

Third annual project workshop

19–22 March 2024
Rabai, Kilifi county, Kenya

Workshop report

Establishing a biocultural heritage territory to protect Kenya's Kaya forests

Organised by KEFRI and IIED



Author information

Lead author: Krystyna Swiderska, IIED

Co-authors: Chemuku Wekesa, KEFRI and Leila Ndalilo, KEFRI

About the event

For more information about this report, or the 'Establishing a biocultural heritage territory to protect Kenya's Kaya forests' project, visit www.iied.org/establishing-biocultural-heritage-territory-protect-kenyas-kaya-forests, or contact: Krystyna Swiderska, krystyna.swiderska@iied.org

IIED and KEFRI would like to sincerely thank Simon Mitambo and Mwaniki Mwanaah from SALT (Society for Alternative Learning and Transformation) for leading and facilitating the cultural dialogue on day 1, and related dialogue sessions on days 2 and 3. Their expertise in facilitating the dialogue stimulated lively discussions on cultural revival, surfaced critical issues, and contributed to cultural reaffirmation and community mobilisation for establishing a biocultural heritage territory in Rabai.

IIED is a policy and action research organisation. We promote sustainable development to improve livelihoods and protect the environments on which these livelihoods are built. We specialise in linking local priorities to global challenges. IIED is based in London and works in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and the Pacific, with some of the world's most vulnerable people. We work with them to strengthen their voice in the decision-making arenas that affect them — from village councils to international conventions.

Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI) is Kenya's lead agency for research on coastal forests, through its Coastal Region office covering Kilifi and Kwale counties. It has conducted action research on Kaya forests, traditional knowledge, traditional crops and sustainable products in Mijikenda communities since 2005, including in Rabai since 2012.

Published by IIED, October 2024

iied.org/22566IIED

International Institute for Environment and Development

44 Southampton Buildings, London WC2A 1AP, UK

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399

www.iied.org

[@iied](https://twitter.com/iied)

www.facebook.com/theIIED

Download more publications at iied.org/publications



IIED publications may be shared and republished in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). Under the terms

of this licence, anyone can copy, distribute and display the material, providing that they credit the original source and don't use it for commercial purposes or make derivatives. Different licences may apply to some illustrative elements, in which instance the licence will be displayed alongside. IIED is happy to discuss any aspect of further usage. Get more information via www.iied.org/about-publications

IIED is a charity registered in England, Charity No.800066 and in Scotland, OSCR Reg No.SC039864 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England No.2188452.

Establishing a biocultural heritage territory to protect Kenya's Kaya forests

UK Darwin Initiative project workshop, 19–22 March
2024, Rabai, coastal Kenya

Contents

Summary	3
Introducing the project and the workshop	5
Day one: Cultural dialogue	7
Dialogue methodology and introduction	7
Forest walk and naming clans	7
Erosion of culture: marriage and environment	8
Storytelling: dependence, religion and culture	8
Tharaka and Potato Park stories: cultural loss and revival	9
Reviving traditional culture in Rabai	10
Concluding reflections	10
Day two: Project progress and challenges	11
Reflections on the cultural dialogue	11
Reflections from Kaya elders from Kwale County	12
Darwin project: progress and challenges	13
Stories of change	14
Challenges with forest conservation	15
Potato Park: approach and lessons	15
Tharaka community: experience of cultural revitalisation	16
Roundtable on establishing a BCHT	17
Reflections from key stakeholders	17
Day three: Microenterprises, agrobiodiversity and forest conservation	20
Microenterprises and tree planting: progress and challenges	20
Discussion: addressing the challenges	21
Agrobiodiversity, water and farmer field schools	22
Kaya forest and elephant shrew conservation	23
Dialogue: cultural revival for forest conservation	24
Closing reflections: cultural revival and the BCHT	25
Day four: Biocultural festival	26
Reflections on the dialogue and workshop	27
Annex 1: Programme for the workshop, 19–22 March 2024	28

Summary

The third annual workshop for the project “Establishing a biocultural heritage territory to protect Kenya’s Kaya forests”, funded by the UK Darwin Initiative, was held in Rabai, Kilifi County, from 19–22 March 2024. The project aims to protect and restore biodiversity in four sacred Kaya forests and surrounding landscapes in Rabai, a Mijikenda sub-tribe, in particular endangered endemic trees and elephant shrew, agrobiodiversity and butterflies. Kaya forests are being degraded due to poverty, population pressure and weakening of traditional Kaya elders’ institutions. About 15% of young people in Rabai no longer recognise traditional knowledge and culture. The project also aims to reduce poverty, revitalise culture and traditional knowledge, and empower Indigenous People and women. It is supporting a community-led process to establish a collectively governed Biocultural Heritage Territory (BCHT) involving ten villages. The BCHT aims to empower Kaya elders to enforce customary laws for forest conservation, strengthen land rights and establish an alternative biocultural economy through various community enterprises (for example honey, coconut oil, brooms).

The workshop was organised by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI). It brought together about 50 community participants from 10 project villages, including Kaya elders, village leaders, youth and women, and government agencies (on day two). The workshop aims were to review project progress and challenges, and to contribute to cultural revitalisation and community mobilisation to establish a BCHT. Days one and three were held outside under a tree, with participants sitting in a circle to foster an inclusive, power-equalising approach.

On day one, a community dialogue on cultural revival and customary governance was facilitated by the Society for Alternative Learning and Transformation (SALT). SALT has developed a dialogue methodology that it has used to revive culture and customary governance systems to protect sacred natural sites in Tharaka, central Kenya, which faced similar challenges (for example, elders being accused of witchcraft). The dialogue approach does not teach culture, but shares knowledge and creates conditions for communities to be able to reconnect with their ancestral wisdom, customary laws and spirituality. It uses storytelling to stimulate reflection on loss of culture, food and identity, so that the idea to revitalise culture comes from the community itself. It also aims to strengthen the confidence of elders to lead the process of cultural revitalisation.

Walking to the forest individually to observe plants and animals stimulated participants to share traditional knowledge about biological indicators; for example, flowering plants indicating that the rains are coming and that it is time to prepare for planting. Participants also shared their clan names and totems — how their names relate to different animals and plants. This revealed that Rabai people still know their clans and that the clans still meet. However, traditional mechanisms for passing on traditional knowledge to youth (*chikokoto* and *rome*) are no longer functioning. Religion is a key reason for youth turning away from culture — there is a need to respect both traditional Rabai religion and external religions (Christianity and Islam).

