Law, Religion and the Environment in Africa

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20 THE SENGWER TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND ENVIRONMENT SUSTAINABILITY IN EMOBOT FOREST, KENYA

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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, which took place in Stockholm in 1972, acknowledged its Stockholm Declaration that environmental conservation is a global concern.² Later, in 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), known as Earth Summit, was held in Rio de Janeiro to discuss the way forward in tackling the global environmental crisis, recommending that all stakeholders should be involved in matters of natural environment conservation.³ The Earth Summit laid down various strategies to be undertaken to tackle the challenge of environmental degradation, such as the need for countries to strengthen appropriate legislation, policies and action programmes in the management of natural resources.⁴ Various studies argue that indigenous people, their culture and their religion should be fostered in order to engage in conservation initiatives.⁵

The Embobut Forest found in Cherangany Hills, which is amongst the five major water catchment areas in Kenya,⁶ is currently under threat, due to the destruction of the forest and the natural resources. There is widespread evidence recommending the need to involve local communities in management and conservation of forests.⁷

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2 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. 1972. Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, A/CONF.48/14 and Corr.1. [hereinafter Stockholm Declaration].

3 The Convention on Biological Diversity was opened for signature at the Rio Earth Summit. See United Nations. 1992. Convention on Biological Diversity of 5 June 1992 (1760 U.N.T.S. 69).

4 UN Environment Programme (UNEP). 2000. *Global Environmental Outlook* Nairobi: UNEP, Division of Environmental Information, Assessment and Early Warning (DEIA&EW). Online at: <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/global-environment-outlook-2000>; United Nations. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, G.A. Res. 61/295, U.N. Doc. A/RES/47/1 (2007).

5 Fernández-Llamazares A, Diaz-Reviriego I, Luz AC et al. 2015. "Rapid ecosystem change challenges the adaptive capacity of Local Environmental Knowledge", *Global Environmental Change* 31:271-284 [<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.02.001>]; Brondizio E and Le Tourneau FM. 2016. "Environmental governance for all", *Science, American Association for the Advancement of Science* 352(6291):1272-1273 [<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaf5122>].

6 A water catchment (commonly referred to as a "watershed") is an area of land where all water flows to a single stream, river, lake or even ocean. In Kenya, there are five water catchment areas, namely, Mount Kenya, Mount Elgon, Mau, Aberdare and Cherangany.

7 Gedzi VS, Dumbe Y and Eshun G. 2016. Environmental Reviews and Case Studies: Religious Resources and Environmental Management in Ghana", *Environmental Practice* 18(3):137-147 [<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1466046616000247>].

However, the Kenyan government has failed in partnering with the local Sengwer community to ensure that the Cherangany water catchment area is conserved.⁸ In fact, the Kenyan government has presided over evictions of the Sengwer, who are the aboriginals of the forest. The scant recognition of the perspective indigenous religions on natural environment conservation has led to skepticism about their value and their role in conservation.⁹ This has led to poor execution and implementation of the charters and policies on environmental conservation, due to disregard of the indigenous communities living in the forests. This chapter heeds the call by the various international organisations to involve all people and organisations in natural environment resource conservation, examining particularly the perspective of indigenous religions. This chapter explores the role of indigenous religion in environmental sustainability through a case study of the Sengwer people of the Cherangany Hills.

The main objective of this research is to find out how Sengwer religious beliefs promote environment sustainability. Data informing this chapter come from a qualitative study that was descriptive and exploratory in nature, focusing on the Sengwer people neighbouring Embobut Forest in Marakwet County, Kenya. The research relied on thirty key informants who had knowledge of Sengwer religious beliefs and practices. Collected through interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation, the bulk of the information for this chapter was obtained from field work between the months of August and December 2016. Collected data was analysed to describe the beliefs and practices of the Sengwer people in environmental conservation and sustainability. The present study shows that the Sengwer religion is intrinsically environmentally friendly and should be incorporated into environmental sustainability plans and actions.

SENGWER METHODS OF CONSERVING AND REGULATING THE UTILISATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

The Sengwer worldview on natural and environmental resources is “ecocentric”, and this perspective ensures stewardship of the environment by members of the community. Unwritten rules and regulations of the community, enshrined in the religious and cultural beliefs and practices of the Sengwer, have shaped the effective utilisation and conservation of the natural resources found within their locality. These beliefs and practices were strong enough to make people obey and observe all of the rules and regulations that govern resource use by the community. In particular, taboos, totems, rites of passage and religious specialists have provided a framework for efficient utilisation of natural resources in Embobut Forest.

⁸ Rutto S. 2018. “State to intensify evictions at Embobut forest”, *The Star*, 19 January.

⁹ Gavin MC, McCarter J et al. 2015. “Defining biocultural approaches to conservation”, *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 30:140-145 [<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2014.12.005>].

