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An African Religious Worldview and the Conservation of Natural Environmental Resources: A Case Study of the Sengwer in Embobut Forest in Kenya

ABSTRACT

This research article is about the African religious worldview in conservation of natural environmental resources using the Sengwer tribe as a case in point. The Sengwer are a hunter-gatherer tribe who inhabit the Cherang'any Hills forests in the northwestern part of Kenya. The current environmental situation in the area is worsening due to the destruction of the water catchment area, which threatens human existence in the region. Measures laid down by the government and various stakeholders to tackle environmental degradation have not yielded the expected results. This prompted research to ascertain the Sengwer religious worldview on natural resource conservation and the challenges they face in utilizing their indigenous religion to combat environmental crisis. The findings of the study established that the Sengwer religious worldview dovetails with environment conservation. The main components of the Sengwer worldview, the Supreme Being, ancestors, the universe, the community and their social system provided a framework for sustainable utilization and conservation of natural resources. The study identified the various challenges that the Sengwer face, and the measures they have taken to ensure that they can utilize their religion to tackle the environment crisis. This paper provides salient recommendations on how various stakeholders can partner with and utilizes the indigenous African religion in conservation efforts, and is expected to benefit government agencies, policy makers, and researchers in environment matters and religion.

Keywords: Indigenous African religion; natural environment conservation; Sengwer.

Introduction

The environmental crisis that the world is facing today threatens human existence. The wanton destruction and indiscriminate overexploitation of natural resources which man has always depended upon endangers the survival of human race. Current techniques put in place to conserve natural resources seem to be at best a mirage because they have not yielded the desired outcomes.

Scholars have noted how friendly African religion is to the environment. Senghor explicitly writes that: “As far as African ontology is concerned, too, there is no such thing as dead matter: every being, everything—be it only a grain of sand—radiates a life force, a sort of wave-particle; and sages, priests, kings, doctors, and artists all use it to help bring the universe to its fulfilment.”¹ This means that everything that was found in the universe has a religious purpose for its existence, hence, a reason for the conservation of the natural resources. The ascription of supernatural and psychic powers to natural environmental resources is the backbone of African religion. This type of animism has played a significant role in ensuring that natural resources have been well conserved through observance of taboos and totems (animals and birds being part of the tribe kindred) related to natural environmental resources. This belief has overtly or covertly promoted the conservation of natural environmental resources such forests, animals, rocks, snakes, and birds.

Traditional African religion permeates all facets and spheres of the human life. J. S. Mbiti has cogently described Africans as “notoriously religious and each people have its religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it.”² In African spirituality there is no dichotomy between the spiritual world and the natural world. This is further described by Mbiti when he writes:

It is religion, more than anything else, which colors their understanding of the universe and their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. To be is to be religious in a religious universe. That is the philosophical

understanding behind African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, actions and social relationships.³

African traditional religion has the ability to positively influence resource conservation. Oladeji opines that “Local knowledge (LK) and traditional practices have great cultural significance and their applications have been found to be relevant in studies relating to contemporary medicine, food production, biodiversity conservation and management, hence, they should be maintained in a manner that ensures that the future generations live to witness them.”⁴

Despite the fact that African traditional religion is cohesive with the conservation of natural environmental resources, little attention has been given to African traditional religion by the government agencies and various stakeholders involved in conservation of the environment. The aforesaid, precludes African traditional religion from playing an active role in the conservation of natural resources. It is on this basis that this paper seeks to ascertain the African religious worldview on natural resource conservation by taking a case study of the Sengwer traditional religion and the challenges they face in conserving the environment. Therefore, the objectives of the study are:

- a. To explore the Sengwer religious worldview on natural resource conservation
- b. To determine the challenges facing the Sengwer in utilizing their indigenous religion in to conserve the environment
- c. To identify how African religion is coping with the challenges
- d. To recommend possible ways of promoting African traditional religion in conservation of natural resources.

Methodology

This section presents where and how data was collected, interpreted, and analyzed. The study is descriptive and explorative in nature as it seeks to identify the challenges African religion face in conserving the natural environmental resources with the focus on Sengwer indigenous religion.

The Study Area

Embobut forest is located in Elgeyo Marakwet in Rift Valley, Kenya. It is the largest reserve among the thirteen forest reserves that make up the Cherang'any Hills water catchment. Embobut forest is located within an area defined by 1° 16' North, 35° 26' East. The altitude ranges from 2,000 to 3,365 meters above sea level, with the highest point at Cheptoket Peak in the north-central section. Embobut forest forms the largest part of the Cherang'any Hills forest, which is one of the five water catchment areas in Kenya. It covers approximately 120,000 hectares and rises about 3,500 meters. Cherang'any Hills receives 1,200 millimeters of rainfall throughout the year; the rainy season is March to September with maximum rainfall in May and August and minimum in January. The forest is characterized by indigenous species, including Afro-alpine vegetation above 3,300 meters.