SALT told the story of the Tharaka. He said that Europeans who went to Tharaka thought that the people did not know God and were lazy and ignorant so they built schools and churches to educate them and teach them religion. So the Tharaka people forgot about their own religion and their traditional culture was almost completely lost. The Europeans also claimed to be the first people to see Mount Kenya.

Simon Mitambo from SALT travelled to Colombia and South Africa, and there he saw people turning back to their culture. He told the story to the Tharaka and they saw the need to bring back their traditional seeds, food and culture, and started coming together in clans. IIED told the story of the Potato Park in Peru, which was colonised by the Spanish, and where the government is still largely white and Indigenous Peoples suffer racism. Six communities in the Andes saw that they were losing native potatoes and culture and were threatened by mining, so they joined their land and established the Potato Park, which is collectively governed based on customary laws. It has restored traditional culture and food, protected land rights, and is largely self-sufficient.

Participants were inspired by the stories, noting that Rabai can also revive its culture and become independent, if others have done so, and that Rabai must act on these stories. They held lively discussions on the need to revive Rabai culture and its transmission to youth. They noted that before,

there was order — customary laws ensured forests were not destroyed and prevented marriage within clans. They also noted that Rabai is overdependent, which “brings about recolonisation”.

On day two, government agencies joined the workshop to review project progress and challenges. Community participants shared lessons from the dialogue. Kaya elders from Digo and Duruma sub-tribes (Kwale county) stressed the need for them to learn from Rabai as they have a Kaya Court there, and for co-operation among Mijikenda sub-tribes to revive their culture. The area chief of Rabai stressed the need to report Kaya forest destruction, and to address the problem of church leaders rejecting people who respect traditional culture. Participants discussed the need to strengthen the enforcement of Kaya elders’ customary laws.

With support from the Darwin project, Rabai has established village-level and landscape-level BCHAT committees involving ten villages. The community has identified *mudzini*, meaning holistic wellbeing of humans, nature and the sacred, as the goal of the BCHAT, and core Rabai values of *soyosoyo* (balance), *umwenga* (solidarity), *kufaana* (reciprocity) and *kushirikiana* (collectiveness) as its guiding principles. A number of biocultural enterprises have been established and started to generate income. Endangered native trees have been planted on farms, with an 80% survival rate, and in Kayas with a 60% survival rate — this is lower due to grazing by livestock but also drought. Participants shared stories of change due to the Darwin project, including revival of traditional seeds, improved unity of purpose in the community, income generation (for example, from honey), and increased participation of women in decision making.

People are making charcoal in forests, large trees are being felled by loggers, and an area of Kaya Bomu forest was recently cleared by a member of parliament to create a football pitch close to a chief’s post (which is also an international issue because the area cleared is in a World Heritage Site). It was proposed that youth and those destroying forests should be employed by the county as forest guards and scouts. Two county forest guards have been brought to the area. Drones could also be used to help monitor forests. The area chief stressed the importance of being corruption-free. National Museums of Kenya, responsible for Kaya forest conservation, noted that there are several acts to conserve forests and no one is above the law; leaders have a responsibility to enforce these laws.

IIED presented the Potato Park approach and lessons learned. The Park’s goal is *sumaḡ kawsay*, or holistic wellbeing, where the human, wild and sacred worlds have to be in balance to achieve this. Its governance is founded on the Andean core values of balance, reciprocity and solidarity, which act as normative principles (customary laws). It has a governing council composed of the elected Indigenous leaders of each community. Its success is thanks to a strongly community-led process based on traditional knowledge. It has doubled incomes from ecotourism and collective biocultural enterprises.

SALT presented their work to revitalise Tharaka culture, noting that colonisation of their minds and Christianity have brought problems, but the world is now turning back to traditional culture. They work with the clan governance system and hold intense dialogues at different levels to revitalise customary governance. He stressed that decisions on what is considered culture and what is outdated should be made by Kaya elders and not by outsiders, and that the Rabai people should embrace dialogues to revitalise their culture.

Community participants expressed support for establishing a BCHAT, in order to bring cohesion and unity and strengthen their voice, strengthen Rabai values, and preserve their culture for the next generation. Kaya elders stressed that the clan system should form the basis for the BCHAT, and that the BCHAT should include all groups, including elders on both sides of the river. Others said the BCHAT governance should include Muslim and Christian leaders. The county planning office offered to provide funding for the BCHAT and urged that the member of the county assembly be informed to facilitate this.

On day three, the community further explored progress and challenges with microenterprises. There is a good market for briquettes, and they reduce fuel consumption. but some villages have experienced difficulty obtaining raw materials, partly due to drought, but rains have now come. Honey production has started and is generally doing well. There is a good market for indigenous vegetables, and a number of farmers have revived traditional crops (such as cassava and cowpeas) following the Farmer Field Schools initiative, but an organisation is promoting hybrids and chemicals. In Kaya forests, some butterfly species have returned. Elephant shrew poaching, habitat destruction and grazing are problems. The elders and community researchers will visit the county government to request support to prevent grazing. Participants discussed whether Kaya elders should revive traditional practices to enforce customary laws. They concluded that further dialogues are needed to find solutions, and that

these should continue at village and clan level. A biocultural festival was organised on the final day, with elders explaining their values and conducting a ritual to the ancestors.

Introducing the project and the workshop

The Rabai community in Kilifi County, coastal Kenya is one of nine Mijikenda sub-tribes that settled in fortified hill villages (Kaya forests) during the 16th century. Its four sacred Kaya forests are remnants of tropical dry forest and are part of the Coastal Forests Global Biodiversity Hotspot with many endemic species. They are gazetted under the National Museums Act and two Kaya forests are recognised as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Despite the efforts of Rabai's Kaya elders to protect the forests through customary rules and taboos (with support from the National Museums of Kenya (NMK)), these forests are being significantly degraded. This is due to poverty and population pressure and weakening of traditional institutions and culture (especially among youth). These pressures are exacerbated by drought and food insecurity, weak enforcement of conservation laws, and industrial development pressures given their proximity to Mombasa.

The IIED and KEFRI are working with the Rabai community to address these challenges through the project "Establishing a biocultural heritage territory to protect Kenya's Kaya forests". This UK Darwin Initiative project started in October 2021 and will end in December 2024. The project aims to protect and restore biodiversity in four sacred Kaya forests (Bomu, Fimboni, Mudzi Muvya and Mudzi Mwiru) and across the Rabai landscape, including threatened endemic trees important for livelihoods, the endemic endangered golden-rumped sengi (elephant shrew), endemic butterflies, indigenous vegetables and traditional crops. It also aims to reduce poverty, revitalise culture and traditional knowledge and empower Indigenous Peoples and women.

