

An interlace of African Traditional Religion practices among the Abatirichi people of Western Kenya in mitigating climate change

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ABSTRACT

Existing empirical studies indicate a considerable level of epistemological uncertainty concerning the rate and extent of climate change in the African region. In this regard, little research has demonstrated that traditional religious beliefs and practices can have an impact on environmental attitudes, especially; the relationship between African traditional religious persuasion and climate change attitudes given climate change is an emerging phenomenon. This is because African traditional religious belief systems and cultural practices directly shape public opinion, affects climate change policy in certain areas of traditional jurisdiction. The study therefore examined the role of Traditional African Religion practices among the Tiriki people of Vihiga County, Kenya in climate change mitigation. The methodology of this study was located within the framework for conducting empirical studies in Religious studies. The qualitative methods of collecting data was utilized, and since the scope of the study falls within the field of religion and environment, a brief history of climate change religion's entrance into attempt to address mounting climate change problems was provided. A Descriptive survey design was adopted where 10 key informants who are the custodians of the Tiriki culture were randomly selected from each of the seven wards (political units) of Hamisi constituency, the study area. Primary data was collected through oral interviews and focused group discussions. The study results revealed that since Abatirichi traditional religious and cultural practices are pegged on traditional forests as a place for their traditional shrines, home for their ancestors- 'misambwa' and sacred trees, they are consciously aware of the harsh consequences of climate change like droughts, thus, unconsciously protect their traditional forests for fear of punishment from God or their ancestors- 'misambwa'. The study concluded that, conservation of forests and bushes by Abatirichi is key to the preservation of their culture because the forests harbour their spirits- 'misambwa' and their strong protective herbs and sacred trees that are part and parcel of their daily life. That is, the Abatirichis' love for their traditional culture makes them preserve traditional and sacred trees and bushes which make them conserve forests, thus unconsciously playing a role in mitigating climate change

KEY WORDS;African traditional religion, Abatirichi, climate change

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I. INTRODUCTION

Perceptions of climate change and its threats to rural communities are among the major challenge faced by scientists. A few studies prove that these communities are aware of change in climatic conditions and their impacts on people's livelihood. However, it is reported that rural communities' perceptions of climate change are centered on variations in temperature and rainfall patterns manifested as rising temperature trends and scarce rainfall. Rural communities are aware that devastating changes in their living conditions such as malnutrition, poverty, water and air contamination, increased risks of disease, foods, soil erosion and depletion of biodiversity are as a result of climate and environmental variability. Observed change in rainfall and temperature patterns are supported by annotations of drastic increase in temperatures with negative impacts on the livelihood patterns of rural communities. This type of understanding of climate change is crucial in planning the adaptation and mitigation measures to address the effects of increased temperature and scarce rainfall for sustainable livelihood (Nhemachena, et al., (2014).

Observed effects of climate change on rural communities are: drought, depletion of water resources and biodiversity, soil erosion, decreased substance economies and cessation of cultural activities which are likely to impact negatively on human healthy conditions and livelihoods. About 70% of people in developed countries living in the rural areas depend on subsistence crop production which is recently characterized by low productivity and instability as a result of marginal and erratic rainfall, low soil and ambient temperature of 10 degree c. Substance farmers are vulnerable to the impacts of increased temperature and drought which are among the recent pervasive stressors rural communities have to cope with.

It is becoming clear that realization of development goals would be seriously hampered by a decrease of suitable areas of maize, cotton and sorghum suitable by 2080. Drought is also expected to exacerbate declining agricultural output, further compromising economic growth and stability, employment levels, food security, demand for other goods and poverty reduction. Major climate hazards; excessive heat, disease, depletion of biodiversity and water scarcity threaten the livelihoods of communities that depend on subsistence crop production for survival (Maponya, et al., 2013).

Furthermore, there is a remarkable ecological variability as a result of persistent drought which resulted in decreased water resources and biodiversity threatening the livelihoods of rural communities. However rural communities have developed cultural-based mechanisms of adaptation to drought, scarcity of rain, decreased production of crops, are accomplished through community based measures to sustain human livelihoods. These mechanisms are complex, developed and use within cultures and imply greater dependability on the use of indigenous knowledge to carry on production of subsistence crops. Production of subsistence crops in the area of climate change is planned in terms of the peoples' knowledge of the seasons, soil fertility, texture and crop variations which enhance sustainable production of crops small-scale farmers sustain the production of crops through knowledge of environmental conditions and change. Studies on Rural communities' perceptions of climate change and their potential for adaptation to climate change hazards are limited. The present study examined rural community members' perceptions of climate variation and their capability to adapt to the impacts of climate change hazards on the production of subsistence crops on which they depend for livelihood (Maponya, et al., 2013).