Taboos

A taboo is a derivation of the Polynesian term *tapu*, which means “forbidden”.¹⁰ In the Sengwer language, it is *kikire*, which also means “forbidden”. The term refers to a set of prohibitions set up or instituted by religious authorities as a way of providing guidance for the community. The main objective is to protect the sanctity and morality of the community and its well-being by not going against God’s will. Taboos amongst the Sengwer have played a vital role of maintaining harmony between God, the spirits (the invisible world), human beings and creation (the visible world). Taboos provide a moral code of peaceful coexistence for the whole universe. The Sengwer have used these taboos to protect and conserve the flora, fauna and avifauna of the Embobut Forest. Taboos have restricted and prohibited unsustainable use of environmental resources, such as animal species, bird species, plant species, hills and water bodies. These taboos shape the Sengwer people’s environmental ethics. Despite the impact of colonialism and other challenges, particularly the interminable evictions that the Sengwer people have experienced in the past and continue to experience at the hand of the Kenyan government today, they still cling to these cherished fundamental values.¹¹

The Sengwer view the environment as a very important and inseparable part of their lives. The environment is an important aspect of the well-being of individuals, as well as the whole community. The observance of taboos helps in understanding the communitarian nature through the moral relationship between the individual and the environment. Sengwer religious beliefs on taboos play an integral role in determining the positive values and attitudes towards the environment. Their worldview is anthropocentric in nature and sees a healthy environment as providing the community with all its needs and wants, for instance, the honey, medicine and religious adorations that are found within the forest. Preservation and conservation of natural environmental resources are seen as vital for the overall well-being of the community. In this regard, the Sengwer use taboos as an ethical tool to control human behaviour towards environment, which in turn promotes good relations between human beings and the natural environmental resources. The following subsections explain the different categories of taboos in relation to plants, animals, birds and snakes.

Taboos related to plants

The Sengwer community has various taboos that guide the effective use of the flora. They hold that, all trees are an abode of spirits; hence, it is regarded as taboo to cut down trees, because the spirits will be annoyed with the community.¹² The belief that trees are imbued with spirits is a lively part of the Sengwer religious

10 Osei J. 2006. “The Value of African Taboos for Biodiversity and Sustainable Development”, *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, Fall.

11 Interview with Kipketter Kimutai by K Mamati, Kapcherop, 25 August 2016.

12 Interview with Paul Kibet (Sengwer elder) by K Mamati, Kapcherop, 21 August 2016.

life that has ensured the conservation of trees. Elders are the ones who have the sole responsibility for the usage of trees, and they are the ones who authorised the cutting of certain trees for religious or cultural functions, which helps to ensure that the trees were efficiently used and managed. They allow the branches of a tree to be cut, but not the whole tree, and only two branches can be cut from a single tree. The Sengwer people only use dead wood for firewood. This helps to ensure that trees were not cut down carelessly. Any person who went against the elders and destroyed the forest or harvested trees without permission was punished or banished by the council of elders. Illat (the thunder god),¹³ would strike such people to death if they did not head the punishment or the community's expectations.

Taboos related to animals

Animals are very important to the Sengwer, because they form the main source of their livelihood, as they depend on animals for hunting and exchange meat products with neighbouring communities. To ensure that hunting should not cause extinction of animal's resources within the forest, there are taboos that help in conservation of species of animals found within the forest. For instance, it is taboo for the Sengwer to hunt or kill a gestating animal. Members are also prohibited from killing a lactating animal or a young animal. Likewise, they are also prohibited from killing an animal giving birth. The aforementioned practices risk endangering future generations of that particular animal species. If a gestating animal not harmful to humans is injured, they take care of that animal and treat it until it is healed.¹⁴ Failure to do so, in the local belief, can lead to infertility, death and loss of children.

The Sengwer believe that there are animals which are to be feared as a sign of bad luck; therefore, they are not killed. This belief has helped them in conserving wild animals found in Embobut Forest. For instance, a gazelle (*cheptirgich*) represents bad luck; therefore, whenever it crosses the path as they are hunting, they call off the errand, as it is believed that bad things may befall them.¹⁵ The Sengwer do not kill warthogs for food, because it is considered to be a dirty animal. In the event that it is killed by mistake, the society demands that the killer should undergo certain cleansing rituals to avoid the wrath of God. It is also a taboo for a member of the community to kill an animal and refuse to eat it. Severe punishment is given to such individuals.

Taboos are also attached to some animal species that act as totems to the various clans of the Sengwer. Members of that particular clan are not allowed to kill or hunt their totemic animal, lest the ancestral spirits' wrath fell upon the clan. This proscription has regulated human behaviour towards animals, leading to conservation of various animals species with the Cherangany ecosystem.

13 Illat (the thunder god) is the chief agent of the supreme deity being called Assis and is represented by the sun.

14 Interview with Kipsang Kemboi (Sengwer elder) by K Mamati, Embobut, 22 November 2016.

15 Interview with Kipsang Kemboi.

Taboos related to snakes

The Sengwer have taboos in relation to snakes, and this has helped to conserve different species of snakes in the forest. For instance, large snakes found in a cave represent ancestral spirits; therefore, they are to be treated well and without harm them in order to avoid the spirits getting angry. When the Sengwer find snakes in the caves where they perform rituals, they give the snake local brew and honey to avoid harm befalling the clan for not honouring the ancestral spirits. This view is supported by Chitando, when he writes of snakes that the “vindictive spirit should not be harmed as that could lead to more trouble”.¹⁶

The Sengwer believe in reincarnation in snake form and that “people who died a long time ago can come back in form of a snake, therefore large snake species such as python are not killed as they are believed to be representing ancestors”.¹⁷ Whenever a snake enters a homestead, they are not supposed to kill it, but instead serve the snake milk or honey, taking caution to avoid being bitten, so that the snake will leave on its own. If by any chance the snake is killed, they perform a cleansing ceremony or a ritual to ask for forgiveness from the ancestors. Snakes are treated with respect, since they are believed to represent the ancestors, and any snake found in the homestead is not supposed to be killed or chased away, but to be treated with respect. It is believed that the spirits of the living ancestors can take different forms and visit the homestead at different times. Beliefs and taboos against harming snake species have helped in the conservation and preservation of different snake species.