The project is supporting a community-led process to establish a collectively governed biocultural heritage territory to empower Kaya elders to enforce customary laws, revitalise traditional ecological knowledge and values, strengthen capacity to defend land rights and establish a biocultural economy. The biocultural territory concept and approach is inspired by the successful Potato Park in Peru — the project is adapting key innovations from the Potato Park and its decolonising action-research approach to the very different and more challenging context of Rabai. It is building a collective BCHT governance institution that brings together Kaya elders and village elders from ten villages. BCHT committees have been established at landscape and village level. Through several meetings, the community identified *mudzini*, the traditional Rabai concept of holistic wellbeing, as the goal of the BCHT, and Rabai core values of balance, reciprocity, solidarity and collectiveness with nature and in society as the guiding principles for collective governance.

The project has also sought to reduce Kaya forest degradation by establishing biocultural enterprises to enable forest-dependent households to generate alternative livelihoods, including honey, coconut oil, brooms, briquettes (that use twigs and organic farm waste) and a cultural village for ecotourism. It has restored endangered trees in the Kayas and on farms, and installed fuel-efficient stoves to reduce pressure on the Kayas. Farmer field schools have been held where agricultural scientists and traditional farmers have provided training to farmers in restoring resilient traditional crops, indigenous vegetables and agroecological practices. All the activities are co-designed with five 'community researchers' from across project villages who facilitate activities at village level. They are accountable to village and Kaya elders as well as to the project.

The third annual workshop brought together about 50 community participants from 10 project villages, including Kaya elders, village elders, village chairmen, youth representatives from the Rabai Sub-County Youth Forum, as well as government agencies. The workshop had two main objectives:

- 1) To review progress towards project outcomes and outputs, and address challenges, and
- 2) To contribute to a process of cultural revitalisation and community mobilisation to establish a BCHT.

The workshop included a strong focus on revitalising culture, as the Darwin project mid-term monitoring and evaluation survey found that traditional knowledge and cultural values are only recognised by 15% of youth in Rabai, and this is a key driver of Kaya forest degradation.

Day one involved a dialogue on cultural revival and customary governance facilitated by the Society for Alternative Learning and Transformation (SALT) — an Indigenous nongovernmental organisation that has been working to revitalise customary governance for forest conservation in Tharaka, central Kenya. Government agencies joined the workshop for day two to review project progress and challenges, including the Rabai chief and assistant chief, National Museums of Kenya, Kenya Forest Service, the county director for culture, the County Planning Office and an agricultural officer. On day three, community members and leaders further explored progress and challenges with biocultural enterprises and Kaya forest conservation.

Days one and three were held under a tree, with participants sitting in a circle to foster an inclusive and power equalising approach. The workshop was designed to centre the voices of traditional knowledge holders, notably Kaya elders, who are often marginalised. The community dialogue (without government) was held on day one as a way to build confidence and prepare to engage in the multistakeholder workshop on day two. A biocultural festival was organised by Kaya elders on the final day, bringing together workshop participants and other community members, particularly youth, to celebrate and reaffirm Rabai's traditional culture and beliefs through traditional dances, prayers, rituals and food.

Day one: Cultural dialogue

A day-long dialogue was facilitated by Simon Mitambo (elder) and Mwaniki (Agostine) Mwanaah (youth) from SALT, bringing together about 50 participants who were supportive of cultural revitalisation (to avoid disruption). The participants included Kaya elders, village elders, village chairmen, youth, women and community researchers. SALT has developed a dialogue methodology for revitalising traditional culture and customary governance institutions in Tharaka, central Kenya. Tharaka has faced similar challenges to Rabai of youth turning away from traditional culture and accusing traditional elders of witchcraft, leading to weakening of customary laws for conservation and degradation of sacred forests. Just as the BCHT in Rabai has been inspired by work in Peru, SALT has been inspired by work in Colombia and South Africa.

Dialogue methodology and introduction

The SALT dialogue methodology seeks to stimulate the emergence of a community-led process, which is a key principle underpinning the success and self-sustainability of the Potato Park in Peru. The dialogue methodology thus provides an approach to support the establishment of a biocultural territory that is adapted to the Kenyan context and challenges. Rather than telling communities what they should do, the dialogue approach uses storytelling and asks participants to consider what is relevant in their context. It centres on stories of communities that had lost their traditional culture and food and decided to revitalise it, so that communities can reflect on what they have lost, and the idea to revitalise culture therefore comes from the community. The dialogues also aim to create conditions for communities to reconnect with their ancestral wisdom, customary laws and spirituality, and to strengthen the confidence of elders to revitalise traditional culture. They seek to strengthen traditional structures, including clan governance. They include experiential elements or 'mystica' as a way to reconnect with the land, and traditional prayers, songs and dances. They are carefully facilitated to spark community dialogue: for example, facilitators sit down once the conversation has got going.

The facilitators introduced the dialogue, noting that in Tharaka they are also working to protect Kayas, and have their traditions within those forests, locally known as *iri*, so they have also come to learn. "We are here today to enhance our traditions, our traditional food that we conserve for the environment, so we can then also educate others". They explained that they have not come to teach the Rabai community but to share and exchange knowledge.

The facilitators conducted a Tharaka prayer facing the Kaya forest, and from a calabash poured some honey and traditional seeds (sorghum, millet) which was then ground slowly by old women. They explained that in their tradition they value hills and very big stones and rocks. During prayers they take off their shoes to connect with their gods and have special feelings with the ground. When they go to the *shamba* they don't wear shoes, so they are connected. The men hold their hands up to ask and the women hold their hands open to receive. A Rabai elder also said a traditional prayer (not facing the Kaya forest). The facilitators reflected on their experience with colonisation: "When the missionaries came they thought we didn't know God, but we did, we prayed even before they came; they also claimed to be the first people to see Mount Kenya, but there were people there before".

Forest walk and naming clans

Participants were invited to walk to the forest on their own, and to sit down and observe and listen to the birds and other creatures. They were then invited to share what they had seen and heard, and to introduce themselves, and their clan and totems if they so wished, and the lineage of their families if they remembered. For example, Simon's clan is connected to the leopard, while 'Mwaniki' means bees, and his mother's clan is Kangara, meaning monkey.