Further, despite this notion that religions seems to especially doubtful of climate change, many faith groups have been increasingly pushing for action and change. The religious community may have more incentive to take action on climate change than other non-religious and non-environmental groups. Several environmental scholars (Haluza –Delay, 2000; Hoffman and Sandland 2005), religious scholars (Kearns,1996; Wallace, 2008) and religious leaders (Beisner, 1997; Harper and Kennealy, 2009) argue that “ care for the environment is consistent with, if not demanded by, Christian values.”(Clements ,McCright and xiao,2013). This is because religious groups tend to see themselves as having a responsibility to address moral issues and an extensive history of doing so. Religions are largely based on moral responsibility. The Judeo-Christian perspective is one of creation in which “nature and universe are just the result of natural laws and chance events; they are the result of a divine will”.

Wolf and Gjerris 2009, p121 insisted that the moral responsibility of each person in relation to their environment footprint; this is an order in the universe which must be respected and the human person endowed with the capability of choosing freely, which has a grave responsibility to preserve this order for the wellbeing of future generation.

More so, religious organizations often have different approaches and motives but tend to share belief that humans must live with less of an impact on the earth and agree that there is a moral imperative to protect all life on Earth (Hulme, 2009). This does not mean that all these groups feel the same responsibility to take action fighting climate change, although there is a general consensus among them that it is the right thing to do. Although many faith groups feel a responsibility bestowed on them by God to care for the created world, each individual person believes different things about their “duty to others, no name, and to deities”(Hulme, 2009 p.144)

The initiative taken on environmental education and action that were once delivered mainly by strictly secular groups has now taken hold in faith communities. In 2009, the catholic coalition on climate change announced at St .Francis pledge to protect creation and the poor, otherwise known as the catholic climate covenant. This initial coalition spread to churches across the United States. A climate change education day was hosted in which adult representatives from over sixty parishes came out to spend the day praying, worshipping learning about climate science and ethics, and planning ways to respond to climate change (Hitzhusen, 2012).

A growing number of interdenominational and community engagement initiatives have also been established. One of the most significant of these initiatives is one up by the United Nations and Conservation (ARC), which is a secular organization that helps big world religions develop their own environmental programs based on their core doctrines and principles, will be heading the initiative. It will involve a seven-year action plan that began in 2009. The program involves incorporating major traditions from eleven of the major world religions: Baha'ism,Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism, and Taoism (Wolf&Gjerris2009). This confirms that religious beliefs and practices are indeed connected to climate change issues, thus traditional religious relating to climate change must be tackled with utmost care.

II. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study was located within the framework for conducting empirical studies in Religious studies. The qualitative methods of collecting data was utilized, and since the scope of the study falls within the field of religion and environment, a brief history of climate change religion's entrance into attempt to address mounting climate change problems was provided.

2.1 Study site

The study was done among the Abatiriki people in Hamisi Constituency which is pre-dominantly rural, and Abatiriki people are believed to still have some African traditional beliefs and cultural practices.

Hamisi constituency is within the area of Vihiga County of the former Western Province in the Republic of Kenya. It is one of five constituencies in Vihiga County. The name "Hamisi" comes from an old rural shopping centre situated about 15 kilometres from the main Kisumu-Kakamega Road. The first shopkeeper to settle here was a Mr. Hamisi, who traded here for many years, thus the place came to be known as Hamisi Trading Centre. This then became the constituency headquarters, and for some time, the head of the former Hamisi District. Wards include Shiru Ward (comprises Jeptulu, Makuchi and Shiru sub-locations); Gisambai Ward (comprises Galona, Gamoi, Gavudunyi and Gimomoi Sub-locations); Shamakhokho Ward (comprises Jivovoli, Serem, Kisasi, Kalwani and Senende sub-locations), Banja Ward (comprises Gasianga, Givogi, Kapsotik and Kipchekwen Sub-locations); Muhudu Ward (comprises Kaptech, Mulundu and Muhudu Sub-locations); Tambua Ward (comprises Gimarakwa, Ivola, Kiptaimes, Gamalenga and Mwembe Sub-locations); and Jepkoyai Ward (comprises Kitagwa, Givole, Kapchemgum and Tigot Sub-locations).