Taboos related to birds

Birds have a significant role amongst the Sengwer; therefore, they are not to be killed. Some birds were thought to act as messengers from God to human beings, for example, the pied crow (*talai*). Other birds, such as crow, are used as a means of direction for hunters; therefore, it is taboo to kill them. Birds such as owls act as a powerful indicator to the Sengwer, because they convey a message of death or misfortune to the community. Therefore, their appearance prompts the elders to perform rituals to avoid death or anything bad befalling the community.¹⁸

Birds that are believed to be a sign of bad omen are not killed, but rather chased away by using wooden stick lit with fire. Despite the belief that the owls represent bad omens, they still are not killed, which leads to their conservation. Apart from owls, some birds are totems for different clans, because of the role they play in the life and existence of the clans. This belief has also helped in conserving different species of birds.

16 Chitando S. 1996. “Attitudes to nature: A Comparative Study of the Karanga and Christian Attitudes to Natural Environment”, unpublished paper (quoted in Taring NT. 2014. “The Sacred Duty of Animals in African Traditional Religion and Culture”). Online at: <https://bit.ly/2VMJyan>

17 Interview with Jonah Kangor (Sengwer elder) by K Mamati, Embobut, 21 November 2016.

18 Interview with Jonah Kangor.

Totems

Totemism is defined as a system of belief in which humans are said to have a kinship or mystical relationship with a spirit-being, such as animal or plant.¹⁹ An object of totem is usually thought to interact with a given kin group or an individual who stands to serve as an emblem or a symbol to such group. It also involves the practice of having a natural object or animate being as the emblem of a family, clan or group. The totem is considered to play a significant role to those who accord much protective power of veneration and worship.

The renowned sociologist Emile Durkheim illuminates the unveiling understanding of totemism, as practised by Australian Aboriginal societies.²⁰ In his argument, totemism represents religion in its most “elementary” or simple form. A totem was originally an animal or plant taken as having particular symbolic significance for a certain group of people. It is therefore a sacred object, regarded with veneration and surrounded by various ritual activities. Eating the totemic animal or plant, except on special ceremonial occasions, is usually forbidden and, as a sacred object, the totem is believed to have divine properties which separate it completely from other animals that might be hunted and consumed.

Totems have served as a commemorative object of ancestry that has promoted natural environmental conservation over time. Different clans amongst the Sengwer community identify themselves with different totems. Totems represent a mystical or ritual bond of unity within the group and are key symbols of religion and social cohesion within the community; they are also used as an important tool for cultural and religious transmission. Each clan identifies with a particular totemic animal because of the history behind the clan’s existence. For example, the Talai clan’s totem is an eagle or *talai* or *chepkrak*. The following myth explains how the relation came about:

A myth is told of how an eagle rescued the clan, during the community celebrations in the ancient time, an eagle came and warned the community about an impending danger that was to befall the community. The eagle acted as a messenger from God or Assis, but most people who were there didn’t not heed or listen to the eagle. The eagle approached one woman and told her the same message, the woman heeded to the eagles warning and fled immediately together with his family. After she left, the place where celebration was taking place was engulfed with a large rock that fell from the sky and killed all those who did not heed to the bird’s message.²¹

Therefore, the clan believes that the eagle saved them from extinction; hence, they revere this bird, and regard it as their clan’s totem. They are not allowed to kill or harm this bird.

19 Haekel J. 2013. “Totemism (Religion)”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

20 Durkheim E. 1965. *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.

21 Interview with Kipkuri Ngetich (Sengwer elder) by K Mamati, Embobut, 23 November 2016.

The Sengwer also have a myth about a buffalo; the following is the myth:

The myth explains that there was severe hunger, in which the head of the family went out in the hunt but never returned. After realising the head of the household could not return on time, it dawned on the wife that her child would die of hunger. To salvage the situation, she went out together with her child to look for food. At one point, they found a grass thatched house called *kirakia* with several openings, where they saw a calf of buffalo. In the evening the buffalo came to feed the calf, the woman approached the buffalo, milked it and gave the milk to her child. Later, the wife returned home and found her husband. She narrated the story to her husband, and the husband thanked the gods claiming that had it not been for the *buffalo* they would have died. Later the lineage and clan was referred to as *kimoi*, meaning buffalo, because the buffalo saved them from extinction due to hunger. The buffalo became their totem; hence they don't kill this animal.²²

From the examples above, it seems that the different clans highly revered their totems. This was borne out of their deep and close intimate relationship, as a result of the role the totems played in the life and existence of the clan. The totem animals were treated with high reverence and courtesy, which helped in conserving certain species of animal by the community. It is a violation of the cultural and religious well-being of the community to hunt, kill or hurt a totem animal or bird. This concept of totems helps in the conservation of animal and bird species amongst the Sengwer. It also acts as a means of ensuring hunting was done in sustainable manner.