The indigenous Sengwer people are an ethnic minority who are traditionally hunter-gatherer people. Their ancestral lands are located in the Rift Valley province in western Kenya, in and around the forests of the Cherang'any Hills. Currently they are characterized as marginalized, oppressed, poorly represented, not well educated, poor, powerless, and discriminated. This is evident through the recent forced displacements and evictions of the community from the forest by the Government of Kenya which disregard their basic human rights as enshrined in the constitution of Kenya 2010.⁵ Just like the Kalenjin sub tribes such as the Nandi and Kipsigis who trace their migratory route from Egypt,⁶ the Sengwer people are also believed to have originated from Misri, present-day Egypt. During their migration they followed the river Nile and first settled on the slopes of Mount Elgon and later on the plains of Uasin Gishu.

Study Design

This study is a descriptive qualitative study. Through field work the researcher obtained first-hand information and observed the Sengwer religious life, sacred sites and various environmental resources. The interview schedule

was used as a guide by the researcher in both open ended and unstructured interviews which allowed the extraction of detailed data for the study. Focus group discussion was important because the information given by the participants was able to be challenged and corrected by the participants in the group; they were also able assist in memory recollection and dealing with vested interest and bias by the members. Hence the dynamics in a focused group became an instrument for testing reliability. The targeted population for the interview was Sengwer found within Cherang'any hills. The Sengwer traditional leaders, elders, rainmakers as well as a traditional herbalist were the key participants in this study. A field assistant helped the researcher to translate and conduct the interview process in situations where the informants lacked competence in English or Kiswahili.

Sampling Procedure

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit informants for the study. Snowball sampling was also used as the researcher was referred by the locals to people whom they considered to be knowledgeable about the Sengwer people and their natural environment. As initial participants were interviewed, they referred the researcher to more participants who were also deemed useful for the study.

Methods of Data Collection

Data for this study was drawn from both secondary and primary sources. Methods of data collection for this research article included personal interviews, focus group discussion, archival documents, internet publications, books articles, and journals.

Data Analysis

Qualitative techniques of data analysis were used to analyze data collected from the field. Data collected from both primary sources and secondary

sources were analyzed under various themes of relevance to the study. Findings of the study were presented through narration.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented according to the study objectives and the discussion centers around the findings. This section provides a detailed presentation of the Sengwer religion, which is an instauration of the Sengwer worldview on natural resource conservation. Later the findings and discussions center on the challenges that the Sengwer face in utilizing their religious worldview in conserving natural resources. How the Sengwer have coped amidst the challenges has also been presented. Lastly, practicable recommendations for various stakeholders in this matter have been presented.

1.0 The Sengwer Religion

The Sengwer people had a robust religious system before the introduction of Christianity via agents of colonization. Unlike major world religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism that trace their origin to a founder, the Sengwer religion has neither known founder nor written scripture. This has been buttressed by Awolalu when he says that “the founders cannot be found no matter how far we go back to history.”⁷ It is a native and indigenous religion of the Sengwer people. The Sengwer belief system is handed down from one generation to another orally. This claim is supported by John Mbiti’s assertion that,

African religion is the product of thinking and experiences of our forefathers. They formed religious ideas, they formulated religious beliefs, they observed religious ceremonies and rituals, they told proverbs and myth which carried religious meanings, and they evolved laws and customs which safeguarded the life of the individual and his community.⁸

In similar vein other African scholars have written widely about African traditional religion.⁹ For instance A. G. Leonard vividly says that “the religion

of these natives [Africans] is their existence is their religion."¹⁰ This therefore means that the life of the Sengwer is interwoven with their religion; religion provides meaning for their lives and existence.

The Sengwer people believe that they originated from a common ancestor called Sengwer who was created by *Assis*. They don't have a conclusive story of how creation of the universe and everything in it happened but they believe that everything in the universe originated from God.¹¹

Most of the participants claimed that the Sengwer believe and recognize the existence of a supernatural being called *Assis* who is represented by the sun. All prayers are directed to *Assis* to whom they pray. Mostly, prayers were done in three intervals; in the morning, at noontime and in the evening. They prayed to God for blessings as they went hunting, for protection and healing. This belief has been supported and emphasized by Mbiti that, "most of the prayers are addressed directly and specifically to God. He is normally mentioned by his personal or attributive name but sometimes he is addressed only by implications."¹² Under a few circumstances prayers and sacrifices are addressed and dedicated to other spiritual beings such as *Illat*, spirits and ancestors depending on the context. This view is also buttressed by Mbiti when he says, "A few, not more than ten per cent, are addressed to divinities, spirits, the living dead and personification of nature (trees, rivers, earth etc) . . . In a few cases we have prayers addressed to national heroes and founders."¹³

The Sengwer indigenous religion was made up of deities with hierarchical ranking. The most important and supreme deity being *Assis* (the sun), sometimes fondly referred to as *Chebetob chemataw* who is associated with blessings and good will. Another deity is *Illat* (god of thunder) who is associated with rain. During dry seasons, sacrifices were made to *Illat* to appease him to bring rain. He is also associated with fury and vengeance whereby he causes droughts or strikes people with lightning if he is angered. This belief compelled the community to always endeavor to live and be in harmony with the spiritual world.

The Sengwer revered and venerated spirits especially ancestral spirits.¹⁴ The belief in ancestors is intrinsically connected to the Sengwer religion. According A. E. Orobator “an ancestor is a blood relative of a living community; this relationship could be of common parentage or shared ancestry.”¹⁵ The belief in ancestors is linked to the community’s close attachment to the forest because they believe that the ancestral spirits live there.

