Cultural Values of Trees in the East African Context

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Certain trees have a sacred status, are used in rituals, and have symbolic importance for ethnicity, identity and connection to a place. In this paper I will explore the values that some East African ethnic groups attribute to trees and their symbolism through an interdisciplinary point of view. Several literary works, have been penned and highlighted the relationship between man and nature: tree's metaphor and symbolism have been used in both Tanzanian and Kenyan literary production; and symbols are also an aspect of East African agrarian history because production, exchanges, and consumption are mediated by systems of meaning.

1. Tree planting: a few remarks

An abundant and interesting literature deals with timber products in East Africa (Nahonyo et al. 2002; Brokensha et al. 1983; Turner et al. 1993); on the other hand, little has been written about other possible reasons why people plant trees. Apart from the huge variety of cultural values and symbolic functions ascribed to trees, tree planting is seen as one means of keeping land under a productive fallow crop (Dewees 1993), as land tenure and property policies, and/or as an environmental policy and for forest conservation. The last two have a long history in East Africa, dating back to the early colonial period when trees like Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus* sp., Mirtaceae), Silver Oak (*Grevillea robusta* A. Cunn. ex R. Br., Proteaceae), Pine (*Pinus sp*. L., Pinaceae), and Cypress (*Cupressus sp*. L., Cupressaceae)[1] were introduced and planted by missionaries. In the 1940s and 1950s, the colonial government began the Mass Literacy Campaign, a rural education program: one key method was the establishment of tree nurseries at schools, from which seedlings were distributed free of charge to anyone who collected them. Tree planting continued after independence in 1961, and in the late 1980s, an additional impetus for tree planting in the Pare area came from the Traditional Irrigation Improvement Program (TIP), funded by the Netherlands Development Organisation (Hakansson 1998: 276, 375). Deewes (1995: 219-221) states that the land tenure processes in Kenya were associated with customary tree cultivation and management practices long before colonial settlement. An individual

[1] This and the following botanical classifications have been elaborated by the author on the basis of the existing sources and are part of the ongoing project *Ethnobotanical Dictionary of Swahili* at the University of Turin.

who did not have a right to use trees could have this right given him by the community through its spokesman. Cultivation rights within a basic land unit belonged to the families with lineage rights, and in some districts those who obtained a redeemable sale or land lending agreement had not right to cut down the trees on the plot. Trees were inventoried at the time tenancy arrangements were made, and the cutting of trees without payment of permission was an offence. It has been reported that other purposes of planting trees in East African are related to border demarcation (Dewees 1995; Snyder 2018; Sheridan 2016). In the highlands of northeastern Tanzania, Corn plant or Cornstalk dracaena (*Dracaena fragrans* (L.) Ker Gawl., Asparagaceae)[2] is used to ritualize the perimetrics of common property resources. Until the1970s, farmers left most of the trees and shrubs around springs untouched in order to protect the water from the sun, and *dracaena* is also symbolically related to 'coolness' and the authority of ancestral spirits (Sheridan 2008: 496-497). In central Kenya, and specifically in Murang'a and Nyeri districts, trees used as boundary markers include African Cherry (*Prunus africana* (Hook. f.) Kalkman, Rosaceae), African Milk Bush (*Synadenium compactum* Hook., Euphorbiaceae), Cordia tree (*Cordia Africana* Lam., Boraginaceae). In this area, the boundary with planted trees gained prominence as a feature of land tenure reforms which accompanied independence (Dewees 1995: 225). According to Nahonyo et al. (2002), though the land was nationalized after the Zanzibar revolution in 1964, several tenure systems exist within the islands. With nationalization of land, people had the right to own and sell only crops and structures located on a piece of land, but not sell the land because it belongs to the State. The western area of the Jozani forest known as *Unguja Ukuu* is reported to have been the first area of Zanzibar settled by migrants from Kisiju, in mainland Tanzania. They settled there even before the arrival of Arabs, and cultivated mainly coconut palms. The local people continued to manage the area up to the 1930s. In the period between 1956 and 1960 initiatives were taken towards establishing a forest reserve.[3] It was formerly

2 The genus Dracaena (L.) has approximately 116 species, of which 63 occur in Africa where they have a high importance in horticulture, traditional medicine, and social function in marking sacred sites and farm plots (Damen et al. 2018: 31).

