

# Indigenous knowledge for climate action at the Ekyisalhalha kya Karoro sacred site, adjacent to Rwenzori mountains national park in Kasese

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This case study examines the contribution of Indigenous knowledge (IK) and practices to climate action at Ekyisalhalha kya Kororo sacred site, adjacent to Rwenzori Mountains National Park in the Kasese district of Western Uganda. This paper is intended to make a case for IK as an important component of climate change mitigation strategies especially if the knowledge is profiled and publicised. The paper presents aspects of traditional knowledge in terms of ceremonies, rituals, norms and customs that can be re-energised for climate change.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors employed mainly a participatory and qualitative data collection methodology. The data were collected in Kasese district largely from the local government officials, cultural leaders, civil society actors and representatives of indigenous minority communities such as the Basongora. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources, at the desk and through community interactions to collect various narratives based on IK. Primary data were collected during individual interviews, by administering a semi-structured questionnaire and holding focus group discussions with different stakeholders in Kasese, Uganda. The respondents were carefully identified and included cultural leaders, young people, local government authorities and representatives of civil society organisations responsible for implementing climate change mitigation strategies.

**Findings** – Climate change effects are manifest in rising temperatures, flooding, desertification and other natural hazards. The Kasese district, in particular, has faced several climatic change catastrophes and there has been limited use or mainstreaming of the existing IK of the communities in the region in different climate action interventions. Amongst the key research findings was that IK can be utilised to address or mitigate climate change risks/hazards and provide valuable insights into climate adaptation strategies, including rain-water harvesting, weather forecasting and preparedness, and sustainable farming practices. In addition, it is easily accessible, especially in areas that modern science has not reached.

**Research limitations/implications** – Few elders with IK related to climate change mitigation and the disconnect between young people and IK bearers were limitations encountered during data collection.

**Originality/value** – The information in the article is an original compilation by the authors based on previous published work from the NetZero Heritage for Climate Action research project.

**Keywords** Climate change, Indigenous knowledge, Natural disasters, Cultural leaders, Mitigation, Knowledge bearers, Ritual cleansing, Indigenous minority communities, Ekyisalhalha kya Kororo, Kasese Uganda

**Paper type** Research paper

## Location of the site

The site is located at the confluence of the Kabiri and Kithangetse rivers in Kyondo sub-county, Kasese district, in the Muyina Chiefdom of the Obusinga Bwa Rwenzururu, a cultural



institution of the Bakonzo community. The two rivers flow from the top of the Rwenzori Mountain ranges part of the Rwenzori Mountains National Park, a World Heritage Site. The site became a traditional court where different disputes and conflicts related to land, marriage, witchcraft and other injustices were resolved.

Floods in Kasese are a regular occurrence. Since 2014 Kasese has experienced four major floods in 2014, 2016, 2020 and 2022. During this time the number of people affected by floods and induced landslides has increased exponentially from 15,000 to 120,000. The cause of the floods can be traced to melting glaciers and intense rainfall. The glaciers are projected to melt by 2050. However, the State of Climate in Africa report from the World Meteorological Organisation and other agencies, released ahead of the UN climate conference which took place in Scotland in October 2021, predicted that at current rates all glaciers on Mt. Kenya, Tanzania's Kilimanjaro and Uganda's Rwenzoris, would be gone by the 2040s. This would certainly lead to an exponential increase in the volume of water in River Kabiri. The annual precipitation anomaly, according to Coupled Model Intercomparison Project 5 (CMIP5) ensemble for the near future (2050), is expected to increase which would intensify due to the micro-climate of the Rwenzori Mountains National Park. These extreme events have induced massive landslides, the last one was in 2022 which led to the loss of 15 people. The indirect impacts (displacement and loss of farm crops) will affect the total population of the district, more than 702,029 people, inevitably leading to land conflicts and increased food insecurity. The impacts are expected to be more intense than in the past because of increased deforestation, inadequate early warning systems and the lack of integration of IK in flood risk prevention and mitigation programmes. Additionally, such incidents could further reduce social cohesion amongst ethnic groups living along the river upstream and downstream, and, in particular, enhance the tensions over land use choices. Climate change-induced disasters such as floods and landslides threaten to widen river banks causing displacement of people, loss of lives, farmlands, property and livelihoods as well as infrastructure, amongst other effects.

### **Key aims and objectives of the project**

The project aimed at enhancing the resilience and adaptation of the Ekisalhalha kya Kororo sacred cultural site and its surrounding areas to the effects of climate variability by utilising the traditional knowledge of the Indigenous communities in Kasese. The specific objectives of the project included:

- (1) Generating information on existing oral traditions and knowledge, cultural practices and beliefs and norms that can contribute to mitigating the impact of climate on cultural heritage.
- (2) Strengthening the capacity of the caretakers of cultural heritage sites to apply oral traditions, knowledge and cultural practices to reduce the effects of climate change.
- (3) Trial-testing the inclusion of Indigenous cultural practices in the management principles for the sacred cultural heritage site.