The Sengwer religion formed the basis of their worldview on natural resource conservation as presented in the next subsection below.

1.1.0 Sengwer Worldview on Natural Environment Resource Conservation

Many scholars have defined worldview in different ways: Barker defines worldview as the way a person tends to understand his or her relationship with social institutions, nature, objects, other people and spirituality.¹⁶ Worldview is also defined as a set of assumptions and presumptions that a person holds consciously or unconsciously about how they perceive reality.¹⁷ A worldview provides people with the foundation for behavior, thought and assumption that govern how people live.¹⁸

The Sengwer are part of the many tribes that are found in Africa. In order to understand their worldview we will start by understanding first what African worldview means. Makwe defines African worldview as “an abstraction which encompasses the total way of life of the African society. It is a psychological reality referring to shared constructs, shared patterns of belief, feeling and knowledge which members of the group that subscribe to this reality carry in their minds as a guide for conduct and the definition of reality.”¹⁹

Therefore, the Sengwer worldview can be defined as a set of belief systems and knowledge about the universe, the supernatural being and the place of human beings in the world. The Sengwer worldview encompasses religious beliefs and practices centered on four main components: the Supreme Being, the ancestors, the universe, the community and the social system. These components have been discussed in detail in the next subsections.

1.1.1 Supreme Being

As aforementioned the Sengwer believe in a supreme being called Assis whose origin is always a mystery but is represented by the sun. The Sengwer believe that the sun is the eye of the Supreme Being who cannot be seen.

They believe Assis to be the creator of the macrocosm and sustainer of life. This knowledge helped them to be always aware of the surrounding. They have given God different attributes for instance; God is viewed as omnipresent (present everywhere), Omnipotent (all powerful) omniscient (all knowing). God exercises his powers through his main agent Illat; this is seen through lighting, and rain. They viewed God as the provider as he provides rain for wild fruits to grow and trees to flower for the honey production and food for wild animals.²⁰

They believe that God uses his Chief agent Illat to bring order in the universe and also to warn people. Illat also acted as an intermediary between God and the Sengwer. Mbiti postulates that Africans “held that God specifically created the spirits to act as intermediaries between Him and men.”²¹ The Sengwer offered sacrifices and prayers to God through the intermediaries by invoking the spirits through the use of natural resources such water bodies, plants, sacred sites found within their environment to appease the spirits. Illat being the chief agent was responsible for accepting or rejecting the sacrifices.

1.1.2 Ancestors

The belief in primordial ancestors is a key component of their worldview. Commenting on ancestors in Africa Phelps rightly observed that: “The spirit of the ancestors is a vital part of the African concept of the community, in which the collective power of all members of the community – the living and the ‘living dead’ – energizes and pervades the daily life of everyone. Those ancestors who exhibit special moral virtue and strength in life are held up as spiritual guides for the living.”²² This belief played a significant role among the Sengwer in the conservation of natural environmental resources. It is held that

the destruction of natural resources could lead to the fury and vengeance of the ancestors befalling upon the community.

Nyamiti, asserts that in Africa ancestors are believed to “enjoy a sacred super human status with special magico-religious powers that can be beneficial or even harmful to the earthly kin.”²³ Therefore, human beings did everything right to avoid the fury of ancestors descending upon the community for destroying natural environmental resources. The ancestors rage was avoided through rituals, sacrifices, libations, prayers and incarnations. The Sengwer held a belief that the ancestors gave them the forest to provide them with all the needs and wants for the community’s existence as long as they utilized resources in a sustainable manner.²⁴ Hence it was the responsibility of the community as whole to ensure peaceful coexistence with nature.

Ancestors were also a linkage between the living and the Supreme Being. Due to the proximity of ancestors to God, they perform various mediating roles. Hence, ancestors were entitled to constant communication with the living. Different totemic objects found within the environment acted as a commemoration of the ancestors; this made totems to have a sense of sacredness therefore advancing the conservation of various animals and birds that were totems. Nyamiti postulates the relationship between human beings, ancestors and the environment when he vividly writes that “solidarity is lived and shared through prayers and rituals, whereby human and cosmic solidarity is engaged.”²⁵ This human environment relationship motivated the community to respect natural environmental resources to avoid the wrath of God through Illat and the ancestors. The peaceful coexistence between the supernatural beings and human beings enabled the preservation of natural environmental resources. The indigenous religion of the local people has been diminishing and this can be cited as one of the reasons why Kenya today is facing disastrous consequences such as floods, prolonged droughts and so forth. Given these elements of the Sengwer worldview, a great deal of inspiration can be drawn from the Sengwer worldview with regard to natural resource conservation.

1.1.3 The Universe

The universe involves everything in it including, man, animals, plants, trees, birds and insects. The Sengwer viewed the universe as a creation of God who is always concerned about what is going on here. All the natural environment resources have a place in the universe and man is in charge of ensuring that all are in harmony by not tampering with the environment.²⁶

For instance, the Sengwer revere trees as they believed that trees were the abode of spirits which should not be harmed. It is out of this belief that whenever the Sengwer fell a tree for certain religious or cultural purposes they had to pray to that tree.²⁷ The concept of trees being the abode of spirits enabled the community to conserve trees since they did not fell trees unnecessarily lest they risk the wrath and punishment of Assis. The Sengwer accorded nature great reverence and respect.