3 There are many protected trees in Jozani forest reserve that are considered of particular value. They are: *Mgunga* (West African Albizia. *Albizia zygia* (DC.) J. F. Macbr., Fabaceae); *Mkorosho* (Cashew Tree. *Anacardium occidentale* L., Anacardiaceae); *Mtopetope* (Wild Custard Apple. *Annona senegalensis* Pers., Annonaceae); *Mtimagoa msisimizi* (Tasselberry. *Antidesma venosum* L., Phyllanthaceae); *Mtikisa* or *Mkulukilemba* (Triangle Tops. *Blighia unijugata* Baker, Sapindaceae); *Mkaratu* or *Mututututu* (Coastal Golden-leaf. *Bridelia micrantha* (Hochst.) Baill., Phyllanthaceae); *Mlangamia* (Love-vine. *Cassytha filiformis* L., Lauraceae); *Mfusho* (Horsewood. *Clausena anisata* (Willd.) Hook.f. ex Benth, Rutaceae); *Mshinduzi* (Forest Fever-Berry. *Croton sylvaticus* Muell. Arg., Euphorbiaceae); *Msigino* (Bell Mimosa. *Dichrostachys cinerea* Wight e Arn., Fabaceae); *Mkeng'eta* (Hopseed Bush, Soapwood. *Dodonacea viscosa* Jacq., Sapindaceae); *Mchikichi* (African Oil Palm. *Elaeis guineensis* Jacq., Arecaceae); *Msiliza* (Natal Ebony. *Euclea natalensis* A. DC., Ebenaceae); *Mziwaziwa* (Pill-bearing Spurge. *Euphorbia hirta* (L.) Millsp., Euphorbiaceae); *Msasa* (Sandpaper Tree. *Ficus exasperata* Vahl, Moraceae); *Mkuyu* (Sycamore Fig. *Ficus sycomorous* L., Moraceae); *Mpepa* or *Mtebi* (Climbing Bamboo. *Flagell*aria *guineensis* Schumach, Flagellariaceae); *Mkwamba* (Bushweed. *Flueggea virosa* (Roxo. Ex Willd.)

established in 1960, and a complete ban in consumptive use of forest trees was imposed 1992 when removal of fallen trees from the reserve was banned (Nahonyo 2002: 3-10).

2. A note on literary metaphors and symbols of trees

In this section I will dwell briefly on some metaphorical uses of trees and their symbolism in East African literature, where references to natural and cultural environment are particularly abundant. The African landscape has been to a great extent an outcome of representational and ideological realms of the involved interest groups, and a contested sphere of the memories and invented traditions of these groups. According to Vierke (2007), it is probably from this kind of depiction that a deep embedment in Swahili culture could arise. An example of this kind of description is represented by Liyongo[4] poems, where trees and, in particular those of the genus Aracaceae as *Mnazi* ('Coconut tree') and *Mkoma* ('Doum palm') that are conceived as venerated trees, and used for similes(Vierke 2007: 27-28).[5] The reference to "nature" is not peculiar to the poetry of the classical period. Tree metaphors have continued to influence the Swahili poetry over the time: tree becomes an image and representation of 'being,' as for example in *Chini ya Mti Mkavu* ('Under the Dry Tree') by Theobald Mvungi, or in *Mti Ukingoni mwa Mto* ('The Tree on the River Bank') by Kithaka wa Mberia, and a tool of social criticism in Abilatif Abdallah *Mnazi: Vuta N'kuvute* ('Coconut tree: Pull and I Pull you;' Acquaviva 2016). Through the language of nature and the forces connected to it, the Swahili poet of the postcolonial period seems able to complete the meaning of his words and to predict any changes that

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Voigt. Thyllanthaceae); *Mdakakomba* (Harrisonia Abissinica. *Harrisonia abyssinica* Oliv., Rutaceae); *Mlashore* (Orange Bird Berry. *Hoslundia opposita* Vahl., Lamiaceae); *Mchunga* (Bitter Lettuce. *Launaea cornuta* (Hochst. ex Oliv.&Hiern) C. Jeffrey. Asteraceae); *Mkavanga* (River Macaranga. *Macaranga capensis* (Baill.) Benth. ex Sim., Euphorbiaceae); *Mwembe* (Mango. *Mangifera indica* L., Anacardiaceae); *Mgelenge* or *Mkenge* (Flat-crown. *Albizia adianthifolia* (Schumach) W. F. Wight. Fabaceae; Nahonyo et al. 2002: 39-41).

4 Liyongo is perhaps the most famous character in Swahili classical poetry. Physically he was a huge man, to such an extent that he could not be compared to any other human being. The mystical powers and supernatural abilities of the hero are outlined in many episodes in the epic. For instance, he is able to outsmart Wagulla warriors who trick him into climbing a Mukoma tree intending to shoot him (Kingei 2001: 89-90). Called *Mukoma* in the Kamba language (Doum palm, *Hyphaene compressa* H. Wendl, Arecaceae), in standard Swahili it is known as *Mkoma*, *Mkoche*, *Mnyaa*, and *Mlala.*

http://www.worldagroforestry.org/usefultrees

5 The tree as symbol of fertility and, by extension, as a beautiful woman occurs in *Utumbuizo wa Mkoma* ('The Song of Doum Palm'), in *Utumbuizo wa Mnazi* ('The Song of Coconut Tree'), and in *Utumbuizo wa Mwana Mnazi* ('The Song of Lady Coconut;' Vierke 2007: 28). In this third song Liyongo finds the lady Coconut to be the ideal metaphor to express the benevolence of his love (Mugane 2015: 61).