Amongst the Sengwer community, it is illegal to kill or harm a totem. It is likewise illegal for a relative such as wife, who may have hailed from a different tribe or clan and therefore had a different totem, to hurt the totem of a husband or son. This is mainly because totems are viewed as part of the kindred, and it is believed that these totems shared blood with the ancestors. To hurt a totem, however, is tantamount to hurting the community's ancestors. Severe punishments, such as banishment, fines, hard labour or death, are applied to anyone who disrespected their totem.²³ The Sengwer community has over twelve clans, each with its own totem, and this helped in the protection of different species and in preventing the animal species from facing extinction. Therefore, totems form the basis of the strong bond between the clans and their totemic animal in the community, which in turn helps in conserving different animal species that are part of the environment.

22 Interview with Abraham Kimosop (Sengwer elder) by K Mamati, Embobut, 23 November 2016.

23 Interview with Nicodemus Ngesewo (Sengwer/Cherangany Elder) by K Mamati, Kapcherop, 23 August 2016.

The fact that individual's members of a clan are prohibited from eating the totem animal reduced pressure towards hunting species of those totemic animals. To ensure that prohibitions were strictly followed and observed, there were tough consequences, which acted as a safeguarding measure to protect the totemic animals against being harmed or killed. Amongst the consequences included Illat (the thunder god) killing the person involved in destruction of the natural resources, in this case the totemic animals. In other instances, the person was banished, fined or cursed by the clan elders. The following is a list of Sengwer clans and their totems.

Table 20.1: Sengwer clans and their totems

CLAN	SENGWER TRADITIONAL TOTEMIC NAME	ENGLISH NAME
Kabon	Kipchotwo	Frog
Kakisango	Soo	Buffalo calf
Kaptakininy	Talai (<i>black and white</i>)	Pied crow
Kamarich	Talai	Eagle
Kaptogum	Saniak	Red ants
Kapkeny	Kobilo	Dog
Kapkendo	Kimoi	Buffalo (large)
Kaptoiyoi (Kapcheper)	Illat	Lighting
Kapkai	Talai	Raven
Kapchangwony	Sokoma (Chepsirere)	Eagles
Kapsunguru	Kimoi	Buffalo (large)
Kaptoo	talai	Crow
Kaptitoket	Talai	Pied crow
Kapchesoo	Kimoi	Buffalo (large)
Kamunai	Soo	Buffalo (large)
Kapseto (Kapsomei)	Segesege (Sabit)	Porcupine

From the above table, it is apparent that some clans share totemic animals, but they differentiate the animals through the description; for instance, the Kapsungur clan's totem is a small buffalo while the Kamunai clan's totem is the large buffalo. The similarity in clan totems shows either that the clans share a common belief in, and history with, that totem or that the totem animal plays a different role for each clan.

The Kabon clan whose totem is a frog,²⁴ highly revere and respect frogs, because it is believed that the frog helped the early ancestors of the clan to a stream of water during a dry season. As a result of the frog saving their lives, it became their totem. Henceforth, it was a taboo for members of that particular clan to kill or harm a frog. There are also prohibitions against interfering with certain water bodies,

²⁴ Personal communication by K Yator (Sengwer elder and community spokesperson) to K Mamati, by email, 26 November 2016.

because frogs are found there. This helps in the preservation of water bodies against pollution. This belief promotes conservation of natural environmental resources.

In all, totems play a vital role amongst the Sengwer people. First, they help in protecting the environment, because totemic animals are not killed by their clans. They also control social behaviour and interpersonal relations in the community. For instance, they help in curbing incest, which is deviant behaviour that makes God angry. It is believed that breaking of taboos with regard to totems can lead to catastrophic events, such as drought and outbreak of mysterious diseases. Totems also give people a sense of identity and a feeling of belonging to a particular community. This encourages collective responsibility in taking care of the environment.²⁵ Despite totems having a religious meaning, they also have inherently environmental values, which stem from man's respect to the totemic objects. Most of these animals, such as lions and buffaloes, can no longer be found due to the various challenges that have affected the community in their attempt to conserve the natural resources, such as invasion of the forest by other communities, climate change and population growth.

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS IN NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESOURCE CONSERVATION

The Sengwer traditional religion recognises and acknowledges a special group of people known as religious specialists. Religious specialists include the council of elders, the rainmakers and the herbalists. They are respected men and women members of the community, who provide solutions to the community's daily problems. Religious specialists are referred to using different titles, such as "sacred personages", "special men" and "sacred men", who possess what theologian John S. Mbiti calls "office personality".²⁶ Religious specialists amongst Sengwer derive their mandate from Assis (the Supreme Being). They have a religious duty to mediate between the physical world and the spiritual world. They also relay important information to the community from God. These categories of people, including rainmakers, herbalists and the council of elders amongst the Sengwer, played a significant role in ensuring that the natural resources were conserved and utilised in a sustainable manner.