The Sengwer believed that all natural resources found in the universe had a role to play in peaceful coexistence of the world. This led them to attach beliefs to animals, trees, hills, water bodies, birds and snakes. This was used as a way of conserving and ensuring sustainable utilization of natural environmental resources.

1.1.4 Community

The community formed an important part of the Sengwer worldview; individuals found their meaning in the community. This is echoed in the words "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am."²⁸ Decisions and social activities such as hunting, harvesting of honey and gathering fruits were done communally. Obligation to the family and the community went beyond personal needs and obligations. This is affirmed by O'Donovan that "Africans tend to find their identity and meaning in life through being part of their extended family, clan and tribe. There is a strong feeling of common participation in life, a common history, and a common destiny. The reality in Africa may be described with the statement: "I am because the community is."²⁹ To the Sengwer being human is belonging to the community and one belongs to the

community just as in any African community by "...participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundations, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence."³⁰

The relationship between the Sengwer as a community and nature is symbiotic in nature. They ensure efficient and sustainable utilization of natural resources for the wellbeing of the community and this directed their worldview towards nature. The Sengwer worldview towards nature was founded on religious views and attitudes rooted in the moral obligation of each member towards nature. The worldview is underpinned by their religion and all that is found in the universe such as plants, animals, birds and sacred places such as hills, caves and rivers provide the fundamental elements given by Assis to sustain the human life.³¹ The council of Elders has the divine sanction to ensure that God's creation was well taken care of.

The universe is viewed in religious terms as God's creation; it is this that informed the Sengwer worldview about nature and all that is in the universe. Mbiti makes a similar observation when he writes "African religion sees nature as a friend of man (humans) and vice versa. He (humanity) is an integral part of nature and the priest of nature. The destruction or pollution of nature (including air, water, forest, land, animals, trees, plants and useful insects) brings harm to all life in general and injuries to human welfare in particular. Therefore, man [humanity] has to preserve nature and use it wisely, indeed mercifully, for his own and its survival."³²

The Sengwer view man as the paragon of God's creative work. This view comes with the responsibility of man ensuring that the rest of God's creation is in harmony. Therefore, man was obliged to observe the rules and beliefs that fostered conservation of the natural resources. This ensured that there is equilibrium between the physical and spiritual world. It is religion that asserted the greatest influence in the lives of the Sengwer as it reminded them of their obligation to the environment and connected them to the spiritual world.

Natural environmental resources that had religious connotations were treated with utmost respect and awe. The same respect was transferred to all institutions that were established in the community to facilitate preservation and conservation of environment. The most important and powerful institution that ensured the conservation of natural resources was the council of elders.

1.1.5 The Sengwer Social Systems

The Sengwer had a complex social system that valued collectivity and communalism. This is derived from the sense that they, Sengwer, came from one man called Sengwer. The complex social system infused natural resource conservation and environment management practices and beliefs into their social life. Initiates were taught important life skills and what it meant to be a Sengwer.³³ Henceforth, sustainable use of the natural resources was cultivated into the fabric of the community through their members at a younger age. This was made possible through various forms of oral literature that were passed on in the evening under the *bien* tree or in the house.

Collective responsibility was emphasized. Whenever hunters made a kill, they would share the hunted animal, however small it was, and regardless of the number of hunters.³⁴ *Sakas* (collective hunting) demonstrates the Sengwer emphasis on communalism. This norm extended to natural environmental conservation as people grew up knowing that they belonged to the community and they are the community which was given the mandate by God to be the custodians of the natural environmental resources. Hence, it was their communal responsibility to ensure that the environment was well taken care of. The clan elders were the custodians, overseers and spiritual leaders who policed and provided guidance on natural environmental resource utilization.

The Sengwer communities were hunters and gatherers; they neither possessed animals nor agriculture. Hence they met all their nutritional requirements through collecting honey, trapping animals, and gathering various fruits and vegetables. They developed various religious practices and beliefs that formed their religious worldview which help them avoid undue exploitation

of the natural resources found in Embobut forest. Thus, the Sengwer through their religious worldview understood well their place in the universe. The importance of the forest led the Sengwer to have a deep respect and reverence towards nature.

2.0 Challenges Facing the Sengwer

The following section presents the various challenges hampering the Sengwer in utilizing their religion in conserving natural environmental resources.

2.1 Christian Religion

The majority of respondents indicated that Christianity has affected the indigenous beliefs of the Sengwer people in regard to conserving the environment. Christianity has dismissed most of the Sengwer beliefs and practices as backwards, forgetting that the Sengwer religious worldview has been the force behind a harmonious coexistence between human beings and the natural environment as pointed out in the preceding sections.