are the essence of nature itself. An example of this kind of reading can be seen in Euphrase Kezilahabi's poetry. In certain verses the poet brings to the surface memories that are apparently "animistic" as in *Ngoma ya Kimya* ('The Dance of Silence), *Lakini labda miti hii michache yakumbuka* ('But perhaps these few trees do remember;' Kezilahabi 1988: 43). In this poem trees are used as symbolic images of continuity – the poet puts his trust in trees that incorporate the spirits of the ancestors and the wisdom of the elders – in contrast to images of change and destruction: *Kilichobaki ni uwanja uliokauka* ('What remained was a dry space;' Kezilahabi 1988: 43). This is a poet's "dreamlike" vision, a mere manifestation of inner chaos and human alienation.[6] Speaking of trees as persons is part of giving a place to the psyche's propensity to personify as a way of defining what or whom is felt as necessary mode of understanding the world and of being in it (Tidball 2014: 28). The image of the tree frequently appears in the archetypal images of the unconscious, and according to Jung (2012), it reflects the Self that designates the unity and totality of the personality. All the mythologized natural elements are not only allegories of those objective elements but psychic images, and symbolic expressions of the interior and unconscious "drama" of the soul. We could define it as a process of returning to the original shape of existence that leads the poet to a careful observation of the world and the creation of images that can be traced back to a dreamlike or primitive phase of thinking,[7] in which the elements of nature are anthropomorphized.

In the field of fiction the use of the tree's metaphor is applied in different ways. According to Khamis (2004), in the literary work *Nyota ya Rehema*[8] ('The Star of Rehema,' 1976) by Mohamed S. Mohamed, for example, there is a tendency to depict class distinction through trees. In the novel the

6 According to Acquaviva (2004), the images expressed through the "dreamlike" language represent a kind of communication between the archaic time and the present time and, therefore, with real life.

7 Concerning the use of figurative language in East African literature, including Swahili poems, novels, and plays, see also Askew (2002), Diegner (200), Khamis (1998, 2004), and Mulokozi (1999).

8 Rehema is the daughter of a rich Zanzibari, Fuad. She is rejected by her father because of her dark complexion. After her mother's death, she goes to the city, where she becomes a prostitute, but later she marries Sulubu, a poor peasant and they settle on a small farm belonging to her father. Rehema gives birth to a baby who looks like Fuad. This likeness proves that she is his daughter, but Fuad dies abroad before seeing the baby. His second wife and her two children split the inheritance between them. Karim, the son-in-law, deprives Sulubu and Rehema of their farm. Through immense sacrifices, they buy another piece of land and start again. After years of poverty, jus as their conditions improve, Karim comes back in order to take that farm from them. Finally, Sulubu stabs his enemy and is only saved from the gallows by the outbreak of the revolution (Bertoncini Zúbková et al. 2009: 424).

richness of Fuad is described using what Khamis defines "enlisting technique," to be read as a botanical inventory (Khamis 2004: 38). According to Khamis 1998: 100-101), the list of trees that symbolize the opulence of Fuad and establish a sense of possession related to agro-economy are preceded by a hierarchical description like *miti ya mchanganyiko* ('mixed trees'), *miti mikubwa ya matunda yenye kushibisha* ('large trees with satisfying fruits'), and *miti ya mali* ('precious trees'). In his novel, Mohamed (1976) cites as mixed tree: *mistaafeli* (Soursop, or Graviola. *Annona muricata* L., Annonaceae) *mipea* (Pear trees. *Pyrus spp.* L., Rosaceae), *michenza kangaja* and *michenza ajemu* (Small mandarin orange tree and Persian orange trees. *Citrus spp*. L., Rutaceae), *migulabi* (Lichee trees. *Litchi chinensis* Sonn., Sapindaceae), *mitini* (Fig trees. *Ficus carica* L., Moraceae), *michungwa* (Orange trees. *Citrus spp*. L., Rutaceae), *mipera mirashi* (Guava trees. *Psidium guajava* L., Myrtaceae).

The second list, that of "large trees with satisfying fruits" shows only three trees: *miduriani* (Durian tree. *Durio spp*., Malvaceae), *mishelisheli* (Breadfruit tree, *Artocarpus altilis* Parkinson ex F.A.Zorn, Moraceae) and *mifenesi* (Jackfruit trees. *Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lam. Moraceae). *Mibuni* (Coffee trees. *Coffea spp*. L., Rubiaceae), *mpunga* (Rice plant. *Oryza sativa* L., Poaceae), and *minazi* (*coconut trees*. Cocos nucifera L., Arecaceae) belong to the "precious trees". It is this large variety of trees that emphasises the sense of wealth and opulence and accords with Fuad's aristocratic tendency of playing and enjoying life (Khamis 1998: 101).