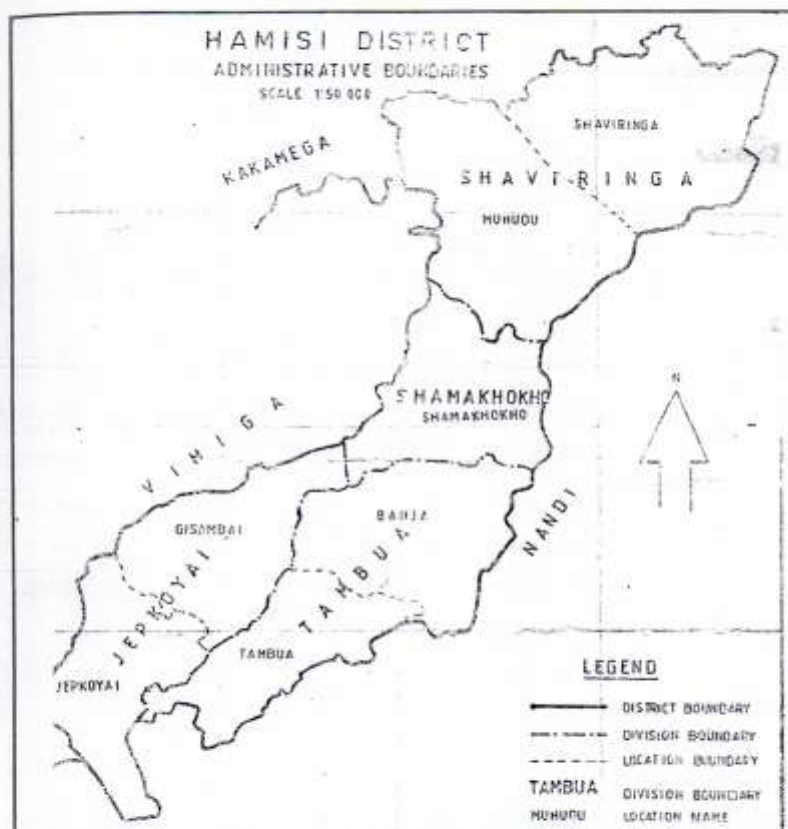


Figure 1.1: Hamisi Sub-County Administrative Boundaries

Source: District Development Annual Monitoring and Traditional Report (2010-2011).

Further, Hamisi constituency is a hilly terrain straddling the Equator, from east to west. The majority of the inhabitants are poor peasant farmers who eke out a living from a harsh, rocky land. Although this region has adequate annual rainfall, the inhabitants lack skills and tools to harvest the rainwater. Thus, water shortage is a

perennial problem here. The main cash crop is tea, which is grown at higher altitudes in the region. Other crops are maize, millet, bananas, avocado, papaya, sweet potatoes and cassava. The inhabitants also rear cattle, goats, sheep and chickens. This District is rated as one of the poorest in the country due to the high population growth and alcoholism amongst the youth.

In terms of religion, there are abatirichi traditional believers with little enculturation into secular religions, though even members of the main stream churches secretly follow traditional practices. That is, Hamisi is headquarters to four main Christian Churches; the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAG) at Nyang'ori, Friends' Church (Quackers) at Kaimosi, the African Divine Church at Boyani near Gamalenga and Israel (Nineve) Church at Jebrok. The prevalence of religious activities has not really reduced abatitichi traditional activities in this region.

2.2 Research design

A Descriptive survey design was adopted. Descriptive research design is a fact finding operation with adequate interpretation generally used to describe a phenomenon. It entails collecting data in attempt to describe as accurately as possible a subject's behavior, attitude or values (Walingo and Ngaira, 2008:52).