The first settlers who came destroyed the forest by clearing it for large-scale farming. They pushed the Sengwer people farther into the forest. When the missionaries arrived, they tried to separate the Sengwer converts from others. Missionaries taught them to disregard indigenous beliefs and practices such as festivals, customs, traditions, and the observance of rituals. Jomo Kenyatta was undoubtedly writing about the missionary's attitudes toward African religions and culture when he wrote:

As far as religion was concerned the African was regarded as a clean slate on which anything could be written. He was supposed to take wholeheartedly all religious dogmas of the white man and keep them sacred and unchallenged, no matter how alien to the African mode of life. The Europeans based their assumption on the conviction that everything that the African did or thought was evil. The missionaries endeavored to rescue the depraved souls of the Africans from the "eternal fire"; they set out to uproot the African, body and soul, from his old customs and beliefs, put him in a class

by himself, with all his tribal traditions shattered and his institutions trampled upon. The African, after having been detached from his family and tribe, was expected to follow the white man's religion without questioning whether it was suited for his condition of life or not.³⁵

Sengwer elders, who imparted the moral and religious education, were often dismissed by the missionaries. The missionaries imposed a religion on the Sengwer that was out of touch with their local environment, perhaps because most of the religious beliefs of the missionaries traced their origin to the desert.

The missionaries' attitudes towards African beliefs still persist today: most churches encourage their members to disregard their indigenous beliefs and practices. This is particularly true in modern evangelical and Pentecostal churches which do not accommodate African religious beliefs and practices. These contemporary churches view African indigenous religious practices, such as veneration of sacred sites and ancestors, as idolatrous or even satanic.

The modern churches have been the force behind the onslaught against Sengwer sacred sites in the forest. For instance, an early missionary attempted to build a church on top of the Kiptaberr Hill which is a sacred hill for the Sengwer people. It is believed that the church did not stand the test of time because the wrath of Assis through Illat came down and destroyed the church. The Catholics later attempted to install a cross on the same Kiptaberr Hill which was also brought down and thrown far away by the power of Assis.³⁶

The repeated attempts of modern churches to destroy the Sengwer's sacred sites and to ensure that the Sengwer people's religious and cultural practices are forgotten clearly show their disregard for indigenous beliefs. Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan environmentalist who won the Nobel peace prize, expresses the effect on indigenous people when she says:

That tree inspired awe, it was protected, and it was the place of God. But in the 60s, after I had gone far away, I went back to where I grew up, and I found God has been relocated to a little stone building called a church. The tree was no longer sacred. It had been cut down. I mourned for that tree.³⁷

Thus, Christianity can be cited as one of the main challenges facing the Sengwer people in their attempt to conserve the natural environmental resources. The wave of Christianity deeply affected the traditional institutions and systems that were in charge of safeguarding the utilization of natural resources.

Modern Christianity's attitude has contributed to a systematic destruction of Embobut forest. Many people who have converted to Christianity don't respect the sacred places nor the traditional systems put in place to protect them. They believe that Sengwer culture has been surpassed with the passage of time. Therefore, the social systems and means of controlling natural environment resources have been destroyed. Chinua Achebe in his book *Things Fall Apart*, fictionalizes the impact of Western religion's cultural imposition on Igbo religion when Obierika says,

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion; we are amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.³⁸

Just like the Igbo, things have fallen apart as a result of Christianity getting more converts who disregard their traditional Sengwer religion. This has led to a far-reaching effect on the influence of the Sengwer beliefs in natural resource conservation as many local people started casting aspersions to their indigenous religion.

2.2 Colonial and Post-Colonial Government Oppression

Most of the participants pointed to the colonial and post-colonial government oppression as their main challenge. The Sengwer people have been disadvantaged since the advent of colonialism in Kenya. The challenges they faced during the colonial government are still being experienced today. In fact, they have now worsened. Government oppression halts their attempts to conserve the environment using religious beliefs and practices like they could in pre-colonial times.

During pre-colonial times, the Sengwer clan elders and the council of elders, who had the divine sanction from Assis and Illat, to enforce the observance of community's regulations, customs, and religious practices.³⁹ The clan elders played a vital role in ensuring that the community's natural resources were used in a sustainable manner to avoid overexploitation.

The colonial government disregarded both the clan elders and the existing traditional rules and regulations of the Sengwer people. They came up with various legislations that alienated the Sengwer people from their ancestral land. The separation hampered the Sengwer people from utilizing their rich religious beliefs and ethics to conserve the natural resources.

The Sengwer people were subjected to a lot of colonial injustices by the British colonial government. These injustices aimed to diminish the Sengwer identity and assimilate the community into extinction:

The Dorobo problem has risen because these people, living in small scattered groups, spread over large areas without any property . . . lived from hand to mouth by hunting and bee keeping . . . there's no reason in modern times for this precarious mode of existence and with the protection afforded by the government of these people.⁴⁰

The then-acting provincial commissioner, Mr. C.H. Adams, went on to state in his memorandum to the Kenya Land commission that, "I agree then the recommendation reported in the prescription that – wherever possible the

Dorobo should become members of and be absorbed into the larger tribe which they have most affinity.”⁴¹

This effect of the colonial government is still being experienced today because various ethnic communities such as the Marakwet and the Pokot claim that the Sengwer are part of their clans.⁴²

The colonial government was concerned with the preservation of the forest, but at the expense of the Sengwer identity. This is evident through the various colonial letters and publications by the colonial administrators who were after the extinction of the Sengwer people as aforementioned. They did not see the Sengwer people as a people with the right to identity, the right to live, nor the right to profess and practice their religion.