Rainmakers

To the Sengwer, water bodies, such as rivers, are considered sacred, because it is believed that the supernatural being named Illat and rain spirits reside there. It is to the rivers, the Kaptoyoy clan, a clan believed to have powers in charge of

²⁵ Interview with Paul Kibet.

²⁶ Mbiti JS. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann. "Office personality" is a term that Mbiti uses to categorise a special group of people in the society who are divinely appointed and occupy an office personality of their own with knowledge and skills in religious matters.

rainmaking, went to perform rituals to appease the spirits in charge of rain. The community elders of Kaptoyoy clan perform rain rituals through prayers and sacrifices to the rain god in order to bring rain. The rainmakers receive their powers from Assis, therefore they pray and appease the spirits on behalf of the community to release rain.

The protection of rivers was important amongst the Sengwer community. They depended on these rivers for drinking water and in performing rituals to bring rain, which would later on lead to flowering of plants, hence leading to plenty of honey. There are taboos that are still observed amongst the Sengwer in regard to rivers. For instance, people are not supposed to defecate in rivers, as this would cause the wrath of Illat, the rain spirit, to come down upon that person or the community. It is also a taboo to bathe in small streams of water. People are not supposed to interfere with natural resources, such as trees or stones found in rivers, because it was believed that the family of Illat resides there.²⁷ These beliefs in river deities are still strong amongst the Sengwer people. They revere all of the rivers found within their locality; thus, they treat rivers and water bodies with a high degree of reverence. These rivers are treated as sacred sites.

Herbalists

Herbalists are medicine men or women who act as native doctors in African society. They are experts in providing medicine for the Sengwer community. The forest found in the highland and shrubs in the lowlands are the main sources of medicine for the community. Not everybody is an herbalist. The role is for a few select people. The profession is handed down to the young members of the community through apprenticeship. Some learn the profession from their elders through exposure to different kinds of plant species that cure different ailments.²⁸ The training of herbalists is largely informal.

Herbalists play a major role in the conservation and protection of natural environmental resources. This is done through the way they harvest the medicine from trees. They only harvest a small portion of medicine from a single tree, for instance, only a few roots, barks and leaves. Only herbalists harvest herbs for efficacy. Harvesting of medicine is done secretly and components of a particular drug are not divulged to any other person. This helps in conservation of the plants in the forest, since harvesting of herbs is limited to herbalists.²⁹

27 Personal communication by K Yator to K Mamati by telephone, 27 November 2016.

28 Interview with Jerop Chepngetich (Sengwer herbalist) by K Mamati, Embobut, 21 November 2016.

29 Interview with Jacob Terekoi (Sengwer elder) by K Mamati, Kachibora, 28 August 2016.

Council of elders (Orkoi)

Patrilineage led by elders was the traditional form of social organisation amongst the Sengwer. Elders still have a very important role to play amongst the Sengwer people, and their influence today cannot be neither ignored nor underestimated, as they are consulted whenever something arises that involves the community. Despite the influence and advent of modern forms of social organisation, the place and role of the Orkoi has withstood the test of time. They derive their power and authority from God. As with the other religious specialists, the council of elders acts as intermediaries between the visible and the invisible worlds.

The foregoing can be explained through a recent case in 2015, in which the Trans Nzoia county government interfered with one of the sacred places of the Sengwer people. The Trans Nzoia county government wanted to get water from one of the sacred rivers amongst the Sengwer. They went ahead without consulting the Sengwer elders. As the project continued, mysterious things kept happening to its workers. It was claimed that property and personal items belonging to those working there were getting lost daily. Some left the place barefoot, because their shoes were missing. These incidents kept happening until the county government sought help from the Sengwer council of elders. The Sengwer council of elders informed them that “the spirits are not happy because you did not seek permission for the project”.³⁰ Later, the elders performed rituals in order to appease the spirits and ask for permission for the project to proceed in order to assist other people. After the elders had performed rituals, the project commenced and went on well and without any challenge till completion.

From the foregoing example, it can be seen that elders play a vital role in controlling how the natural environmental resources found in the community are to be utilised. The elders have the responsibility of showing which trees are to be harvested for a particular religious or cultural function. They are the ones who deliberate on the directions of the affairs of the community. Each clan amongst the Sengwer people has its own elders, who form the larger Sengwer council of elders who deliberate on the affairs of the Sengwer community.³¹

The elders formulate clan policies to guide the community, and it is sacrilegious for anyone to disobey the elders and the rules put in place. This is done for the benefit of the whole community. The elders are in charge of ensuring that anybody who breaks the rules and mismanages the natural environment resources is punished according to the guidelines of the community. In the event that a person disobeys and goes against the community rules and regulations, elders are called upon to pass judgment for the destruction of natural environmental resources. Judgment is done under a large tree named *bein*. The elders preside over the cursing of those who break the communal laws by having them rotate a tree (*kokorwor*) that is used for cursing, and the elders curse that particular person as he or she rotates

³⁰ Interview with Jacob Terekoi.

³¹ Interview with John Korir by K Mamati, Kapcherop, 26 August 2016.

the tree. This cursing ceremony is referred to as *kawatia*. Members of the Sengwer community are always conscious of their environment. Those who destroy the natural environment are easily known and severely punished. If they would not reform, they are banished or ostracised, while others are left to be struck by Illat, whose wrath is death by lightning.