The tree image as a symbol of historical memory, of identity and belonging to the territory, is found in Kezilahabi's novel *Rosa Mistika*[9] (1971):

> *Katika ziwa Victoria – kama liitwayo mpaka sasa –kunakisiwa kijulikanacho kwa jina la Ukerewe [...] Katikati ya kisiwa hiki kuna jingo kubwa la wajerumani lililosalia mpaka sasa. Karibu na jingo hili kuna mti mpaka leo uliokuwaukitumika kunyongea watu – watu weusi nafikiri. Jengo hili liko katikati ya kijiji cha Namagondo* (Kezilahabi 1971: 7)
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> In Lake Victoria – as it is still called today – there is an island known as Ukerewe [....] In the middle of the island there still remains a big German building. Next to this building there is a tree that was used to torture people – I think black people. This building is at the center of the village called Namagondo (English translation by Tchokothe 2014: 114)

[9] Rosa and her sisters grow up watched over by their father Zakaria who denies them even a minimum of freedom. Once at boarding school, Rosa hurls herself headlong into amorous adventures, but after some bad experiences she reforms and becomes engaged to Charles, her first love. Charles, however, jilts her suddenly when he learns about her past and Rosa commits suicide (Bertoncini Zúbková et al. 2009: 435).

In Kyallo W. Wamitila's *Bina-Adamu*[10] (2002), the tree is depicted as symbol of identity:

> *Nilipozaliwa niliwakuta watu wakikiogopa kiini cha kijiji chetu [....] bado wanakiogopa [....]. Katikati pana mti mkubwa ulioota na unaoonekana na mtu akiwa mbali [...] Huu lakini umejitahidi kusimama imara [...] na unabakia kitambulishi kikubwa cha sehemu hiyo* (Wamitila 2002: 7).
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> When I was born, I met people who were afraid of the interior of our village [...] They are still afraid of that place [...] At the center of the village, a big tree was growing and one could see it from afar [...] But this tree is determined [...] and it will remain as the identity of the village (English translation by Tchokothe 2014: 114).

3. Symbolizing life and death: sacred forests and groves

In almost all world cultures, people utilize trees symbolically to make concrete and material the abstract notion of life (Frazer 1915). According to Ikeke (2013: 346-347), the African understanding of the forest cannot be separated from the African cosmological view of reality: trees, plants and other organisms that make up the forest were infused with spirits. The forest was seen as source of life, and the plants were the most spiritual and mysterious of all life forms (Burnham 2000: 35). Sacred[11] forests and groves have been integral parts of human life in many parts of the world since ancient times, and they exist throughout tropical Africa serving both as places for rituals of initiation and sacrifice and important reserves of biological diversity, preserving unique floral and faunal species.[12] Some groves may be what remains of larger forests, but it has been showed that many are the products of vegetation change and shifting social values and function, and many acquired spiritual

10 The hero is an unnamed village boy who is searching for three hermaphrodite children, the offspring of the village prophet. If he manages to find these children, life in his poor village will change for the better. During his journey, the hero assisted by a mysterious voice and supernatural female called Hanna, visit Europe, Asia and Africa, the latter devastated by famine and wars. The hero learns that Africa's troubles are caused by a mysterious P.P. who lives in America, where his followers thrive on the poverty of developing countries. Under the patronage of P.P., they are creating "the man of the future" whose concerns is to consume imported industrial goods. The hero makes his choice: from now on he will struggle against P.P. and for unity of Africa (Bertoncini Zúbková et al. 2009: 302).

11 Sheridan (2009: 74) states that the term "sacred" does not imply that the sites are religious institution, separate from politics, social organization, and land tenure.

12 In Mfangano island, Lake Victoria, Kenya there are a total of 36 sacred groves called kibaga: nothing is removed from these groves, not even dry fallen tree stumps and branches suitable as firewood. Abuse of the kibaga is punishable by the community. The threats to the sanctity of the groves are mostly anthropogenic and include clearing of vegetation for cultivation, timber products for building and for fishing related activities (Ogol, Ogola and Khayota 2004: 51, 53, 56).

value only within the context of the transformation of colonial rule (Sheridan 2009: 74-76). In the Pare Region of Tanzania there are two kinds of sacred groves called *mpungi* and *mshitu*. *Mpungi* is a small shrine of trees surrounded by fields of maize, beans, and bananas, and contains the skull[13] of a particular lineage's ancestors and there the living ask the dead for their blessing (Sheridan 2008: 498). *Mshitu* is a forest where young men are initiated. The sanctions for violating *mshitu* are far more severe than those for a *mpungi*. Each grove has a designated caretaker responsible for conducting sacrifices, organizing initiation rituals, and monitoring the integrity of his grove (Sheridan 2009: 79-81). According to Kimambo and Omari (1972), *mpungi* exists because of the rapid segmentation of kin groups in precolonial Pare, and because of unintended ecological consequences. After arriving in the area, male elders established a sacrificial spot under a tree near their new homes. As the families grew, they were prone to segmentation. The sacrificial areas became places that maintained lineage unity through collective rituals. While the *mpungi* shrines mediate relationship with ancestors, *mshitu* represents political and ecological relationship (Sheridan 2009: 84). It has been reported that in North Pare region there are over 600 sacred groves where indigenous trees can be found. Elderly men sacrifice beer and meat to their ancestors to cool their anger and to forestall the diseases, famine and paranormal events that angry spirits are likely to send. The essential characteristic of a *mshitu* is its secrecy rather than its vegetation status, and it is for this reason that the idiom for "keeping secrets" and oath-taking is *kula mshitu* ('eating a sacred forest;' Sheridan 2009: 80).