Many participants shared their clans and totems, showing the interconnections among participants, and the potential of clans to strengthen engagement with youth in the BCHT process. Clan and family names included: the Kavyo clan, named after Nsongo, a bird; Kobe (tortoise); Dzivo (big coconut shell); Mwamunga clan, named after the tree; Munga (a tree); and Luvuno (harvest). Other clan names mentioned include: Madzohadzuya, Mwamtukuyu, Karyaka, Kulo, Mwamkamba, Mwamunga, Pagala, Mbari ya Gaya, Mwamumba, Tsongo, Mwamvoo, Mandundi (Giriama sub-tribe), Mwandeje, Ndenge (from Kambe, male goat), Mbetsa, Mbari ya Monzo, and Dogo (Duruma sub-tribe). The facilitators

noted that each person could identify their clan, which is a sign that Rabai still has traditional culture; in some areas people no longer know their clan. They noted the importance of knowing one's family trees, at least five to six grandparents, "as it helps us know our origin". An elder noted that there are nine Mijikenda sub-tribes and about 40 clans.

After the walk towards the forest, participants reported seeing many animals and plants and shared traditional knowledge about biological indicators and medicinal plants. They saw butterflies, which means it is almost the rainy season and they need to prepare for farming, cashew nut trees that have started flowering, which means rain is coming soon, and safari ants dragging food and grasshoppers, which shows rain is on its way. They also saw bees, which means they will be harvesting honey soon, and millipedes and worms under leaves, which means there will be a good harvest. They saw a tree that heals boils, heard birds, a monkey and grasshoppers, and saw a snake, a big green lizard with a red head, and mango and guava trees. Mwaniki saw a tall tree and thought about how differently people view trees — as timber or a shed — and it made him think of ancestors.

Erosion of culture: marriage and environment

Participants discussed aspects of their culture that have been lost. A woman noted that in the past when children were born, they sang a traditional song, and they used to have palm beds, which were cool, rather than mattresses. Simon Mitambo noted that these days it is acceptable to marry in the same clan, but before it was not. People used to be taken as kids to meet all their clan, but today people don't know their uncles, cousins and so on, so it's easy for them to marry within the clan. Before, when young men wanted to marry, their grandmother and paternal aunts went to the village to look for a wife, but these days men look for their own wives so there is no control. A Rabai elder noted that "in the olden days, we followed traditions so all was well, parents were in control, but nowadays sons look for their own wives so the order is not being followed". They used to carry calabashes of coconut wine when going to give the dowry. Five calabashes were given by the groom (half carried by men and half by women) and they cooked maize (not rice as it was introduced later). When given calabashes, "the parents need to share wine with brothers so they are happy too".

Simon reinforced what the elder said, that in the olden days there was order and that was good. But nowadays families often end up marrying each other. Before, people were not destructive to the environment. "So now we want to bring back that culture, so we look after our environment." He noted that "now we are sitting in a good order, it's not like a classroom, we are sitting in a circle, we have a centre, which means that everyone communicates well". He explained that when he suggested that people walk barefoot to the forest he was talking about connection to the ground, the land, and asked "when people walk barefoot, what does it mean?" A youth replied that it causes a connection between people and land: "There is give and take between you and the land, like electrons". Simon noted that nowadays everyone is on their own, there is no connection between one person and another.

Storytelling: dependence, religion and culture

Simon introduced the session, noting that earlier they saw animals and plants and recalled how things were before, how people lived with animals. "But we have also heard that marriage ceremonies are different nowadays, and that people do not conserve the environment and forests like they used to. So things are not going the right way — how can we revive traditional foods, dances, songs and so on?" He said that they were going to tell stories of Tharaka and the Potato Park, so people can think about where they had gone wrong.

Rabai participants first shared stories of their own visits to the Potato Park and Tharaka. A Kaya elder who visited the Potato Park saw that: "They have real unity, they own their culture and plant their own seed and eat from their land, they don't import. They depend on themselves. But we expect visitors to educate us and even feed us." He noted that in the Potato Park people even make their own clothes and medicines, "but we have been Christianised, so we look to foreign religions and external organisations". Another participant agreed that Rabai is very dependent and that even in meetings they expect to be given something: "Organisations come to us but when the project ends, we forget it, we don't make any follow-up."

A Kaya elder also noted that in Tharaka, some people are Christian and respect traditional religion, but in Rabai people forget their traditional religion. It was noted that if in Tharaka they are practising both

traditional culture and external religion then Rabai can do the same — so they should not just blame religion. He added that “overdependence brings about recolonisation”, and that there are many companies that have caused environmental destruction in Rabai and “we don’t even care because we are given something like money”. He is a farmer, so he sells crops and is self-sufficient, and he is also a Muslim.

Another Rabai elder noted that in Tharaka there is order and “you can’t enter the community from any direction”. People preserve their culture and at the same time adopt new religions. But in Rabai “we have adopted new religions and lost all our culture”. This is a problem for Kaya elders as the community no longer provides funding for them to conduct rituals so they sometimes have to fund the rituals themselves (eg. purchase a chicken) . In Tharaka they don’t allow the destruction of big trees “but in our place there is a lot of destruction, even of big trees in Kaya forests, people make charcoal”. He urged the community to unite for their culture.

Tharaka and Potato Park stories: cultural loss and revival

Simon Mitambo from SALT told the Tharaka story. A European ‘nomad’ arrived in Tharaka in 1910, travelling from place to place and trading. At first people did not want to accept him because he was white and they thought he was an albino and an incomplete (that is, abnormal) person. And the white man thought people from Tharaka were backward so he built a school in order to educate people. It had glass windows, but local people broke them and made them into glasses. But the European had weapons and went against the Tharaka people because he thought they were lazy, just singing and dancing, and thought they were idiots. So the Tharaka people felt intimidated. They went to the new church and forgot about their religion, and they also wanted education, until Tharaka culture had gone completely.

But when Simon went to Colombia and South Africa, he saw people turning back to their culture. He told the stories to the Tharaka community and they saw the need to change. They realised they had lost a lot of seed varieties and needed to bring them back. They saw women who sold their nutritious products to buy bread that is not nutritious. So they started to bring traditional culture and food back through their clans, and started coming together in clans, and telling the stories to their clan.

