENTAL CAUSE
Malaria	Mosquito-borne parasitic disease causing fever, chills, and anemia	Poor drainage creates breeding sites for *Anopheles* mosquitoes
Chikungunya	Viral disease causing joint pain and fever	Poor drainage encourages mosquito breeding
Dengue	Viral infection with high fever and rashes	Accumulated stagnant water in urban environments
Zika	Mosquito-borne virus linked to birth defects	Poor drainage, especially in peri-urban zones
O'nyong'nyong Fever	Mosquito-borne viral disease with joint pain	Insect breeding due to stagnant rainwater
Elephantiasis	Parasitic infection causing severe swelling	Stagnant floodwaters host filarial worm vectors
Cholera	Acute diarrheal disease from contaminated water	Floods are contaminating drinking sources with sewage

Source: John Mwangi, PhD thesis 2025.

The political ecology of diseases is an intersection of health, as impacted by environmental changes driven by political and economic forces, which catalyze the emergence and spread of new diseases, in addition to the persistence of old diseases. Malaria remains a prevalent public health challenge in the Kauma community, with its prevalence closely linked to environmental changes.[20] Malaria is the largest disease burden, which is endemic in damp parts of the country, particularly in the wet and humid areas of coastal Kenya.[21] Sadie J. Ryan et al. and Mordecai et al. observed a shifting in the seasonality of Malaria transmission by extension from the usual 2–3 months (July–September) to 4–6 months (July–December) due to longer high-temperature seasons that is projected to put 50.6–62.1 million people at risk of endemic transmission by 2030 in eastern Africa.[22]

3.4 Cultural values line of defense.

Colonial and modernist forces embodied in the alliance between Western science and capitalism have denied Nature its personhood, severing the relational bonds that once demanded moral responsibility toward it. Within this worldview, nature is reduced to a resource, its living spirit erased, and its exploitation rendered not only permissible but economically desirable. Such thinking did not emerge in a vacuum; it was actively imposed through colonial education, religion, and policy, displacing indigenous cosmologies in which rivers, forests, mountains, and animals were kin and moral agents. The elders in the Kauma Kaya forests who continue to love and protect nature resist the redirection of human attention away from reciprocity with the land toward the pursuit of profit and consumption. The hegemonic forces' refusal to acknowledge Nature's personhood has consequences that reach far beyond environmental degradation. It generates

[20] Kilifi County Government, *Kilifi County Integrated Development Plan 2023–2027* (Kilifi: Kilifi County Government, 2023), 66

[21] Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, *Climate Change Impacts on Health and Livelihoods: Kenya Assessment* (2021), 25.

[22] Sadie J. Ryan, Catherine A. Lippi, and Fernanda Zermoglio, "Shifting Transmission Risk for Malaria in Africa with Climate Change: A Framework for Planning and Intervention," *Malaria Journal* 19, no. 1 (2020): 170, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12936-020-03224-6

a deep moral and cultural dissonance: a clash between ancestral, place-based ways of knowing, rooted in lived experience, ceremony, and interdependence, and the impersonal, extractive frameworks of modern science and economics. This tension feeds into the political ecology of diseases, where disrupted ecosystems, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity create fertile ground for vector-borne and zoonotic diseases to flourish, particularly among vulnerable rural populations.

Decolonization, in this context, focuses beyond reclaiming land and governance to restoring the ecological and cultural systems that sustained health and abundance. Reviving Kauma grain farming, which was once the pride of the community before colonial cash-crop policies and market dependency displaced it, would re-establish local food sovereignty, improve nutrition, and reduce reliance on both foreign food aid as well as imported staples. Such a revival would also strengthen community resilience against climate shocks, improve household incomes, and directly address poverty by ensuring that wealth generated from the land remains within the community.

Reconstruction of Kauma agro-ecological knowledge, sacred forest stewardship, and indigenous reciprocity ethics, decolonization offers a pathway to heal both land and people. It promises to dismantle the structural drivers of poverty, curb the ecological conditions that foster disease, and rekindle a culture in which the earth is once again regarded as a living relative, deserving of respect, care, and protection. But Kauma's cultural values that have been the first and the last line of defense against indiscriminate and senseless extraction have been eroded among many youth and middle-aged people, and it's now facing strong economic pressures. These Kaya cultural values were: *Kufaana* (reciprocity), *Soyosoyo* (balance between people and nature), *Umwenga* (solidarity), and *Kushirikiana*(collectiveness).

4.0 CONCLUSION

There was a misconception that Africans could not philosophize; however, this was the first line of defense for the preservation of the forest through its forest wisdom. This study's advocacy for decolonization of knowledge indirectly hints at the role of African philosophical thinking on their environment, particularly given the present global climate change challenges. Decolonization emerges as a critical positionality that reconfigures the place of Indigenous Africans within conservation discourse not as essentialized or ethno-philosophically inscribed "traditional" figures, but as situated knowledge-holders and active agents who, within their specific ecologies, enact practices of environmental stewardship oriented toward restoring landscapes to their original ecological and aesthetic integrity, as exemplified by the Kauma community on the Kenyan coast.

Climate change has both directly and indirectly affected the Kauma native people. Directly through the harsh weather patterns, coupled with strange sicknesses, which are aggravated by the unproductive land. Decolonization will restore the Kauma in all aspects of their livelihood, as all things are interwoven. This study recommends the revival of cultural pride that affirms environmental stewardship as a sacred duty. This study recommends reaffirmation of the authority of the Kauma **council of elders,** especially *enyenzi, who adjudicated on shrine forest matters,* to work alongside contemporary environmental institutions to advise on forest land use, sacred sites, and community conservation. Reverting to Kauma ecological stewardship, which emphasizes meeting human needs without compromising the health of an ecosystem. The coast is an excellent case study through decolonization of environmental conservation in the region, which has seriously heeded Barack Obama's warning that this generation may be the first to experience the wrath of climate change and the last that can do something about it.

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