The colonial government alienated the Sengwer people from their ancestral land in the forest. To achieve their objective of extinguishing the Sengwer ethnic group, they facilitated other communities (such as the Marakwet, Pokot, and Nandi) to access the Sengwer ancestral land. Various parts of the Cherang’any forest were cleared for farming and settlement by these dominant tribes.⁴³

Furthermore, the British government altered the Sengwer ancestral territory boundaries. They divided the Sengwer people into two administrative units: Trans Nzoia and Elgeyo. Later, these administrative boundaries were further divided into four administrative units—namely, the Trans Nzoia, West Pokot, Uasin Gishu and Elgeyo Marakwet counties. This alteration of the boundaries led to encroachment of other communities into Sengwer ancestral and forest land, leading to the destruction of the forest and natural resources. The new administrative units favored the governmentally recognized communities. This has had a negative impact on the Sengwer cultural and religious life.⁴⁴

To ensure that the main objective of wiping out the Sengwer people was met, the colonial government converted the Sengwer community’s land and homes into government forest. This is evident in the many letters that colonial masters exchanged. For instance, Assistant Conservator of Forests letter (Natives in Kapolet Forest) to the district commissioner Kitale on 7th January

1943 states that "I understand that some of the Cherangani Dorobo are once more in Kapolet Forest Reserve in spite of the police raid there in last February and the severe penalties imposed in them. I would be glad if you could arrange for them to be shifted once and for all from Kapolet into West Suk Reserve before the end of the year."⁴⁵ The post-colonial government continued Sengwer oppression by violently evicting the Sengwer from the Sengwer land as shown in the succeeding sections.

Among the Sengwer, the management and conservation of the environmental resources was tasked by clan elders from each Sengwer sub tribe. The colonial government interfered with the indigenous Sengwer communal ownership of land and the tribal systems responsible for controlling hunting, habitation, and utilization of resources in the forest. Members of each sub tribe were obliged to respect the sub tribe territories by not hunting, gathering, or collecting honey from another sub tribe's territory without permission from the elders.

These systems ensured that the natural resources were conserved for continuity and future generations without causing extinction of the various plant and animal species. These systems were destroyed by the colonial government as they forcefully evicted the Sengwer people from various parts of the Cherang'any Hills forest which is a major water tower in Kenya. This is still being propagated and perfected by the current government as there are still ongoing evictions of the Sengwer people from the forest they call their home.

Furthermore, the colonial government made several attempts to erase the traditional lifestyle of the indigenous Sengwer people. The Sengwer people were known, and are still known, as an aborigine community of hunter and gatherers, but the colonial government introduced potatoes and cattle ranching as an attempt to change their lifestyle. This is found in the letter by the assistant district commissioner in charge of Elgeyo Marakwet to the provincial commissioner. He emphatically says this concerning the colonial government efforts.

It is of course argued that the Cherangani were bushmen who were induced to leave their forests. It is true that all Government officers

in charge of this district have striven to persuade the Cherangani who remained in the forests to leave their Dorobo haunts and habits and become cultivators on the slopes, owners of cattle, payers of taxes, and respectable members of society.⁴⁶

The colonial government position on its intention concerning the alteration of the Sengwer lifestyle is buttressed by Mr. Hoey in his evidence before the land commission where he states that: "it is given on the grounds that the Cherangani when I first came into the country had no stock, but the Administration Officers did their utmost to persuade the Cherangani to adopt an entirely different mode of life and become stockowners, and to cultivate a good deal more than they had done in the past."⁴⁷ The colonial government also converted part of the Sengwer land in Trans Nzoia into a game reserve that is currently known as Saiwa Swamp National Park. This was a home for many wild animals where the Sengwer people went for hunting.⁴⁸ The colonial effect is still being felt today as the government insists on evicting the Sengwer from their ancestral land found with the forest which will affect successively their lifestyle and identity as hunters and gatherers. The aforementioned has occurred through violent evictions and disrespect of basic human rights.⁴⁹

Immediately after independence, the Sengwer people believed that their oppression and lack of identity would finally come to an end. On the contrary, the government that egressed from colonialism worsened the situation. The post-colonial government, led by President Kenyatta, President Moi and President Uhuru, have followed the footprints of colonial government in their continuous oppression, marginalization, discrimination, and denying of the Sengwer people's rights. Rather than returning the land and forest reserves that the colonial government had taken from the Sengwer, the post-colonial government gave that land to other communities and political cronies.⁵⁰ This affected the Sengwer people since it mixed them with different communities who had different cultural and religious practices.

Lack of recognition of the Sengwer people as a distinct ethnic tribe has left their attempts to conserve the environment unsupported and unappreci-

ated.⁵¹ In 2010, the Kenyan constitution recognized the rights of the minority communities in the following sections: articles 19, 21, and 26 in the Bill of Rights; article 63 on community land; and article 67 on the National Land Commission.⁵² However, the government has not respected the constitution nor the above-named articles as they have presided over forceful evictions of the Sengwer people from Embobut forest.

Furthermore, the independent government failed to come up with comprehensive environmental policies that were in line with the local people's religious worldview. This has led to a vicious circle of conflicts between the government and the indigenous Sengwer tribe. Hence, there is need to bolster and resuscitate traditional institutions that were in charge of natural resource management.