In all, the use of taboos and totems, along with the actions of the council of elders and religious specialists, acts as a prohibitive measure, ensuring that the natural environment is well conserved. Non-adherence to these measures attracts the wrath of the Supreme Being through his agent Illat, the thunder god. There is instantaneous punishment and reward of evil by the Supreme Being through Illat in rewarding evildoers who destroy natural environmental resources and disobeyed the community elders. The austere punishment acts as a deterrent and caveat to those who would be destroyers of the natural environmental resources. Despite the challenges that have negatively affected the Sengwer, traditional institutions of natural resource management are still relevant today.

Rites of passage

Rites of passage are rituals which mark the passing of one stage of life and entry into another, such as birth, puberty, marriage, initiation to priesthood or death.³² Human beings undergo a developmental process that involves various stages. Amongst the Sengwer people, both men and women pass through all these stages, starting from birth, through puberty, marriage, death and then reincarnation.

In particular, every member of the Sengwer community actively undergoes initiation rites at puberty. During these puberty rites, members are imbued with environmental conservation knowledge. Initiation takes place in the forest at a designated place, and the initiates stay in the forest until they are reincorporated in the society. The designated places in the forest where these ceremonies take place are sacred, and nobody is allowed to interfere with flora found there.³³ The beliefs and taboos associated with these sites help in ensuring that members of the community do not interfere with the sacred places. This helps to ensure that the natural resources within the sacred places for initiation are conserved.

During the seclusion period, initiates are taught about sustainable utilisation of environmental resources, their clan totems and how they are supposed to relate to them. They are also taught about their age sets and the community's expectations.³⁴ They are taught about different natural resources, such as the flora and fauna found in the forest. The initiates are bestowed with social and economic responsibilities.

32 Barnard A and Spencer J (eds). 2006. *Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Routledge.

33 Omare GS, Kilonzo S and Gumo S. 2009. "Role of taboos in the conservation of Kakamega forest for peace building in Africa", *Peace and Conflict Journal* 2(1):9.

34 An age set is an organised group consisting of persons (often male persons only) who are of the same age, formed of all those males who are initiated at one time.

During initiation, young boys are taught hunting practices that do not threaten natural environmental resources in the forest and young girls are taught about gathering fruits in a sustainable manner.³⁵ Puberty rites involving initiation play a crucial role in ensuring that the environmental knowledge, religious beliefs and cultural practices are passed from one generation to another. Through initiation rites, sacred places found in the forest are conserved, ensuring that the forest and its resources are protected from destruction.

ORAL LITERATURE AS A MEANS OF CREATING ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

Oral literature is regarded as the oldest form of art created and used by mankind. It is a verbal art that different communities in Africa have used for centuries, because it expresses “the very heart of a people’s way of life: it is the very soul of their culture”.³⁶ Furthermore it “expresses a given society’s world view and gives them a springboard from which their day-to-day existence is propelled”.³⁷ The Ugandan novelist, poet and social anthropologist Okot p’Bitek also affirmed that oral literature embodies the political, social and moral philosophies of the people, their outlook on life and death.³⁸

Different literary forms of oral literature have acted as reservoirs of the Sengwer religion, culture, values, concepts and identity as a people. Through oral literature, the Sengwer community accumulates traditional environmental knowledge, which Peter Schmidt defines as “a body of knowledge built by a group of people through generations living in close contact with nature”, including, “a system of classification, a set of empirical observations about the local environment, and a system of self-management that governs resource use was passed from generation to generation”.³⁹ Oral literature provides directions and defines how the environmental resources were to be utilised in a sustainable manner.

The Sengwer religion has no written scripture, which is a common feature of African religion. Their religion is passed from generation to generation through word of mouth. Therefore, oral literature has played a significant role amongst the Sengwer, since it has been used to preserve the Sengwer religion. This is done through songs, riddles, myths, legends, carvings, language, adages and symbols. Oral literature

35 Interview with Geoffrey Kipsaina (Sengwer youth) by K Mamati, Kachibora, 24 November 2016.

36 Bukenya A, Kabira WM and Okoth-Okombo D (eds). 1994. *Understanding Oral Literature*. Nairobi: Nairobi University Press.

37 Bukenya, Kabira and Okoth-Okombo, *Understanding Oral Literature*.

38 P’Bitek O. 1973. *Africa’s Cultural Revolution*. Nairobi: Macmillan Books for Africa (quoted in Bukenya, Kabira and Okoth-Okombo, *Understanding Oral Literature*).

39 Schmidt PR. 1994. “Historical ecology and landscape transformation in Eastern Equatorial Africa”, in Crumley CL (ed). *Historical ecology*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 393-421.

that is related to natural environment, such as trees, animals and birds, reminds the community of the Supreme Being and their religion. This ensures that they are always conscious of their actions towards the environment.

Songs

Songs were used by traditional societies as a medium of uniting and bringing together members of a particular community. Jane Nandwa and Austin Bukenya, in *African Oral Literature for Schools*, postulate that song and dance pervade the entire spectrum of African traditional life and that, in most societies, there are songs for every stage and occasion of a person's life, from the cradle to the grave.⁴⁰ They further observe that songs encompass the entire gamut of African traditional life, which in itself speaks volumes. It is an indication that there are ideas and values, which are generated and conveyed by songs that permeate the social practices of African traditional life. These songs carry important messages and knowledge about various facets of human life, including environmental conservation. Songs encourage members of a particular group to be active participants in conserving the environment.