Krystyna Swiderska (IIED) told the story of the Potato Park in Peru. Peru was colonised by the Spanish in the 1500s. The Spanish claimed to have discovered America but there had actually been people living in America for around 15,000 years. The government and elites in Peru are mainly white, and there is a lot of racism against Indigenous Peoples, not only because of the colour of their skin but also their knowledge systems. In the late 1990s the Andean communities near Cusco had a lot of potato diversity and traditional knowledge but this was declining and government policies were promoting economic development, which was threatening them. The landscape was beautiful but there were conflicts between communities over resources and they were threatened by mining. So Alejandro Argumedo, director of Asociación ANDES (Peru) and his brother started talking to a few people in different villages and bringing them together around the potato, a symbol of common cultural identity and a key resource. Together they came up with a vision of establishing a collective territory because each community/village alone could not defend itself against mining. The process started in 1998 and in 2000 six Quechua villages agreed to establish a community association. They legally registered the association of Potato Park communities in 2002.

Krystyna visited the Potato Park in 2005. It is a very beautiful landscape, and she was struck by how proud the community researchers were of their territory and by what they said — that the mountains teach them their traditional knowledge. They have male and female mountain gods responsible for different aspects (water, seeds and so on), the mountains give customary laws and wildlife signs, and they have meetings. That is where the biocultural heritage concept came from. The Quechua community researchers said you can’t just focus on traditional knowledge, but on its interlinkages with biodiversity, landscapes, customary laws and cultural and spiritual values. And the Potato Park people went to the International Potato Centre and obtained many of their indigenous potato varieties, which they had lost; now they have 1,400 different varieties. They now have ecotourism and biocultural enterprises, which have doubled incomes, and a benefit-sharing agreement where 10% of revenues are shared among the villages to prevent conflicts, reward efforts to preserve collective biocultural heritage and support the poorest people (for example, widows and orphans). The park is governed on the basis of Quechua customary law principles and their holistic wellbeing concept (*sumaq kawsay*), which

requires balance between the human, wild and sacred worlds. It has improved food security and climate resilience, prevented mining and influencing policies.

Reviving traditional culture in Rabai

Simon Mitambo asked why the people in Rabai cannot sit down as a clan and tell stories. Participants answered that there is no *rome*, the traditional evening family gathering where elders transmit knowledge to youth. Moreover, the Kaya elder responsible for *chikokoto* — a traditional communication method that brings community members together (for example, to clean and safeguard Kaya forests) — died and no one has replaced him, because Kaya elders earn no income. Simon noted that if people work for the collective wellbeing of the community, they will not need money so much. A youth added that clans don't meet because they are dispersed, living in Mombasa for instance. But an elder said that clans do meet even now; the problem is the link between older and younger generations. There is a disconnect. In the past, if a clan had a Kaya elder, they also had a more junior Kaya elder, but that practice is lost. So some children in Rabai don't know their culture.

Mwaniki (SALT) noted that they thought they had lost Tharaka culture completely. He said that they know some Rabai clans meet, so they can start from there. He pointed out that there is a lot of convergence between Christians, Muslims and traditional cultures (such as taking shoes off), and they all worship the same god, so they should not separate religion and culture. Leila Ndalilo (KEFRI) noted that Kaya elders should not complain if people take up Christian or Muslim religion so that they have unity. Participants noted the importance of good communication to maintain dual religions and bring everyone together.

Participants noted that people are turning away from Rabai culture because elders don't sit with young people to educate them on culture — for example, to teach them that if they don't go to Kaya forests there is a penalty. Also, in the past, chickens were taken for rituals and people went to the police and the feelings against culture got worse. Rabai culture was also phased out by education, which has also made people get into different religions. People become Christian, and when their parents die, burials are Christian. Leila (KEFRI) suggested that when a person dies, the clan should be involved in decisions about burial. One participant said that their father asked to be buried as a Muslim but for the traditional way of mourning to be followed the next day, so she follows both the traditional religion and Islam. Mwaniki suggested that culture does not necessarily need to be the same as before, that they can also take ideas from other cultures.

In Tharaka, women prepare the food in gourds used in prayers, so they are very involved in passing on culture, as in other communities. Asha (a community researcher) said that in Rabai, it is mostly men who make decisions about culture, not women. According to a male participant, women are involved in decision making these days, for example, regarding weddings, they give their views and are decision makers. Another woman noted that before they had traditional birth attendants and there was culture in the birth process, but now they have to go to hospital.

Concluding reflections

At the end of the dialogue, a farmer reflected that it is true that Rabai has lost a lot of culture. In the stories they heard that people were affected by mining and decided to change, “so we can do that and become independent, we don't need to go to the government to ask for money. If we depend on others, then we will have problems”. Sometimes the government wants to destroy the environment “so we should go our own way”. He is trying to be independent by growing vegetables and is not badly off financially, but thieves have started stealing his vegetables. He said that the elders have left children to make decisions for themselves, and that is part of the problem. Decision making now often depends on the wealthy son, which sometimes brings problems. But he noted that Rabai's clans are already in place and are meeting, so they can use them.

The farmer thanked KEFRI, saying “since I got involved in their meetings I can see that I am changing as they are bringing people together, building trust”, and he is grateful to KEFRI for coming to enlighten the community. He added “we must act on these stories so we can end up being the story”. Simon Mitambo encouraged the community to use what they have learnt here to do something concrete,

stressing that this should not be the end of the conversation, and that they should revive *chikokoto* and *rome*¹ to transmit traditional knowledge.

Day two: Project progress and challenges

Day two of the workshop was held at Rabai Museum and brought together community and government stakeholders to review the progress of the project and discuss challenges. Participants included the Rabai chief and assistant chief, village elders, village chairmen, community researchers, National Youth of Kenya, Kenya Forestry Service (KFS), an agricultural officer, Kaya elders from Rabai, Duruma and Digo, National Museums of Kenya (Lawrence Chiro), the county director for culture (Ishmael Kalume) standing in for the minister, and the director of planning for Kilifi County (Christine Chiro) (see participant list, Annex 2).