In Zanzibar, sacred forests are called *Misitu ya Jadi* (' Forests of Ancestors') or *Misitu ya Mizimu* ('Spirit Worship Forests'). The size of sacred forests varies from one place to another: in Kenya they range from 10-200 hectares while in Zanzibar they are from 0.5-20 hectares. Though the exact number of the sacred forests is not known, it is believed that most families or clan in the rural areas are connected to sacred forests or trees, and local leaders, mainly traditional healers, have an important role in managing them through traditional and cultural values. The use of forest resources is regulated by taboos, i.e. the local people are not allowed to collect certain types of products or cut certain trees such as Fig tree or Baobab tree that are regarded as sacred trees in the groves and are said to be home of deities or spirits. Another taboo concerns women who are not allowed to enter

13 Skull installations ceased in the 1930s because of the pressure from colonial administrators and missionaries (Sheridan 2008: 498).

sacred forests while they are menstruating or just after childhood (Madeweya, Oka and Matsumoto 2004: 35-36). An example of how cultural and geographical environment represents an important literary reference is the novelette *Mzimu wa Watu wa Kale* ('Shrine of the Ancestors', 1960) by Zanzibari writer Muhammed Said Abdulla, a thriller which won first prize in the Swahili story-writing competition organized by the East African Literature Bureau in 1957-1958. The story is set on the author's native island. Bwana Ali's corpse is found in a sacred grove with his head chopped off. Inspector Sefu suspects an Indian trader who has bought up all of Ali's properties and in whose yard the murder had occurred, but the brilliant amateur detective Bwana Musa proves that the murderer is a Congolese Arab, whose wife Bwana Ali had once seduced (Bertoncini Zúbková et al. 2009: 410). Abdulla highlights the belief in spirit possession, and gives a detailed account of one of the curing ceremonies in which the spirit are called out. Zanzibar folklore bears the influence of Islamic beliefs and socio-cultural elements from African mainland, Middle East and India. Abdulla's fiction is indeed a window into some of enduring beliefs about *jini*, and ancestral spirits dwelling in hallowed places. In the story the possessed Kipwerere sits on a mat with her legs stretched towards Mecca. The ceremony requires the use of specific paraphernalia such as *jiwe la marijani* ('coral stone'), and fragrances obtained from plants whose leaves when burnt give off a pleasant smell, i.e. *pachori*, *udi*, and *ubani wa makaburini* ('graveyard frankincense;' Mbogoni 2013: 174).[14]

3.1. Sacred Trees

The permanent and radical nature of the trees take on symbolic meanings[15], both alive, like humans and immobile, like landscape features, the trees have long played a central role in life cycle rituals (Turner 1967). Very interesting is the study conducted by Weiss (2003) that highlights how Coffee plant is conceived as sacred tree by Buhaya people of northwestern Tanzania. He states that East Africans the lakes region chewed coffee plant (and used it in a number of cultural rituals.[16] Its propagation and production in Buhaya was therefore closely monitored and controlled by the Haya

14 Pachori is an onomatopoeic version of English 'patchouli' (*Pogostemon cablin* (Blanco) Benth., Lamiaceae); 'udi' known as Agarwood, Aloeswood or Gharuwood, is a dark resinous wood used in incense. It is formed in the heartwood of Aquilaria genus' trees (*Aquilaria sp*. Lam., Thymelaeaceae; especially *Aquilaria malaccensis* Lam., Thymelaeaceae); 'ubani wa makaburini' ('graveyard frankincense') is obtained from Olibanum Tree or Coptic Frankincense (*Boswellia frereana* Fluecte., Burseraceae), and Indian Oil Banum (*Boswellia serrata* Triana&Planch., Burseraceae).

15 On the subject of sacred places Turner (1979: 24) states that they are indicated by various forms representing a connection between the human and trans human spheres, and usually set in a vertical dimension as trees.