The Kenyan government has used the World Bank-financed forest conservation program in western Kenya's Cherangani Hills, popularly referred to as, "Natural Resources Management Project" (NRMP) as a means by which to continue with the violation of the Sengwer constitutional rights through violent evictions. The World Bank has left a trail of misery among the Sengwer as they are responsible for the evictions which they have vehemently denied in dire contradiction with what is happening within the Sengwer ancestral land.⁵³ The Kenyan government has failed to recognize that the Sengwer community is environmentally conscious because their religion does not allow the destruction of natural resources in the forest. They have failed to realize that the Sengwer people coexisted sustainably with their environment since time immemorial and that their religious practices are rich in environmental ethics as revealed by the current study. This study shows how the government and the stakeholders should change to a holistic approach of involving the Sengwer people in the management and conservation of Embobut forest that is under threat.

The alienation of the Sengwer people from the forest threatens their survival and continuation of the generations since the forest is where their ancestral spirits live. The Sengwer people used the forest to appease and honor the ancestral spirits. The forest was also used by the community to teach adolescents during initiation ceremonies about the environmental knowledge of

efficient and effective natural resource utilization. This eviction away from their ancestral land therefore threatens them on a spiritual and environmental level.

2.3 Development Initiatives and Cultural Differences

Development initiatives are also being undertaken on the sacred Sengwer sites without consulting the Sengwer elders. This undermines the contribution of the Sengwer beliefs in resource conservation. For instance, the recent harnessing of water by the Kitale county government without consulting the Sengwer elders undermines their authority in the society.

Rapid social, cultural, and economic changes have disadvantaged and eroded the Sengwer religious beliefs and practices.⁵⁴ This has subsequently affected their contribution towards natural resource conservation. Many communities have moved into the Sengwer ancestral land, leading to cultural dilution that has undermined the traditional Sengwer institutions that presided over conservation and preservation of natural environmental resources. These communities have no respect for the Sengwer elders, making it hard for the elders to impose the traditional Sengwer rules on resource utilization and conservation.

2.4 Population Growth

Ever-increasing population has an overwhelming effect on the natural resources as it puts more pressure on the earth's finite resources. The effect of overpopulation is felt not only in the country but also in Embobut forest. Population growth has led to depletion of natural resources as people clear forest to establish homesteads and farmland.

The influx of other tribes into the Sengwer ancestral land has contributed to the destruction of the forest and the natural resources. Communities such as the Keiyo and the Marakwet, who don't share the beliefs of the Sengwer that are associated with natural resources found in the forest, have no regard to conserving the forest. The Dominant communities neighboring the Sengwer have interfered with sacred sites of the Sengwer people and destroyed sacred trees found there.⁵⁵

Members of the focus group discussion emphatically averred that dominant tribes, mentioned above, have invaded the forest to harness timber, firewood, and charcoal for economic purposes. This has led government agencies to believe that the Sengwer people are the force behind the destruction of the forest. Additionally, those same government agencies, such as Kenya Forest Service personnel, are involved in the timber business. Both groups are destroying the homelands of the Sengwer people and make the Sengwer seem unfriendly to the environment.

Respondents pointed out the need to have the Sengwer community as the only homogenous ethnic community residing within the forest and be allowed to take care of Embobut forest. This is the surest way of protecting the natural resources. The surety comes from the fact that this group of people has a common shared religious system and a common accepted traditional authority.

Overgrazing is also another challenge brought forth by increase in population. Dominant tribes that have settled around the forest rear many animals on limited land, which has led to people invading the forest for grazing which destroys many plant species that are found in the forest.⁵⁶

The above challenges have had an immense impact on the role of the Sengwer religion in conserving the natural resources in Embobut forest. It is an undeniable fact that the modern forces of social change have undermined the effectiveness of the Sengwer religion in natural resource conservation. This has led to the destruction of the forest and the natural resources found therein.

3.0 How the Sengwer Have Coped with These Challenges

Despite the Sengwer people facing the above-named challenges, they have continued to influence natural resources through the beliefs and practices that guide them. Under this section the researcher presents different ways of how the Sengwer community ameliorates and copes with the above-named challenges.

3.1 The Sengwer Cultural Center

The majority of the participant highlighted that the Sengwer people have established the Sengwer Cultural and Information Centre (SCIC) and the traditional “KopSengwer” houses at Kapolet to protect and preserve their culture and religious practices. The SCIC also seeks to appreciate and acknowledge the Sengwer people’s culture through the documenting and showcasing artifacts and work tools of the Sengwer people as a museum would. The SCIC reminds the people about their history, culture, and the environment. They hold annual cultural meetings at the SCIC. It is one very important step in ensuring that the unique environments under which most minority tribes live are preserved, maintained, and, above all, remain true to cultural and traditional characteristics.⁵⁷

3.2 Legal Action

The Sengwer have taken legal action against the government for forcefully evicting them from the sacred forest which is their ancestral land. They have taken their case to both local and international courts, seeking to protect their identity and existence within the forest.⁵⁸ The Sengwer have sought the intervention of global organizations such as the World Bank and European Union to involve them in all decision-making regarding the conservation of Embobut forest. They have also written memoranda airing their objection for not being involved, including the statement: “European Union will be perfecting continued oppression, marginalization, torture and discrimination of Sengwer Indigenous Peoples if it will go ahead and fund the identified projects in Cherang’any Hills of Marakwet district without consultation and participation of Sengwer Indigenous Peoples.”⁵⁹

Despite their legal efforts in the local courts, the government has not honored the court injunctions. For instance, the government has disregarded injunctive conservatory orders issued by Eldoret High Court in March 2013.⁶⁰ The Kenyan government has forcefully evicted the Sengwer people from their

ancestral land by burning their houses and torturing them, not respecting their human rights as pointed out under section 2.2.

