



Greed for land leaves sacred lake desecrated

By **WILFRED MUCHIRE**

As he agonisingly stares at the receding waters of Lake Mbututia, Mzee Fredrick Mugwika cannot understand the unbridled commercialism of today's world.

Every question he poses brings tears to his fatigued eyes, yet, not a single straight answer addresses his growing pain.

"Who did this to us? Who on the earth can dare cultivate inside the sacred lake? Would such a person ever escape the wrath of our God, ancestors and spirits? Where do they expect all these birds will migrate to?"

These are some of the questions bothering the 70-year-old man and with each question, he stabs the ground with his blunt machete.

Located at Kianjai Location of Tigania District in Eastern Province, the 1,000-acre Lake Mbututia that is deemed sacred by local residents, has earned itself a name not only within the location, but far and beyond.

Since 1984, Lake Mbututia has been at the centre of a controversy related to a flawed land demarcation, which saw a number of families moved from their ancestral land and relocated elsewhere.

Local residents say they were not informed when the lake and surrounding areas were declared a land adjudication zone in 1961. They only came to realise this after corrupt individuals had acquired their inheritance in the mid-1980s.

Mzee Sabastiano Itaru, an elder whose 1.5 acres of land is somewhere inside the lake, points at a heron standing in the shallow water to approximate where one of his land's beacon could be if the water had not been there.

Itaru, like the rest of the community wants not only the sacred lake protected but that the stolen land be returned to its rightful owners.

"This sacred lake has over centuries been our temple of traditions and spirituality," recalls elder John Mutema. He concurs with other elders that the protection of the sacredness of the lake lies squarely in the hands the six clans who were the owners and guardians of the waters.

"The six clans included Amatu, Amakia, Thing'amburi, Mwiganda, Mbuya and Antu-a-iiya who became stewards of the lake after the Maasai left the area and moved towards Laikipia," explains Mzee Mugwika. He adds: "The Maasai left this area about a century ago and in fact some families in Kianjai are still in touch with their Maasai relatives to this day."

The Lake was a shrine not only for the Maasai and Meru communities, but it is said elders from as far as Borana and Somali communities in North-Eastern Province often made pilgrimage to it for prayers and sacrifice.

In times of drought, spiritualists from the six clans would gather and slaughter a sacred sheep. The sheep would then be

asymmetrically cut into two equal pieces and the right hand piece would given to the warriors who would take the meat to the deepest part of the Lake to feed the gods. To climax the ceremony, elders would throw millet seeds into the waters to pacify and calm the lake.

"Before the end of the ceremony, dark clouds would gather and heavy rains would fall on the same day," recalls Mzee Itaru.

In recognition of the historic and cultural heritage, the Department of Sites and Monuments, National Museums of Kenya gazetted the site in December 2003. The survey to earmark the best-suited sites for gazettement in Mount Kenya region was sponsored by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) through Community Management of Protected Areas Conservation (COMPACT) project.

Other sites such as Giitune Forest, Lake Thaa, Lake Nkunga and Narumoro Caves were also gazetted in the same notice.

Today, Lake Mbututia is beleaguered by major problems that emanate from the corrupt acquisition of its beaches. The Co-ordinator of Meru Wetland Conservation Initiative, Mr Francis Kithure, says Lake Mbututia has over 200 bird species. The birds often migrate as far as Isiolo to feed every morning and return to their nests late in the evening.

Due to the land crisis in Kianjai, local residents are fast losing their cherished attachment to the Lake Mbututia. In the late 1980s they set ablaze the papyrus, reeds and sages grow naturally around the lake. These are what formed the breeding grounds for the birds.

Today, the edges of the lake are bare and birds are migrating to alternative breeding grounds, leaving behind those unable to move. The chicks cannot survive an environment full of human activity that includes grazing of cattle and fishing.

Human activity on the three hills neighbouring the Lake — Nyambene, Keiya and Chura — has destroyed the eco-system and led to reduction of water levels and siltation. A study by Kenya

Wildlife Services described Lake Mbututia as the richest biodiversity wetland in the larger Meru District, with over 92 reptile species. An attempt to convert the lake into a community park through a Sh14 million grant from European Union's Biodiversity Conservation Programme, flopped when the District Lands Office failed to avail the map proving the lake had been sub-divided and the true owners identified.

Investigations revealed that by 2003, 148 peasants had been displaced in the adjudication exercise leading to their displacement. Many of them could not afford the Sh200 required to lodge a complaint.

Mr Rukunga Michira, was reduced to a market beggar when he lost his 0.73 acreage. The ancestral land which he had occupied for many years was forcefully taken by the new owner. He is now living on his brother's nearby farm.

"This Lake is not like a blanket that one can steal. We need to restore its sanctity as the last ceremony took place during the infamous drought of 1984. We want to revive those sacred ceremonies and rituals, no one wants this lake subdivided," says Mzee Mutema, whose 3.5 acres disappeared in the land adjudication. He adds: "No one wants compensation and we just ask for justice as human beings."

Mr Mugwika is relatively lucky since he lost only 1.5 acres retaining six. However, his brother lost four acres. "During the campaign period President Kibaki came asking for votes in this village. Our area MP, Dr Kilemi Mweria, spoke about the problem of land in respect to this lake. It is now more than a year down the line, yet nothing has come forth."

Porini Association, an NGO involved in conservation work around the Mt Kenya region, is currently working with the community to ensure that both environmental and human justice prevails.

The Association has in the past assisted communities living around Karima Hill in Othaya, Nyeri South District and Giitune Forest in Ambothoguchi Division of Imeni Central District to reclaim their land.



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