

SACRED SITES

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## SACRED SITES

Sacred sites are special reserved holy places where our elders go to pray and talk to our Gods. These places mean so much to our Indigenous communities and deserve a lot of attention and protection.

Unfortunately as we start the new millennium, we discover that these holy places are threatened and may not be existing in the next few years if nothing is done.

The whole problem of threat is clear because of the conflict that exists between the Indigenous, non-Indigenous communities and governments on the issue of land. Indigenous Peoples are faced with several concerns related to land rights, water, and socio-economic opportunities. Being a minority, in any situation is more than likely a disadvantage. It is not surprising therefore that in a number of African Countries, the Indigenous groups are the minority and usually go without recognition amongst the mainstream groups or within their governments.

The issue of Indigenous Peoples in Africa will continue to be a complex one in the development literature, which is dominated by those from the mainstream societies.

In Africa and especially in the Eastern Africa, the Indigenous Peoples like the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania live in the Arid and Semi-Arid lands. Despite that they live in the dry lands, they are well adapted to an often harsh environment because they have gathered vast local knowledge about their resource based, its weakness and strengths, its utilization and management. The adaptation is complex and based on survival.

For the Maasai, the core of development confrontation revolves around land. It is more than the issue of whose land is it. As many groups disagree over ownership of land, for the Maasai, the issue is deeper -who decided what the conceptualization of land should be, and will their ancient traditional concept be forcibly taken away from them.

The Loita Maasai, a subgroup of the Maasai of Kenya inhabiting part of Narok District of Kenya in the great Rift Valley, led by their cultural and spiritual leaders, the **O loiboni**, have, since colonial times, consistently and successfully resisted the encouragement of modern systems of tenure and management of land resources into their time. In the past six years, we have seen changes in the interest of their reserved forest known as

**Naimena Engiyo-the lost child.** This forest is historical, its thickness and its richness in Biological diversity has created interest in some greedy Kenyans who wanted to take away from the Loita Maasai. The community elders formed a trust and went to court after unsuccessfully trying to solve the matter traditionally. So far the elders have managed to block any distraction, grabbing and encroachment

The Forest means a lot to the Loita Maasai. The Forest is a Sacred Site where the Maasai elders led by the Loibon go to pray and offer sacrifices. They pray for the needs of the communities. Up to date it is still a place of great value. The Forest is called **the lost child** because of its thickness and many centuries ago it was believed a beautiful young Maasai girl got lost in it. The Forest is so thick that if you get into it you have to know your way out otherwise you may never come out again, the forest is home to different species of wild animals and one of the richest sites on Biodiversity in Kenya.

Another very interesting Sacred Site which is threatened is **Endonyoormorwak -which in Maasai means "Endonyo"** is hill while **"irmoorwak"** means elders. The word therefore means a hill of elders. This Sacred Site is situated between Mount Kilimanjaro the tallest mountain in Africa known as *Oldoinyoibor*-(the white mountain) and Mount Meru the third tallest known as *Koimerek or Oldoinyorok* (the black Mountain).

Traditionally, the Maasai believed that it was at this hill (*endonyoormorwak*) that the first lady who is the Mother of the Maasai **Naiterukop** originated. Besides the historical background, the hill has sacred trees and plants required by the Maais during the performance of their spiritual ceremonies.

In the Maasai community, respect and responsibility of a man is determined by his age group. The young Morans -Youth must undergo different stages before they are recognized as elders. In the case of the Tanzania

and Kenya Maasai, it is only by undergoing the sacred ceremony in the Endonyoormorwak that one can be regarded as an elder. The ceremonies take 12 to 15 years when a new group is then promoted to elders group. These ceremonies have been taking place for hundreds of years without any interruption. It is a Sacred place for both the Tanzania and Kenyan Maasai.

In the early 70s, trouble began. There began an invasion of both individual and none Maasai around the Sacred hill. People who did not understand the importance of the site for the traditional Maasai.

The government of Tanzania gave leaseholds to individuals in areas surrounding the sacred sites. Due to this the natural vegetation around the site like the sacred trees were cleared to give way for farming.

In 1974, the Maasai traditional elders decided to try and own the land through the Tanzanian land act of 1923. This did not succeed and the government denied them the right to own it.

In 1990, the government of Tanzania started to show an interest of the same venue. Their motive was to keep it as a historical monument. This will then be made a tourists attraction and therefore deny the Maasai elders access and privacy to their spiritual site. The Maasai elders have object the idea strongly and have had a great support from their Kenyan brothers.

In 1998, the elders known as *ilaigwanak* formed and registered their own trust following the foot steps of the Loita Maasai. They have tried to register the land as a trust but with no success. And just like the Loita Maasai they are preparing for a court case if money is available to fight and block the Government from their Sacred Site

It is also positive to note that other tribes also had similar sacred places. These tribes believe that calamities like drought occur frequently because sacrifices are no longer offered and the sacred sites have disappeared, good example is the Kamba community from Kenya. They had special places in the villages where they used to go and offer sacrifices during drought, epidemics and to give thanks during grace periods of good harvests. The trees and bushes growing in these places were highly conserved and were not supposed to be cut at all. The sites were known as *Mathembo*. The Kambas now believe that the problems they have now are because there are no more sacrifices offered and where rains occur then they believe somebody must have visited the Mathembo. Few of the sites such as Nzambani Rock were adjudicated and registered as a community utility whereas the rest has been adjudicated into individual freehold.

In the Mijikenda Sacred Groves of the Kenyan Coast: *The Kaya Forest*, the Mijikenda tribes do not have a positive story to be proud of. The Kayas are forests scattered along the Kenyan coast which are relics of once extensive lowland forests. Initially, these forests sheltered small fortified villages called Kayas, which were established to shield the Mijikenda cultural heritage. The traditional elders regulated the use of the Kaya as a source of selected forest products, burial sites and sites for ceremonial activities. Studies have shown that the Kaya forests are important for both cultural and biodiversity consideration. They support various types of plants, some are considered rare because they have been exploited elsewhere. Expansion of agricultural, tourist resorts, development and mining activities are posing a threat to the existing of many Kaya forests due to interference from central government land tenure and development policies and external culture influence on the young generation who have no spiritual attachment to the Kaya forests. These are signs that the elders' commitments to caring for the forests is declining and these forests are in real danger of disappearing.

It is also evidence that without the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in the formulation of government policies like Land and forest, then the problems will always be there. Before the so called policies were put in place the Indigenous peoples had their own way of managing resources, now that others have come and brought rules in a language they do not understand, they are lost as much as their heritage is getting lost. All have to work together as Chambers R. puts it:

*"One may wonder how much goes unknown because of unseeing eyes, unhearing ears, professional conditioning, and biases of rural development tourism. Neither rural people nor outside scientists can know in advance what the others know. It is by talking, travelling, asking, listening, observing and doing things together that they can most effectively learn from one another."*