

**IMPACT OF ECO-CULTURAL BELIEFS AND PRACTISES IN THE
CONSERVATION OF KIVAA SACRED FOREST, MACHAKOS COUNTY,
KENYA**

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DECLARATION

DECLARATION BY CANDIDATE:

This thesis is my original work and has not been presented for award of degree or any other award in any other university.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the spirited efforts to conserve forest resources, it is noted worldwide that these finite resources are continually coming under sharp threats. Forest Resource Assessment reports that nearly 1%, approximate 9 million hectares of the world's total forest is lost annually. This loss is mainly due to deforestation and the transformation of the forest to uses such as commercial agriculture or human settlement. In Kenya, the result of this has been extreme drought and famine leaving millions, most being children, hungry and dependent on food aid for survival. This growing trend in the reduction of forest cover begs for the rethinking of current conservation strategies and the need to come up with sustainable means to protect our collective future. The use of eco-cultural beliefs and practices may present a more sustainable option. Use of eco-cultural beliefs for conservation has been applied on the Kivaa forest since 2008 and is arguably bearing great success. It is against this background that this study was founded. The study aimed to one, explore the eco-cultural beliefs and practices used to conserve Kivaa forest, two, to identify the structure of the committee conserving the forest, three, assess the benefits and challenges associated with this strategy and four suggest on how this strategy can be incorporated into the environmental management at the country level. A qualitative research design was adopted for the study. A sample size of 100 households and ten key informants was used. Data was gathered using household questionnaires, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), document analysis, oral history accounts and key Informants interviews who included, two Kamba custom leaders, Institute for Culture and Ecology staff, two pastors from the local churches (Full Gospel church and African Independent Church, AIC), Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Machakos county staff, Kenya Forest Service (KFS) and Kivaa Location chief and sub-chief. Data analysis of the household questionnaires, interview scripts and field notes were through establishing themes, categories or patterns and conclusions drawn in line with the study objectives. Findings indicated that the use of eco-cultural beliefs and practices has been successful in restoring Kivaa indigenous forest led by a custodian group known as the Kamba Custom Conservation Group (KCCG) who lead ritual performance, setting of the traditional laws and punishing those who degrade the forest. Findings also identified various eco-cultural beliefs and practices that are used for forest conservation, including customary rules and regulations, customs and rituals, taboos and totems, use of shrines and sacred sites. The study concludes that the use of eco-cultural beliefs and practices in forest conservation is a strategy that has great potential and effectiveness in restoring our highly degraded forests. Despite notable challenges, the use of indigenous knowledge (which is the basis of eco-cultural beliefs and practices) presents a strategy that is cost-effective, social-culturally acceptable and having high chances of success. There is need for conservationists, government and other stakeholders to recognize and support the use of eco-cultural beliefs and practices as a strategy towards forest conservation by, among other ways, involve community members in decision-making on the management of natural resources, and to seek ways of standardizing indigenous institutions in natural resource protection. These stakeholders should recognize traditional norms and values as independent institutional frameworks and promote their efficacy and effectiveness particularly in the devolved structures in Kenya and beyond.