2.3 Target population and sampling procedures

The researcher targeted the 'Abatirichi wise people' who are perceived as custodians of the Abatirichi traditional religious beliefs and practices; from where 10 key informants who are the custodians of the Abatirichi culture were purposively sampled (Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) from each of the seven wards (administrative units) of Hamisi constituency, the study area. That is, purposive sampling was based on age of the respondents because, the more one is advanced in age, the more experience and wisdom one is perceived to have with regard to traditional and cultural issues in the area under study.

2.4 Data Collection

Primary data was collected through oral interviews and focused group discussions. Oral interviews were used where by an agreement was established with the purposively selected elderly people in the villages who informed the researcher about climate change in the area. The interviews were organized to have a general overview of the historical context of climate change and community interpretation of climate change. According to Kathuri (1993) an interview provides the option of elaborating or clarifying items after they are presented to the respondents. The interview guide had both open-ended and closed-ended questions. During interview, data was recorded by writing down responses.

Further, the study used focused group discussions to collect detailed views, opinions and perceptions about Abatirichi traditional African religious beliefs and climatic change from the respondents. Kombo and Tromp (2006) observes that focus group discussions can produce much information quickly and are good for identifying and exploring beliefs, ideas and opinions in a community. That is, focused groups discussions can produce useful information and insights that would be less accessible in the absence of the interactions found in group setting (Landlof and Tylor, 2002).

2.5 Data analysis

Qualitative content data analysis was adopted to analyze collected data. Sandelowski (2000) asserts that the qualitative content analysis technique is used when the researcher is interested in attaining a straight description of the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher found this to be an appropriate analytical method for this study since the major focus of the study was to capture real-qualitative data on how the Abatirichi traditional religion beliefs and practices can play in managing climatic change.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Qualitative data analysis revealed that generally, the abatirichi believed in forest conservation because the forests keep their gods, shrines, 'misambwa'- spiritual forces. The forests are also a source of their cultural heritage, because serious cultural practices like circumcision rituals are carried in the forests, thus, the conservation of forests especially indigenous species that are drought resistant and last for long years really act a strong mitigation effort in curbing climate change.

Further, one responded during oral interview said that all aspects of weather, thunder, lightning, rain, day, moon, sun, stars, are interpreted by the abatirichi elders to symbolize many aspect of climate. For instance, there are specific rituals and trees to prevent catastrophic lightning and thunderstorms-'likulu' that can destroy crops or reared animals. One respondent by the name Lubuze, reported that most Abatirichi elders have old working stick made from specific trees and if thrown in rain can stop thunderstorms and lightning instantly, or some special plants are planted in the homestead to specifically deter thunderstorm or lightning to destroy the 'protected homestead'.

There are more than 40 smaller “cultural forests” of the Tiriki are situated in the same densely populated area south-east of Kakamega forest. They are described as rich in biodiversity (Onyango et al. 2004). The villages of the Tiriki are adjacent to both types of forests – governmentally administered forest and cultural forest sites. That is, after demarcation of the Kakamega forest by the government in the early 1930’s, traditional boundaries have been removed. This drastically reduced the power of traditional authorities. It was in that time that the Tiriki community started to develop and conserve the present “cultural forests” for traditional purposes.

The Abatirichi perceive clearly visible differences between the two forest types; the government forest and their ‘cultural forests.’ These mainly refer to the fact that the governmental forest is larger and consist of exotic and indigenous tree species, while the ‘cultural forests’ are smaller, naturally grown and composed of indigenous traditional tree species. Nevertheless, a set of common perceptions exist for both forest types.

Most interviewed elders generally agreed that the governmentally administered forest is clearly perceived as officially protected by the forest guards and the foresters, where those close to the government forests utilize it for as firewood, grass and building materials, traditional medicine and grazing ground for cattle. The interviewed elders insisted that trees for traditional medicine though found in this government forests are never destroyed but only the useful parts like leaves, the buck and roots carefully picked, thus, conserved for future use. The forest is further valued for attracting rain as much as tourists who come to visit the forest for its natural beauty and biodiversity. The forest is seen as property of the government; therefore, no direct protection rules exist among the Tiriki community that concern the forest as a whole, but traditional beliefs and cultural rules refer to certain sacred trees which are conserved for traditional purposes.

Further, most interviewed elders expressed their strong belief in the forests because forest bring rainfall so that they do not experience droughts, but interestingly accused their Christian counterparts who defame traditional trees as primitive idolatry, cut them, then later complain of harsh weather. The forests also keep their sacred animals used for traditional purposes or even used in the forecasting of climate changes.