16 According to Haya customs, consumption of coffee had been ritual rather than nutritional (Hydén 1980: 45).

monarchy, a situation that conferred upon coffee a value that would display a surprising historical continuity. Sacred trees are often connected with sacred groves, shrines and share the some supernatural powers, to grant divine blessings, to cure and to punish (Dafmi 2007: 29; von Hellermann 2016: 372). Von Hellermann identifies three main groups of symbolic trees in South Pare mountains, Tanzania. She states that a wide range of indigenous tree are found in sacred groves: *Mdu* or *Mdudu* (Small Bead-Bean. *Maerua triphylla* A. Rich, Capparaceae), *Mvumo* (Wild Fig Tree. *Ficus thonningii* Blume, Moraceae). The most important plant belongs to genus *dracaena*[17] – Dragon's Blood Tree – called *Ithae*, Swahili name is *msanaka,* and found in the center of sacred groves. The plant indicates a place of ritual importance, a place where ancestors are buried (von Hellermann 2016: 372-373; Sheridan 2008: 494). According to Sheridan (2008), in the north Pare region, *dracaena* is a symbol between ritual practices and agrarian economics: it was part of a toolkit with which East Africans negotiated the course of change over the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries, and among Chagga people of Kilimanjaro region, plants belonging to Dracaena genus mark lineage skull shrines, adorn the first animal of a brideprice exchange, and protect the doorway of a new mother's house (Sheridan 2016: 40). In *miombo*[18] woodlands spiritual plants were found to be used for worshiping and ritual activities and for protection against witchcraft. They include: *Mgurure* (Velvet Bushwillow. *Combretum molle* R. Br. ex G. Don, Combretaceae), African or *Mninga* (Wild Teak. *Pterocarpus angolensis* DC., Fabaceae), *Mgoza* (Sterculia Tree. *Sterculia mhosya* Engl. Malvaceae), *Mtonga* or *Mpapa* (Spiny-leaved Monkey-Orange. *Strychnos pungens* Soler., Loganiaceae), *Kimwemwe* (Powder-bark Gardenia, *Gardenia ternifolia* Schumach., Rubiaceae), *Mgumbugumbu* (Wild Grape. *Lannea schimperi* Hochst. ex A. Rich., Anacardiaceae; Mgumia, Nkonoki and Safari 2017: 63). According to Ogol, Ogola and Kayota (2004), in

17 It seems that Dracaena genus' plants are a key symbol in the Pare mountains. Initiation ceremonies were banned by the German and British colonial governments and condemned by missionaries and have not been held since the 1950s. In the Pare mountains, the idea that trees attract rain predates the colonial period and linked to a history of rainmaking rituals performed in sacred groves (von Hellermann 2016: 373; Hakansson 1998: 276).

18 Miombo woodlands are the most extensive tropical woodlands in Central, Southern and East Africa. Africa. In Tanzania they are the dominant vegetation type covering about 95% of the total forest area. The term "miombo" derives from a local name "muuyombo" of the Nyamwezi tribal group in Tabora, Tanzania and is used both in Tanzania and Zambia to describe woodlands dominated by the genera Brachystegia, Jubelnardia and Isoberlinia from the family of Fabaceae (Mgumia, Nkonoki and Safari 2017: 69; Luoga, Witkowski and Balkwill 2000: 330). According to Mgumia and Oba (2003), the miombo woodlands are central to spiritual functions in local communities, and girls sung injunctions with a secret sense at the holy tree *muyumbo* or *muuyombo* (Prince of Wale's feathers. *Brachystegia boehmii* Taub., Fabaceae) (Zhukov 2004: 10).

Mfangano island, several trees are considered special because connected to magic and spirit world, i.e. Stinging Nettle tree (*Obetia radula* (Baker) Jackon., Urticaceae) associated with evil spirits and should not be grown in homesteads; Sesban tree (*Sesbania sesban* (L.) Merr., Fabaceae) is a tree of luck. It is forbidden to cut it when found growing in the wild as it sheds sap, which drips for a very long time and is associated with weeping; African Milk Bush (*Synadenium grantii* Hook. f., Euphorbiaceae), has protective powers that result in ultimate punitive death of offenders; Silver oak (*Brachylaena huillensis* O. Hoffm., Asteraceae) is associated with magical powers. It has been reported that only about eight trees of these species can be located on Mfangano island (Ogol, Ogola and Kayota 2004: 54).

3.2. The case of *Mũgumo* Tree or "Tree of God"

Fig tree or *Mũgumo*[19] as it is called by the Kikuyu people, is significant to the Kikuyu people of Kenya because it represents the symbol of power, life and fertility[20]. *Mũgumo* tree fulfills many functions: the tree provides medicine for both humans and cattle. Apart from medicine, the tree is useful for hanging beehives. Honey continues to be valued by the Kikuyu people for brewing purposes when mixed with the juice of sugarcane and the fruit of *Mũratina* tree – also known as Sausage tree (*Kigelia africana* (Lam.) Benth., Bignoniaceae) – to produce beer that is required for all the traditional ceremonies and ritual sacrifices around the sacred *Mũgumo* tree, also defined as *Mũti wa Ngai* ('Tree of God'), and it is conceived of as medium for communicating with God and as a place for sacrifice (Beech 1913: 86; Karangi 2008: 123-124).

> at the foot of tree on either side were deposited half a victim's head and five or six pieces of half burnt firewood. With these Ngai was requested to cook his food. Next a perfect torrent of wine [...] was poured on the eastern and west sides of the tree. Ngai was

19 Kikuyu or Gĩkũyũ people have some general descriptions of *Mũgumo* with reference to its size, colour, strength and height, and define it in terms of social, religious and political functions. According to Karangi (2008), the name Mũgumo may be derived from the verb – *guma* meaning "to become mouldy", "grow mould" or "grey", and Kikuyu people describe it as "that old, grey tree". Other tree definition are: *Mũtĩ mũnene* ('big tree'); *Mũtĩ wa Mũgĩkũyũ* ('Gikuyu tree'); Mũtĩ *wa Mambura* ('tree for sacrifices'); *Mũtĩ mũũgũ* ('climbing tree'), and *Mũtĩ wa ũthata* ('fertility tree') (Karangi 2008: 119 - 122).