Anthony Jao (Rabai's area chief) welcomed participants to Rabai subcounty on behalf of all administrators in Rabai. He said that Rabai has half the population of the whole subcounty, with 57,900 people. Chemuku Wekesa (KEFRI) introduced the workshop, saying "We started this journey in 2013, through the SIFOR project. We started training people on traditional foods resistant to drought and constructed the cultural village next to the Kaya forest. The BCHT aims to strengthen management of resources, using Rabai's cultural norms like *soyosoyo* and *umwenga*, giving the community authority. We have had a number of virtual meetings with the Potato Park and have seen that we can do the same and succeed. The Darwin project has come to reinforce what you have started to ensure our BCHT stands/succeeds and to help generate income. It is a process that is here to stay, though the Darwin project will end, after which it will spread to other places in Kenya and other parts of the world to protect rich biodiversity. To succeed we have to bring the community together to speak with one voice, the community will have to come together to solve problems that arise." Chemuku explained that the workshop objectives were: 1) to revitalise cultural and spiritual values; 2) to bring the community together and enhance the sustainability of the BCHT as a process that continues beyond the project; and 3) to assess progress with the Darwin project activities.

Chemuku also introduced the cultural dialogue held on day one and facilitated by SALT. He described how the Rabai community had learnt from their counterparts in the Potato Park who are far ahead, heard stories from Tharaka on how they are reviving their culture and customary governance of nature and how they are using the clan system Chemuku said they had heard that the clan system is still functioning in Rabai and that there are many clans such as Tsongo, Tsui, Mwamunga, Kariaka. He also talked about how the community had discussed the destructors of their culture — "the rich have a lot of say here" — as well as religion, modernisation, and the over-dependence of the community on donors and the need for the community to be self-dependent.

Reflections on the cultural dialogue

To maintain the momentum from the cultural dialogue on day one as a community-led process, the workshop began by sharing key messages and reflections from the dialogue.

Simon Mitambo explained that SALT is doing the same in the Tharaka community and has been working with traditional elders there for the last 11–12 years. He explained that they had chosen the name SALT to symbolise putting 'salt' or taste in their culture — salt gives taste to whatever you are doing. "Chemuku has already told us about bringing our community together to get a territory in Rabai that gives power to use our customary laws to govern ourselves. The chief has said they have arrested people destroying the forest, we should recognise the forest as a sacred place. If we respect customary laws that will reinforce forest conservation. Yesterday we saw the need to empower the community laws as the basis for forest conservation. We started with prayers facing the forest, in Tharaka we face the mountain — Mount Kenya — as it is sacred. In Tharaka we also have honey that connects us to the land. We had an opportunity to go in the forest for connection and each person shared experience. There are one million species threatened with extinction so if that threat continues, we as humans are

¹ *Chikokoto* is the traditional way of making announcements about important community issues/events including rituals and ceremonies; and *Rome* is an evening family gathering to share traditional knowledge.

also threatened. We had a story from the Potato Park, where they had problems like us, they had forgotten their culture, and we learnt how change came, and we thought that we can do the same in Rabai, because environmental destruction will affect the community as a whole.”

Different dialogue participants shared what they had learnt: that they connected with plants and animals that provide medicines and give them signs so they know when to prepare their farms; that the forest was cool and quiet compared to this venue; and that “we are the own destroyers of our culture and we can also bring it back”. A young man learnt that you can have your own culture and religion at the same time, as in Tharaka, but in Rabai most Christians don’t want to participate in cultural events. A young woman learnt that parents have an obligation to pass on culture to their children. Others said they learnt about knowing and using traditional and ancestral names. “When we recall our ancestors and clans we find we are from the same family and community”. They also learnt that they should prepare wills to ensure rich children don’t decide to have non-traditional funerals.

Simon added that “Our kids should know that the forest is sacred, so we should not graze in it and not do any destruction in it”. He also said that natural signs can help people know if the harvest will be good or bad and hence prepare themselves, and sometimes this is even better than using meteorological services. “So this helps us know how the environment will be, it is ecological knowledge.”

Participants also recalled learning about the Potato Park and how mining companies were threatening their land and environment. The six villages saw that togetherness can easily prevent destruction, and that they needed to practice potato farming, not mining. People in the Potato Park were not ready for more money but were ready to conserve their environment. The Potato Park created their own voice and succeeded in managing their land. The participants also learnt that the Tharaka people used the clan system to come together. One participant said: “We also have the clan system like the Tharaka that can also assist us to succeed in raising our voice”.

Simon asked: “After hearing the Potato Park and Tharaka stories, what can we do as Rabai people?” A Kaya elder replied that Rabai people should identify themselves as a community, whether rich, poor or religious. “I have a traditional name, so religion is not a threat; if I’m told to take off my shoes when going to Kaya, I can link it to the mosque, where they also do the same”.

Chief Jao supported this. He was invited to a cultural function and when he went to the church, the church leadership was against him because he had participated in a traditional ceremony. He was given six months’ probation by the church and was then admitted again. The church is branding Kaya elders as people who conduct witchcraft. Some pastors claim that even the Bible says those performing witchcraft must be killed. In the past, Kaya elders were very powerful — people took their orders — but nowadays things have changed. Chief Jao urged parliament to embrace traditional laws too.

Simon encouraged participants to embrace Rabaiism (that is, Rabai identity) in how they dress and the food they eat, and participants stood up and chanted “Rabai”. Participants also stressed the need for a system to reinforce traditional laws and said that “Kaya elders should be made powerful”. The chief noted that during registration to get ID cards people identify themselves as community members by their clans, but some people feel ashamed and use names that are not traditional. He said that people should embrace their culture, especially the youth.

Simon noted that “sometimes we implement our laws selectively, if it is a law it should apply to every person”. He explained that they have a similar problem in Tharaka where pastors are against traditional culture. Maasai people go to church in their culture and it seems normal. There is an exchange programme that takes people to Maasai land to see how they dress and go to church. Even the missionaries who brought religion never stopped people practicing their cultures.

Reflections from Kaya elders from Kwale County

A Kaya elder from Digo (a Mijikenda sub-tribe) went to the Potato Park in Peru, but was not allowed into their sacred site. They were advised by the Potato Park communities to educate their children from 13 years and above, and they saw that people there observe their culture. “Sometimes we think the Europeans have no culture, but they do. Everyone is identified by their culture.”