### **Method of data collection**

The authors employed mainly a participatory and qualitative methodology to collect the data. The data were collected in Kasese district largely from the local government officials, cultural leaders, civil society actors and representatives of Indigenous minority communities such as the Basongora. Data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources, as part of a desk top survey and through community interactions to collect various narratives on IK. The data collection exercise was constrained by factors such as limited documentation of the IK, few elders with the relevant information, and not much literature about climate

change that is specific to the Rwenzori region. The challenge of limited documentation of IK was addressed through interactions with several members of the community, especially the clan leaders and ridge leaders in Kasese.

*Strategies used to reduce the risks of climate change-related disasters and conflicts*

During the project period, several strategies were developed and implemented to reduce risks from climate change disasters including:

- (1) Capacity-building to mainstream IK in climate change interventions. More than 25 stakeholders drawn from the Kasese Local Government district, civil society organisations, cultural institutions, parastatals and Indigenous minority communities were involved in capacity-building. The main objectives included introducing the participants to the notion of climate change, its associated risks, mitigation measures and adaptation and enhancing the capacity of key stakeholders to appreciate the role of IK in climate change mitigation.
- (2) Engaging young people. Given that more than 77% of Uganda's population is made up of people below the age of 30, it was essential to engage them during the project implementation to sustain the project interventions.
- (3) Indigenous tree planting. The planting of 2,000 Indigenous tree species, such as ficus natalis (locally known as mitooha), and bamboo in Kasese was carried out. The planted trees will remove carbon dioxide from the air, store it in the trees and soil and release oxygen into the atmosphere. The trees will help protect the Kabiri river banks against the effects of flooding and help communities along the river banks adapt to the changing climate changes.
- (4) Establishment of the River Kabiri Valley Climate Change Mitigation Committee. Towards the end of the project, a climate change committee with representatives drawn from eight villages along the river valley was established.
- (5) Cross-generational dialogue. During the project implementation, a dialogue meeting between young people and elders was held in Kasese to provide an opportunity for young people to acquire information related to IK for climate change from the elders.

**Outcomes and outputs – qualitative and quantitative**

A total of 150 copies of a publication profiling IK for climate action were produced and disseminated during an event in the Kasese district, as well as 50 T-shirts for the River Kabiri Valley Climate Change Mitigation Committee. About 120 participants carried out participatory mapping of areas for tree planting and 30 community members participated in the capacity-building training on how to utilise IK to address climate change variations. A total of 60 young people from schools had an opportunity to interact with elders to learn about the existence of IK. The commitment by climate change actors such as the Red Cross and UWA to mainstream cultural approaches during the design of climate change interventions was amongst the most significant outcomes of the project. This will, however, require continuous follow-up and engagement with such agencies. The IK of the Bakonzo was documented. Considerable environmental knowledge has been accumulated and is transmitted through cultural practices and norms related to the management of the site and forecasting climate changes.

**Community-based early warning systems**

During the project implementation, which involved collecting IK for climate action, ridge leaders and traditional healers were interviewed. During the interviews, it was mentioned

that there was a god called Nyabingi or Omughole in people's homes. She would appear in the open and speak and the ridge leaders would translate her message. She predicted weather conditions or long droughts and warned people to keep food in granaries. The ridge leaders further mentioned that traditionally, there were special people locally known as abalaghauli (prophets) or abakumukali (prophetesses) who informed people about impending disasters, especially flooding and droughts. Bird species locally called ekyipipi predict both the onset of a rainy season and the dry season. In case of any impending flooding, the smell of the river waters changes and several birds and snakes start migrating from the areas that are likely to be affected by the floods.

### **Governance and leadership**

Many villages are situated on the ridges of the mountain slopes. Each ridge is traditionally governed by a ridge leader (Mukulu wa Bulhambu). Whenever there are calamities such as floods, drought, or famine, the ridge leaders mobilise their people to bring items such as animals (goats, sheep) that are used as sacrifices to the water god.

### **Traditional worship, taboos and ritual cleansing ceremony**

The ridge leaders carry out ritual cleansing of the mountain ridges and rivers, however, in the past five years, they have not carried out any cleansing rituals because their King was incarcerated in Kampala and the churches have campaigned against the rituals. The recent flooding of rivers in Kasese is largely attributed to the non-performance of the rituals and the lack of respect for the ridge leaders. Most of the interventions to mitigate climate change effects in the area are externally driven and use top-down approaches where clan and ridge leaders are brought on board at the implementation stage rather than during the planning/strategy development stages.

### **Conclusions**

During and after the documentation exercise, it was clear that IK could be used to address the effects of climate change particularly in Kasese, and that the Bakonzo still value and use cultural ceremonies, rituals and norms to safeguard riverbanks and other water bodies, albeit seldomly. The belief system attached to river confluences was seen to be appreciated mostly by elders and ridge leaders. The existence and utilisation of this knowledge are threatened due to several factors such as the influence of Christianity, the disconnect between young people and the knowledge bearers and the tendency to focus on modern scientific approaches rather than incorporating indigenous knowledge (IK).

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