This is not different amongst the Sengwer, as they have used the songs to convey important information and knowledge about the Sengwer religion, culture and their surrounding environment. These songs are sung at different times of the year, during different occasions, such as marriage and initiation ceremonies and when children play. They hold annual cultural meetings at Sengwer Cultural and Information Centre (SCIC) where they sing, dance and remind themselves of their history, religion and culture.

Songs that were sung and had important knowledge about the environment include the following:⁴¹

DISTRIBUTOR	
<i>Kichaitapei</i>	Distributor
<i>Kichaitapei tulwop Cherangany</i>	Distributes water from Cherangany Hill
Chorus:	
<i>Kicheitapei kinyem koroni</i>	Distribute water to all sources
<i>Kicheitakungir murung</i>	Distributes water to large rivers
<i>Kicheitakungir kaplum</i>	It distributes water to all places
<i>Kichaitakuit Turkana</i>	Distributes water that reaches Turkana
<i>Kicheita siekol pande</i>	It distributes water for irrigation

40 Nandwa J and Bukenya A. 1983. *African Oral Literature for Schools*. Nairobi: Longman.

41 Personal communication with Geoffrey Chelimo (Sengwer youth) to K Mamati, Kapcherop, 26 August 2016.

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This song is sung by the Sengwer and passes the message that Cherangany Hills needs to be protected, since it provides water to different parts of the country, such as the Turkana region. The song shows how the Sengwer care for Cherangany Hills as an important source of water. Therefore, the song instils in people the awareness to conserve the forest.

Another song sung by the Sengwer that carries important knowledge about their environment and natural resources is:⁴²

WHY BURN THE FORESTS	
<i>Chepelei</i>	Why burn the forests
<i>Hooye chepeleiyo, kipelchine suswepmoi chepeleiyo</i>	Why burn the forest that has grass land for wild animals
Chorus:	
<i>Hoo chepelieyo</i>	Why burn forest
<i>Kipelchine mbo sawee chepeleyo</i>	Why burn forest that Buffaloes inhabit
<i>Kipelchine keener chepeleyo</i>	Why burn forest where wild animals live
<i>Muty bwana chek ipel korop Sengwer</i>	Sorry, white man, why mistreat land of the Sengwer
<i>Ipel mbo kipturuny ak kipire</i>	Why mistreat the wild pigs and wild goats

This song was sung by the Sengwer to warn against a colonialist, called Mr Chek, who wanted the Sengwer out of their ancestral land. The song also discourages burning and destroying of the forest.

This song mentions some of the animals that were hunted by the Sengwer, thereby showing that the Sengwer were a hunter and gatherer community who were very much concerned with the forest, because it harboured their food. The song also shows how the Sengwer people benefitted from the forest, as they were against being moved far from the forest, because the forest enabled them to get honey, wild fruits and medical herbs.

42 Personal communication to Kibet Kiplagat (Sengwer elder) by K Mamati, Kapcherop, 25 August 2016.

PRAISES OF MANHOOD SONG ⁴³	
Chorus	Soloist
<i>Aye merewo oe</i> (2x) A male Turaco eeh (2x)	<i>Merewo tiombotim</i> Turaco beast of the forest
<i>Aye merewo oe</i>	<i>Merewo mito ket</i> Turaco in the tree
<i>Aye merewo oe</i>	<i>Mito mosop cherumbe</i> which is the highland waterfalls
<i>Aye merewo oe</i>	<i>Merewoni mi mosop</i> Turaco in the highlands
<i>Aye merewo oe</i>	<i>Kayekei katanyon</i> Dawn is coming to our home
<i>Aye merewo oe</i>	<i>Kirogu Talai kipkonei</i> Talai came from the highlands
<i>Aye merewo oe</i>	<i>Wechu kitor Kipteber</i> Our sons first settled at Kipteber
<i>Aye merewo oe</i>	<i>Kitor Moyokwo</i> They settled at Moyokwo
<i>Aye merewo oe</i>	<i>Kitor Lemeiyowo</i> They settled at Lemeiyowo
<i>Aye merewo oe</i>	<i>Kitorei leker</i> They settled at the fireplace
<i>Aye merewo oe</i>	<i>Kitor Charwa no</i> They settled where goats are shared
<i>Aye merewo oe</i>	<i>Charwamosowon</i> All the shepherds shared

This song is sung during various community festivals, such as marriage and after initiation. In the song, various natural resources such as rivers, hills, trees, birds and animals are mentioned. The song reminds the Sengwer of their history and their surrounding environment. It reminds the Sengwer of how the eagle saved them from facing extinction, as narrated in the myth about the eagle as a totem bird. This story prompted the Sengwer to be conscious of their action towards the natural environment resources.