Most interviewed elders plus resource persons from Shamakhokho resource center reported that cultural forests are described to vary in size between 0.5 and 4 ha and to mainly consist of indigenous tree species such as Arungana or Musasa. Many trees are said to be more than 100 years old. Since for traditional circumcision ceremonies water is required, the cultural forest sites are normally situated in valleys. In order to be useful for circumcision ceremonies, the forests need to be densely stocked, so as to provide a good shelter and hiding place for the boys during the circumcision and initiation time, which nowadays lasts four to eight weeks, and which is practiced every 5 years.

The interviewed elders insisted that all cultural forest sites are hold as trust land, which is administered by the local authorities in close cooperation with the village elders. This ensures that the forests serve the local people and their cultural uses. In every village at least one of the village elders is responsible to control the forest. Additionally, via social pressure the whole village controls the adherence to customary rules that protect the cultural forests. Most interviewed elders asserted that the cultural forest are home for their ancestors where traditional shrines are located and really protected- in fact there is fear that cutting a tree from shrines will cause death; they believe those cultural forests are sacred and a source of their life; the cultural forests conserve their culture and have all trees needed for their traditional circumcision rituals and ceremonies; and of course a major source of their traditional herbal medicine.

The most common rules governing the maintenance of cultural forests are that; women are not allowed to enter the cultural forests; no one is permitted to take wood out of this place, and to cut trees – except during the circumcision and initiation time; traditional medicines can be collected by only authorized traditionally circumcised people, the “secrets” referring to the initiation rituals are told from the old men to the younger ones, and they are not allowed to share them with outsiders (woman, strangers and children); the circumcision ceremonies are accompanied by cheerful dances and beer drinking outside of the forest, but during these activities the forest will not be entered; and the adherence to the protection rules is motivated by strongly rooted and inherited fears about the Abatirichi cultural forests.

The cultural forests are thus perceived as a major part of the Abatirichi identity simply because the cultural forest has clearly more spiritual meaning to them as Abatirichi than the governmental forest; that is, the cultural forests represents the infinite bond and long-lasting relationship that unites the former, the actual and the coming Abatirichi generations. The vital rituals celebrated in those forests contribute to the loyal continuance of this perception by mostly Abatirichi traditional loyalists.

That is, the abatirichi cultural forest have traditional trees, that links between the sky and earth, often symbolise links between the spiritual world of ancestors and Abatirichi people. Rituals and ceremonies which draw on forest symbols often serve to link people with their cultural heritage, as well as their ancestral past. Further emphasis is that cultural trees are a maternal symbol: a protector and provider who gives fruit, other foods and medicines, provides a reservoir for water, protects against the natural elements and evil spirits.

Therefore, in comparison to other cultural forests across Africa, some researcher from West Africa, report that forests provide the venue for many cultural events. For instance, in many parts of West Africa, forest areas and specific trees are protected and valued for particular cultural occasions and as historic symbols. Each community has its own traditions associated with sacred areas and, as a result, the species that are found in them vary greatly (Sanago, 2003). For instance, sacred groves are the site of ritual and secret society initiations, a locale where social and political values, morals, secrets, and laws are passed on to the younger generation. Sacred groves house the most important religious and ritual relics. They are often the site of ancestral burials or places where people can communicate with their ancestors. Sanago (2003) further describes sacred groves in Côte d'Ivoire, noting that they are places where moral values are taught and passed on from one generation to the next. The trees within these groves are viewed as sacred trees, housing spirits, and providing links to ancestors. In some areas, sacred groves are the only forested areas that remain. Although many cultural traditions are disappearing with the rapidly changing social and physical environments, sacred groves often remain as valued elements of cultural heritage. The groves are also often the site for ritual healings and the location where villagers find particular plant medicines thus really conserved.