3.3 Syncretism

The word “syncretism” comes from the Greek word *synkretismos* which means “to combine.” Schreiter defines syncretism as the “mixing of elements of two religious systems to the point where at least one, if not both, of the systems loses basic structure and identity.”⁶¹ Syncretism therefore refers to the amalgamation of two or more religious beliefs. It also refers to the accommodation of two belief systems towards the beliefs, rituals, and practices of each other. The Sengwer people have coalesced their indigenous belief systems with that of Christianity to ensure that their religion does not die off. Research participants affirmed that, despite many members of the Sengwer community aligning themselves to one of the Christian churches (such as the Catholic Church, the Seventh-day Adventists, and African inland churches), the majority of them still practices their indigenous religion. This is seen through cultural practices such as the singing, language, dancing, and prayers they make to Assis whenever there is a problem. Mbiti emphasized this when he postulates that “on the cultural level, like the naming ceremonies, initiation rites and marriage procedure, traditional elements become partially Islamized or are remodeled.”⁶² Many members of the Sengwer community have adopted Christian beliefs and practices that suit their traditional beliefs and practices. During Christian services they sing, dance, and pray in their local language.

Furthermore, many converts take their children to undergo the traditional rites of passage. During this period, they are taught about the Sengwer religion and culture and the importance of the forest to the survival of the community.⁶³ Christian churches should be encouraged to embrace Sengwer traditions that are in line with biblical teaching so as to foster interreligious cooperation in natural resource conservation.

3.4 The Place of Council of Elders

Findings from the field reveal that the Sengwer elders are still respected and feared by members of the community. Despite the many challenges that the Sengwer elders face, they have continued to play an active role of providing direction for the community and interceding for the community whenever there is a calamity.⁶⁴ They are still consulted whenever a major decision involving the usage and utilization of the natural resources found in the forest. This has strengthened the Sengwer religion. There is need to empower the community elders so that they can continue to effectively ensure that natural resources are protected and utilized in a sustainable manner. Sengwer elders who have lobbied and petitioned the government to respect their rights to the ancestral land as stated in article 63 of the Kenyan constitution.

3.5 Informal Education

The Sengwer people have transferred the indigenous environmental knowledge and their religious practices from one generation to another through informal education that takes places at home in the evening and during the various cultural practices that take place in the community.⁶⁵ Boys are taught by their fathers during hunting and in the evening as they wait for food to be ready. Girls are taught by their mothers in the evening while cooking. During rites of passage for both girls and boys, various ecological knowledge, religious beliefs, and indigenous practices centered on the community's worldview are passed on to the initiates. Boys were also taught how to mend beehives from trees without destroying the trees. This has helped to build the identity of the initiates and make them feel proud of their culture and religion. Traditional herbalists also transfer important herbal knowledge to selected members of the community. They are taught how to harness drugs for different diseases in a sustainable manner that does not harm the environment.

Recommendations

In view of the study findings, the researcher recommends the following:

Since traditional African religion shapes human behavior, actions, beliefs, and attitudes in relation to environment, the same can be used to encourage environmental ethics for the future. Therefore, there is a need to both integrate indigenous religion and involve the locals in decision-making concerning the conservation of natural environmental resources.

The government should come up with policies that recognize and empower the indigenous religion of the local people in conserving and managing natural resources. The policies will provide a framework on how the indigenous religion can be fused with modern ways of conserving natural environmental resources.

Religious leaders, especially from the Christian faith, should recognize the undisputed role that the indigenous religion has played in ensuring a conducive environment free from pollution, degradation, and hazards. They should seek to create partnership instead of condemning and demonizing the indigenous Sengwer religion.

There is need to empower the council of elders so they can carry out their duties effectively as divinely sanctioned caretakers of the natural resources found within their jurisdiction. This can be done through legislation and incentives given to the traditional authority to motivate them in their work.

Conclusion

This study has delineated the Sengwer worldview in relation to natural resource conservation. The findings of the study have enunciated a worldview so interwoven with nature that it promoted the conservation of natural resources during the pre-colonial time. The study has also described a wide range of challenges that face the Sengwer religion in their attempt to conserve natural resources.

The Sengwer religion has devised mechanisms to tackle the challenges and to ensure that they are actively involved in the conservation of the forest and the natural resources found there. Sengwer religious beliefs and practices are precepts of nature stewardship in the modern society. As opined by Oladeji, there is a need to create a decision-making framework that integrates a multiplicity of approaches to effectively manage and conserve the natural environment.⁶⁶

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