20 Among the Kikuyu, the fall of a Mũgumo tree is perceived as a sign of both good and bad changes. For example, in 1963, a Mũgumo tree fell in Thika, a town in Kiambu County, and this led to the exit of colonialists who were being fought by the local group of Mau Mau. The tree split and fell in two parts, leading to an independent Kenya. In 1978, another Mũgumo tree fell, leading to the death of founding President Jomo Kenyatta (Abuyeka 2017).

> besought to drink. Then the skin of the male victim was placed at the foot of the tree on the east. Ngai was requested to clothe himself [...] The drink went around again and the following prayer was uttered :
>
> *Tuanyua tuikare wega na uthe indu na mburi na ngombe na ciana na mundu-muka na kiama kigwate wega.*
>
> "We drink that we may live happily and may you (O God) give us possessions, and sheep, and cattle, and women, and that Kiama (counsil of elders) obtain blessings".
>
> Two or three of the elders in turn took a branch of *mugumu* in their hands, stood up and prayed in turn. [...] The jumble of bones and meat [...] were left on the table. On this, were replaced a mugumu branch which had been held in turn by orators – the whole was left for Ngai (Beech 1913: 88).

Barlow (1913) refers how Mũgumot ree plays also an important part in the kikuyu circumcision ceremony, in particular he describes a ceremony called *gũikia* (the throwing ceremony) performed on the day preceding the circumcision morning and devoted to this tree:

> although should the original tree have fallen or have been cut down for any reason, a new tree will have been planted to take its place, the new tree being a cutting from the original one. Should it be that the tree has fallen in disuse [...] or should happen to be a new tree not used before for this purpose, a sacrifice must first be made at the foot to ensure success in its use. [...] The boys to be circumcised come running to the open space which has been cleared round the tree [...] Arriving in the clearing each boy throws one rod over the opening in the tree in spear-fashion. A dance [...] is then performed by the boys and girls to be circumcised, the girls having also come to clearing, but not running. [...] The girls are now conducted to the tree by the women and each girl takes off the hoop [...] which has been placed round her neck, unties it, breaks it and, placing the pieces against the stem of the tree, lets them fall to the ground at its foot. [...] Finally both the boys and girls go to the foot of the tree and certain men ascend it and pluck twigs from it which they let fall to the ground. Here a tussle for the twigs occurs amongst the women, who present them to the boys and girls – an odd number of twigs to a boy and an even number to a girl (Barlow 1913: 42-43).

Mũgumo tree has also been described as a sacred tree by the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In some of his novels, trees appear and many times acquire the status of symbol. His short story entitled *Fig Tree* (title later translated into Kikuyu as *Mũgumo*) in his first published collection of short stories, *Secret Lives and Other Stories* (1975), tells about Mukami, a young woman who falls in love with Muthoga who already has three other wives. Her happiness is dampened by her barrenness as she is

unable to give her husband a child after one year of marriage. The gods restore her under the sacred fig tree where she realizes that she is pregnant.

It has been reported a belief that *Mũgumo* was traditionally used to induce fertility. Emblematic is its white-sticky, milky and rubber-like fluid. The milky sap symbolizes fertility which, in Kikuyu cosmology, is linked with the question of life, progeny and the survival of the community (Karangi 2008: 124).

In *Matigari*[21] (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1989), the *Mũgumo* tree mong whose roots Matigari buries his weapons is a symbolic image that on the first pages is defined simply as "a fig tree:"

> a huge mũgumo, a fig tree, right in the middle of cluster of other trees. It was remarkable for its very wide trunk, and its four roots were visible, with one jutting out from the middle, and three others sticking out at the sides (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1989: 3-4).

Mathurai (2009: 95) points out that in the novel the sacred value of *Mugumo* tree is cast within the domain of political activism:

> to get to the mũgumo tree we have tu pass through many roads, and we have to pass many people. We might be arrested before we get there'
> [...]
> If we can find a bus [...], we can first go to the children's village and hide there until nightfall. Then we can go to the mũgumo tree, take the guns and take the swords, go to the house and tell Boy and Williams: Hands up! Surrender! (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1989: 144).

According to Balogun (1995: 149), the *Mũgumo* tree's image has been carried over from earlier works of the author: in the novel *The River Between* (1965), the author explores the importance of this tree within Kikuyu cosmology and how it was respected by them:

> A big Mũgumo tree stood near the edge of the hill. It was a huge tree, thick and mysterious. Bush grew and bowed reverently around it. And there the ancient tree stood, towering over the ill, watching, asit were, the whole country. It looked holy and

21 The novel tells the story of a former Mau Mau fighter who returns to home ready to start a new life. He finds that despite gaining independence, his people are still exploited by their corrupted leader. Matigari highlights the battle between the colonial masters who strived to enslave the minds of the Africans, and shows the struggle between the loyalists, the patriots and the sell-out.