More so, In a village in Northern Ghana, Ntiamao-Baidu (1987) describes a sacred region protected by traditional beliefs: the villagers' ancestors were saved from enemies when they hid in this sacred area. Now the spirits of these ancestors and gods live there. The area is never farmed and is burnt once a year to protect it from accidental fires; and reports for Cameroon describes the symbolic and mystical use of forest areas valued by the Fang of Southern Cameroon. The 'temple' (the site of initiation ceremonies and rites) is always situated at the foot of a large forest tree where medicinal plants are often cultivated. This tree symbolizes the forest which houses the body of god and was once the source of people's food. During initiation ceremonies, the root bark of the species *Tabernanthe iboga* (a hallucinogen) is consumed by ail initiates, so that they can see god. In this culture, the tree and forest medicines are believed to be vehicles through which people communicate with god, thus really revered and conserved.

In the Casamance region of Senegal, a traditional healer founded a healing village for mental patients at the foot of a large cottonwood tree (*Ceiba pentandra*). The village location was chosen because the tree and surrounding forest symbolized healing and protection, a peaceful place that linked people with their god and ancestors. Village dwellings are now built around the tree. And every day, at the foot of this large tree, patients discuss their problems, undergoing the equivalent of group psychotherapy. The study concludes that this 'healing' village demonstrates the fundamental mystical, religious, and social importance of trees in their culture, thus really protected and conserved for cultural heritage (Parrinder, 1954).

Therefore, Abatirichi generally adopted traditional view of the environment, as a fundamental place where all human activities including spiritual or ritual ones occur. It is from the natural world that humans derive their ritual materials. The emergence of African churches in Kamosi also regards the environment as being sacred or a shrine as taught both in the Tiriki traditional religion and the Bible.

The Tiriki community thus safeguarded the environment because of the belief that just like the human community; the environment was created by God, belongs to God and has to be protected. That is, just as humans utilize the environment, God also uses the environment for his own purposes. God has also given the environment certain rights over humanity whereby the community must serve as a caretaker and protector of the environment. Thus, to the traditional Abatirichi's, humans must not be predators but curators of ecosystem. In Abatirichi and general luhya traditional religion mankind does not have a unique place in God's creation and the spirits' presence can be felt through and within nature. Humanity only has a special talent of being a sacred steward of the Divine Being on whom his stewardship is accountable to. Nature nourishes human life and spirit, nature is part of humankind and humankind is part of nature. God has contact with all His creation – living and 'dead' (inanimate), thus, in the Abatirichi environmental point of view, the environment is both part of and partner with humanity; confirming the general traditional religious statement 'We came from it and we shall go back to it'. The environment also performs many rituals on its own, for example, experience of day and night, natural seasonal change of weather patterns. Humans have some vital rituals which they have less control of such as breathing and how blood flows in the body. Any form of disturbance of the above raises challenging concerns and diverse reactions including spiritual ones for humans.

Further Abatirichi depicts 'Luhya communism' where traditional community collectively worked hard on the environment by farming and hunting, practiced communal generosity to save the community from hunger. Communal generosity was based on the understanding that humanity was accountable to God on how it used the material blessings from the environment. This reinforces the African traditional societies both the rich and the poor were completely secure and nobody starved of food or dignity because he lacked personal wealth; he could depend on the wealth possessed by the community. This was so essential because in traditional African society everybody was a worker and everybody earned a living for the community, thus collectively participated in local environment conservation.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that Religious values whether traditional or secular, just as other cultural beliefs evolve over time and while they may provide a foundation for human-nature relationships, these ideas are shaped by a myriad of factors. This means that no particular religious tradition bears “the burden of guilt”, just as no tradition can be expected to single handedly promote environmental stewardship. But a paradigmatic cultural shift which creates structural opportunities for pro-environmental behavior, including those rooted in reputable traditional religious practices, can be a means to mitigate the current climate change crisis.

In this regard, since Abatirichi traditional religious and cultural practices are pegged on traditional forests as a place for their traditional shrines, home for their ‘misambwa’ and sacred trees, they are consciously aware of the harsh consequences of climate change like droughts, thus, unconsciously protect their traditional forests for fear of punishment from God or their ancestors-‘misambwa’.

More so, conservation of traditional forests and bushes by Abatirichi is key to the preservation of their traditional religious beliefs because the forests harbour their spirits-‘misambwa’ and their strong protective herbs and sacred trees that are part and parcel of their daily life. That is, the Abatirichis’ love for their traditional culture makes them preserve traditional and sacred trees and bushes which make them conserve forests, thus unconsciously playing a role in mitigating climate change.

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