These songs show how the Sengwer person relates with nature and how nature inspired their creativeness, hence enabling people to be aware of their environment. These songs are also sung in appreciation of nature. The Sengwer cultural dancers are currently the custodians of the Sengwer songs that promote environment conservation; they have maintained their traditional regalia, tunes and dancing style. They have also composed more songs in order to create environment awareness amongst the members of the Sengwer people and their neighbouring

43 Kassagam JK. 1999. *Study of names and cultural beliefs about birds amongst the Marakwet peoples of Kenya*. Nairobi: Binary Computer Services.

communities. These songs are currently used to show how the forest was significant to the Sengwer people, hence the need to conserve the forest.

Storytelling

Storytelling is one of the earliest and most popular African traditions. Indigenous storytelling is shaped by diverse cultural contexts that encompass different worldviews and epistemology.⁴⁴ According to Kibet Kiptoo, “the Sengwer people have stories which have been handed down from one generation to another; these stories are about the history and legends of the community and their attachment to the forest.”⁴⁵ Storytelling is used as means of entertainment and as a didactic instrument for the Sengwer community. Narration of folktales, myths and legends by the elders in the society transmits important environment values and norms to the younger ones. This creates awareness of the relationship between human beings and the environment and how their actions on nature can have either positive or negative impact. Storytelling broadens the Sengwer understanding of their surroundings and encourages good behaviour, which in turn cultivates positive values towards the environment.

Traditional African religion had a variety of ways through which the conservatory knowledge of environment was passed from generation to generation. They never had the power of the pen, but they did have the power of the mouth, which safeguarded this important environmental and ecological knowledge for the purpose of posterity. Oral literature was therefore an important component in traditional African societies. The Sengwer people are not excepted, as they have also employed various literary forms of oral literature to disseminate and pass ecological knowledge from generation to generation.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an in-depth discussion of the Sengwer religious beliefs on natural environmental resources. The various environmental resources found in Embobut Forest, their religious and cultural significance and the taboos attached to these natural environment resources by the community have all been presented. It can be concluded that the Sengwer people view the world through a religious lens; therefore, the universe is largely seen as religious in character. In that light, the Sengwer religion has played a significant role in influencing and ensuring effective and sustainable use of the environment and the natural resources in it. This was made possible through the use of taboos and totems that were attached to plants and animals in the forest.

44 Brown L. 2013. “Storytelling and ecological management: understanding kinship and complexity”, *Journal of Sustainable Education* 4.

45 Interview with Kibet Kiptoo (Sengwer elder and local leader) by K Mamati, Kapcherop, 27 August 2016.

Findings from the field reveal that oral traditions found amongst the Sengwer people, such as songs and storytelling, are significant in ensuring that the environment was protected. Oral literature appreciates the aesthetic beauty of the environment. It is used to create environment awareness amongst the members of the community and to transmit environmental knowledge to young people at various stages and through rituals associated with the rite of passage through puberty. Positive attitudes towards the environment are inculcated into members of the community at a tender age through use of oral literature.

Undoubtedly, the Sengwer worldview has ecological implications that need to be tapped. The Sengwer are clearly environmentally conscious and are fully aware of their divine duty to protect the environment. It can be deduced that the Sengwer religious worldview influences natural environment conservation and can still be used to ensure the protection and conservation of the natural resources found in Embobut Forest and Cherangany Hills. Therefore, the Sengwer religious worldview is a precept of nature stewardship in the modern society.

Most respondents to interviews conducted for the present study argued that there is a pressing need to integrate indigenous conservation knowledge into school curriculum. Necessary steps and initiatives should be taken by policymakers to include indigenous environmental conservation knowledge that stems from people's religious beliefs and practices into the school curriculum, including early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary education, to form positive attitudes amongst learners towards conserving the environment from an early age, throughout the student's education and adult life. This is in agreement with UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), which "aims to integrate values, activities and principles that are inherently linked to sustainable development into all forms of education and learning and help usher in a change in attitudes, behaviours and values to ensure a more sustainable future in social, environmental and economic term".⁴⁶

Respondents also felt that parents, through sensitisation campaigns, should also be encouraged to take pride in their religion and culture and pass the important ecological and environmental conservation knowledge to young people. In order for this knowledge to be appealing to young people, there is need to repackage oral tradition in form of drama, movies, motion pictures, songs and radio and television presentation. This will also help to preserve these important traditional knowledge and religious beliefs and practices on natural resource conservation for posterity. This view is supported by Judy Iseke⁴⁷ and Sylvia Moore,⁴⁸ who opine that collecting community stories through digital means ensures that communities

46 UNESCO. 2007. "The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD 2005-2014): the first two years", U.N. Doc. ED/UNP/DESD/2007/RP.

47 Judy Iseke is a Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Education and Associate Professor at Lakehead University. She is also a filmmaker and an artist.

48 Sylvia Moore is an educator on Aboriginal/Indigenous education. She uses an Indigenous methodological approach to research on storytelling and personal narratives.

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honour their oral traditions and resist the dominance of texts that are prevalent in the dominant society.⁴⁹ Ultimately, this study recommends that traditional Sengwer institutions should be incorporated as part of a broad-based approach of ensuring that the Embobut Forest and Cherangany Hills water catchment is well protected and preserved for posterity.

⁴⁹ Iseke J and Moore S. 2011. "Community-based indigenous digital storytelling with elders and youth", *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35(4):19-38 [<https://doi.org/10.17953/aicr.35.4.4588445552858866>].