A Kaya elder from Duruma said that they share the same culture as the nine Mijikenda tribes. He said that what was discussed at the dialogue was very important, and should chart their way forward. He urged participants to continue in the same spirit so their culture is preserved. He noted that the

participants from Tharaka are from Ngo clan (Leopard) and they also have the same clan so they share many things in common. He stated that the Rabai people have a Kaya elders' customary court, so they are an example for the whole Mijikenda community, and whatever is discussed by the elders gives a solution. He noted that in Kwale, there are the Duruma and Digo sub-tribes, and an elder really tried to revive culture there and sought advice from those in Rabai, but the old man died, bringing an end to the customs in Digo land. In Kwale there are 18 Kayas but only three or four of them are registered under the National Museums Act. The Digos are Muslim — he stated that even if someone tells them to open a meeting with a Digo prayer they revert to Islam. “So, there is a need for co-operation if we want to enhance our culture.” Recently this Kaya elder was in a meeting and saw a lot of disunity amongst the seven Mijikenda tribes in Kilifi. “There are nine sub-tribes but we have lost some along the way which is not good. We should unify because our customs are almost the same. In Duruma we impose fines for forest destruction — for example, a sheep or a cow — but we are being threatened by destructors with big knives ('pandas'). Our traditional attires are being replaced by Christian and Muslim attires, and we are referred to as practising witchcraft. We need unity between elders, Christians and Muslims.”

Darwin project: progress and challenges

Leila Ndalilo (KEFRI) provided an overview of progress with the Darwin Initiative project. This is the third year of the project. The project started with the community, who co-designed the activities. Free, prior and informed consent is sought as a continuous process. The main activities are:

- **Establishing a collectively governed BCHAT:** village and inter-village meetings have been held to design a collective governance system. Village-level and landscape-level BCHAT committees have been established with chairpersons to operationalise the BCHAT. The overall vision/goal is a culturally rooted BCHAT that supports biodiversity conservation and local livelihoods. The vision is rooted in the Rabai *mudzini* concept that promotes balance between the wild, human and sacred worlds. Meetings have also been held to develop bylaws for registering a BCHAT association, which identified the objectives of the association as ensuring community collaboration and engagement in projects and protecting Rabai against external threats. Guiding cultural values/principles have been identified for the BCHAT — *soyosoyo* (equilibrium), *umwenga* (solidarity), *kufaana* (reciprocity) and *kushirikiana* (collectiveness).
- **Sustainable livelihoods:** training has been provided for biocultural enterprises and the community has appointed co-ordinators for broom making, honey, coconut oil and briquette making. Some beekeepers have already started harvesting. Virgin coconut oil is in high demand — there are some orders from Nairobi and outside the country. Briquette machines have been installed. Goat keeping was also requested to enhance livelihoods and reduce pressure on bushmeat (for example, the elephant shrew), and will be supported by IIED co-funding.
- **Biodiversity restoration:** tree restoration has been monitored on about 400 farms and four Kayas, with an 80% survival rate on-farm and 60% in Kayas. Farmer field schools have been held in all villages to restore agrobiodiversity, with training provided by Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organisation (KALRO) and traditional farmers.

Lessons learnt include that cultural values are key for social cohesion and a major ingredient for establishing a BCHAT. Youth inclusion and gender inclusion are very important. Multistakeholder collaboration is essential for integrated landscape management. Livelihood enterprises are also important.

Private land ownership in Rabai is a challenge for collective management — the community is trying to develop bylaws to overcome such challenges. Erosion of culture poses a threat to preservation of traditional knowledge; there is low uptake of culture, values and traditional knowledge by youth. Proximity to Mombasa is also a challenge, bringing infrastructure and industrial development, urbanisation, and rampant sale of land. The *jikos* project (fuel efficient stoves) has not started, as suitable clay could not be found in Rabai and was too costly.

Dr Chiro (National Museums of Kenya) noted that the community should put cultural values above private values, so he feels that the Darwin Initiative project is a good project. He added that if *jikos* are not part of their culture or the clay is not from Rabai that may be a problem. The community explained that originally *jikos* were made in Mombasa, they used to get them from the Jomvu people by bartering

with maize. The community asked for the *jikos* project to reduce the use of firewood. They need the right soil to make *jikos*, so they don't crack. A youth challenged Kaya elders for not allowing them to make pots and *jikos*, depriving them of income. A village elder, KEFRI and the county director for culture added that culture changes, and people should embrace new ideas. Kaya elders replied that they have already given permission for *jikos* to be made, but not cooking pots, as that is not allowed in Rabai culture — they should not deprive youth of livelihoods, but culture must be adhered to.

Stories of change

In line with the BCHT community-led philosophy, the project has developed a participatory monitoring and evaluation system, where the community identifies indicators that are useful for them, and can use the system for continued monitoring after the project ends. The community identified the following areas to monitor: improved Kaya forest conservation, revival of traditional crops, improved livestock production, increased income, unity of purpose and trust, and enhanced women's involvement in landscape and resource management. Participants were asked if they had any stories of change to report that were attributable to the project.

A farmer noted that the community has now started to embrace traditional seeds that are resistant to harsh environments. He is using traditional seeds on his farm now — cassava and maize. He noted that Kaya forest conservation has also improved and trees have been planted, but due to unemployment there is also felling of trees for sale. He added that more effort is needed to improve environmental management. Planting trees on farms — agroforestry — is one way to do this. The community has been depending on forest guards paid by the government, “but now we don't have them so there is no security for the trees we are planting in forests, and livestock are also destroying them”. A Kaya elder agreed that there has been destruction of planted trees by livestock.

A youth noted that unity of purpose has improved. “The Darwin project has brought us together so we have been able to know one another including some people we would never otherwise have known.” They stated that the youth have started embracing culture, and that they should also embrace forest conservation “because any forest destructor becomes an enemy for all”. Another youth reported that he has gained traditional knowledge. Now he knows Rabai culture; he never knew his ancestors before, but now he knows six or up to ten forefathers.

A youth also reported that income has been generated from projects such as honey. Another participant was thankful to the beekeeping project. He said most people thought that keeping bees would be harmful to their lives and were scared of harvesting honey, but now there are many people who can assist with taking honey so people shouldn't be scared about taking up beehives. “There is a lot of honey market in the county nationally and even internationally, our honey here is better than other honey”.

A village chairman reported that the community has appreciated economic activities, and said there should be scaling up of beekeeping and other activities. He advised that the goat project should upscale the local breed, and that there are a lot of opportunities in local materials, which the community should embrace for economic gain, especially vegetable farming.

Three women reported enhanced involvement of women: “I am now 78 years old and can see a difference, now women are given opportunities, I can see a change — women are being heard nowadays, they are being involved and getting educated”. Another woman noted that they are involved in community decisions now, whereas in the olden days wives were treated like children of their husbands. “I have interacted with so many people because of this project, I did not know so many people and chiefs before. Women are now being heard and involved in all activities”. A community researcher said she is “happy that the Darwin project has made the women now free to communicate and even the community has identified them and made them village elders and given them other roles due to training from Darwin project”.