> awesome, dominating Waiyaki's soul so that he felt very small and in presence of a mighty power. This was a sacred tree. It was the tree of Murungu (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1965: 15).

In *Weep Not, Child* (1969), the tree has been linked to the Kikuyu cosmogonic myth. It was on the land under the *Mũgumo* that ancestors ('ngoma') had founded the Kikuyu nation, and hence the tree is regarded with reverence by them, as it has been described by Jomo Kenyatta (1938):

> One day, Ngai took Gĩkũyũ the founding father of the Agikuyu people on top of Mount Kenya. He showed him where to build his *mũciĩ* (homestead), not far away from the mountain, a place filled with the *Mĩgumo* trees. It was a very beautiful land with many rivers and trees of every kind. Then, during the conversation, Ngai told Gĩkũyũ: ' You and your descendants will at times be in need of my help and blessings. When that need arises, slaughter a goat around the *Mũgumo* for me [...]'. Then Gĩkũyũ went to the spot indicated to him by Ngai; there he met already waiting for him, a beautiful woman whom he took as his wife. Her name was Mũmbi ('moulder, creator'). After some time, they had nine daughter but no sons at all. Gĩkũyũ was greatly perturbed since he needed a male heir. Remembering his conversation with Ngai, he took a goat around the *Mũgumo* tree and killed it. He then poured the blood and the fat on the trunk of the *Mũgumo* and then made a big fire to roast the sacrificial meat for Ngai. [...] he implored Ngai to help him get sons to marry his daughters. Having one that, Gĩkũyũ went home to return the following morning to find seated under the *Mũgumo*, 'nine' handsome men to marry his daughters (Kenyatta 1938: 5-9).

In Kenya, the *Mũgumo* tree is also closely related to the name of Wangari Maathai who was one of the most famous ecological activists in the world. She learned of the importance of this tree to her tribe, the Kikuyu, when she was still a child.

> In the mid-1940s, a little girl called Wangari played beneath a giant fig tree near her home in the highlands of Kenya. 'That is a tree of God', her mother told her. "We don't cut it. We don't burn it. We don't use it. They live for as long as they can, and they fall on their own when they are too old'. At the time Wangari did not know why the fig tree was so special. She just knew the stream that flowed beneath it was a good place to hunt for tadpoles (Shanahan 2016: 122).

Wangari Maathai (1940-2011) was the first woman in East and Central Africa to obtain a PhD. She was a scholar and an environmental and human rights activist. In 1977, she founded the Green Belt

Movement, an NGO that encourages women to plant trees to defeat deforestation and environmental degradation. Maathai began to use her organization as a springboard in the struggle against abuses of power, such as land grabbling or the illegal detention of political opponents. In 2004, she was the first woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace prize (UNESCO 2014; Onyang'o et al. 2011; Shanahan 2016). In 2009, the novel *Nakuruto* by Clara Momanyi was published. It is set against a backdrop of environmental activism, and analyses the works authored by women. In the novel, the main character Nakuruto derives her name from Lake Nakuru. The character's name is presented and developed in the story to help bring out the theme of saving the earth, the author uses Nakuruto to admonish humanity. She has seen in real and in a dream an environmental change and its effects: her society has degenerated from food sufficiency to food insecurity due to the ecological destruction. Social turmoil replaces the peace and co-existence that were landmarks of her traditional society. She sees also the destruction of the African indigenous culture of ecological conservancy. In her traditional society, cutting of trees and exploitation of other ecological elements was a controlled affair but with the onset of colonialism, her society changes rapidly. According to Nixon and Ronald, the novel demonstrates a contextual backdrop to conservation efforts by Wangari Maathai who transits into the fictitious ecocritical voice of Nakuruto (Nixon and Ronald 2014: 38).

4. Final Remarks

Speaking of nature and relative symbols of the plant world with reference to trees means giving relevance to a particular aspect of African culture and in particular of East African agrarian history. As reported by Sheridan (2008: 493-494) production, exchange, and consumption are mediate by systems of meaning. Since precolonial times, in fact, economy was a set of shifting economic networks embedded in sets of ethnolinguistic groups that often had more to do with geography and mode of production than political identity. It is in this dynamic system of economics that rituals became important social institutions for creating and confirming social relationships. It is clear that sacred forests and groves hold a strong symbolic charge.

In the East African culture they have been reported to be home to mighty spirits that can take or give life. They originate from a variety of roots, which include sites linked to specific events, burial grounds housing the spirits of the ancestors, while others are renowned for the healing powers of

deities from which healers derive their powers. They vary in size, and are controlled by traditional authority. Forest trees represent the links between the sky and earth, often symbolize links between the spiritual world of ancestors and people. Rituals and ceremonies which draw on forest symbols often serve to link people with their cultural heritage, as well as their ancestral past. The tree features in both oral and written East African literature reflect important symbolic images, and since the 1970s have become symbols of ecological and political activism in East African countries.

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