The lead for the brooms enterprise requested that more people join the project and contact him as they are bulking brooms. He advised that people should be more careful not to destroy coconut trees. He asked if broom bulking would enable them to phase out brokers?

A participant reported that agriculture officers are insisting on the use of hybrids instead of local varieties and asked how to deal with this. The agriculture officer replied that both should be embraced “but it depends on yield, you should also look at yield”.

Challenges with forest conservation

IIED said that the success of the project depends not only on the community continuing the activities after the project ends, but also on government support. How can we get chiefs and county government to ensure Kaya forest conservation? Just before the workshop, a member of parliament had felled an area of Kaya forest close to a chief’s post to create a football pitch.

Chief Jao said that Rabai chiefs have arrested many people who have been destroying the Kaya forests — four people are awaiting trial — but sometimes lack of evidence frees them. They, along with forest officers, arrested a logger, but the culprit was not taken to court. The county government has now seconded two forest officers to Rabai. He added “the forest is for us all, we should not leave its protection to administrators or Kaya elders; we should all be vigilant and always report destruction. Over 30 big trees were felled near a Kaya elder’s home — elders and community members must report such destruction.”

It was suggested that the county government should provide more forest guards and those degrading forests should be identified and employed by county governments as guards to prevent the destruction. Those surrounding forests should be made to plant trees on their farms because some people are making charcoal in forests. Big trees are also being felled by commercial loggers. Youth and residents around forests should be paid a small amount by the county government to be scouts for the forest. There is a need to reinforce customary elders’ laws to prevent destruction of forests — it is taboo to make pots, and it should also be taboo to cut trees in Kaya forests.

The chief noted that forest destruction is not being carried out only by those close to forests but also by people from far away. He said that most of the destroyers of forests are youth and women. He explained that there is an issue of boundaries between forests and some farms — some areas look like they are within the forests but people have titled them. He urged the county department of forests to bring surveyors in to identify the proper boundaries between Kaya forests and private land. The chief noted that the county government should not be corrupt: “It should be corruption-free so that we succeed in stopping forest destruction”. He also said he is there to help Kaya elders if there is a problem in the forest.

A participant suggested that drones should be used to monitor forests as the forests are too big for two people to manage, and there is a need for co-operation among all stakeholders who manage the forest. An NMK officer strongly endorsed the use of drones to monitor the forest, so that forest conservation can go digital — youth can be trained and have an office in the Kaya to monitor using satellites and drones.

It was noted that there are fake Kaya elders in the forest and it was asked how this should be dealt with in Rabai. A Kaya elder replied that there is a bit of division. Two to three Kaya elders feel they are from the other side of the river and that they should not be associated with this part. The four Rabai Kaya forests are connected — two on one side of the river and two on the other. There is order in the Kaya system but the system should be formal — a person can’t pronounce themselves as a Kaya elder unless they follow the proper system. There is a Mombasa republican group who want independence and when that was declared illegal, they pretended to be Kaya elders.

Potato Park: approach and lessons

The Potato Park is collectively governed by six communities based on customary law principles — balance, reciprocity, collectiveness, solidarity — with nature and in society. These core ancestral values sustain biocultural heritage but allow the community to adapt and address new situations. The first level of governance consists of each elected village leader (president) and village assembly. The Potato Park has a General Council where the president of each community is represented. The goal of the Potato Park is *sumaq kausay*, or holistic wellbeing, where the human and domesticated world, and the wild and the sacred must be in balance to achieve wellbeing.

The Potato Park protects sacred mountains — like Rabai’s sacred Kaya forests — and sacred lakes, rivers, wildlife, Andean crops, potato wild relatives and water. It has revived traditional knowledge systems, beliefs and rituals. It has also tripled potato diversity through an agreement for potato repatriation with the International Potato Centre. This has increased food and nutrition security despite climate change. The communities are largely self-sufficient — farming is mainly for food and is agroecological. The Potato Park has also doubled incomes and has been registered as an Agrobiodiversity Zone to legally protect land rights from mining.

The process to establish the Potato Park has been strongly community-led and based on traditional knowledge. Key steps have included: dreaming/visioning with communities; documentation of biocultural heritage facilitated by community researchers; participatory boundary mapping; and establishing a Potato Guardians group, a community seed bank and collective microenterprise groups (linking traditional knowledge experts from different villages).

The six communities (that is, villages) have developed an intercommunity agreement for benefit sharing based on customary laws: 10% of revenues from biocultural enterprises go to a community fund. At the end of each year the funds are distributed to the villages that have done the most to protect biocultural heritage and used to support those most in need. The benefit-sharing fund also pays for an administrator who supports the various community enterprises — ecotourism (trekking, homestay), gastronomy, crafts, herbal teas, medicinal creams, potato shampoo and so on. The enterprises develop value-added products, which are packaged and branded with the Potato Park logo. They sell directly to tourists and hotels to derive maximum income from minimum use of natural resources.

Tharaka community: experience of cultural revitalisation

Simon Mitambo (SALT) explained that the work to revitalise Tharaka culture started in 2013. They started like an NGO, sitting with a few elders, sharing stories and discussing what they could do and where they were going. They decided that all things — plants, animals, non-living and people — are all one thing, in one cup. They know that there are colonising people who colonised their minds, and whatever was left to them by British colonial rule is disturbing them. They are working to get over that problem left by people who came to bring Christianity. Simon added that the global context for working on biocultural diversity includes the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services report of 2019.

Simon explained that community dialogues are at the heart of SALT’s approach with communities. He asked: “How should people decide what is outdated and what is not? Who declares that something is outdated — is it the Rabai community or a person from outside? Most of the time it is outsiders who tell the community that something is outdated. But nowadays the whole world is turning to traditional culture; for example, traditional medicine is being embraced. But there are many things that pretend to be tradition but are not; things that are considered as culture but may not be culture for us, as they come from outside.”

He added that people should embrace dialogues. “Discussions on what is culture should be left to Kaya elders, so that they can decide what to do to build the BCHAT. When we bring the elders together it guides us on how to go about the BCHAT. The dialogues bring back community cohesion and collective decision making, and rely on elders to share their knowledge. Our culture started a long time ago, not just the other day like the culture that comes from outside. External medicines, types of clothes etc, should not undermine our clothes, medicines etc.”

Simon said that learning exchanges between communities are also important. The Rabai elders are talking about Tharaka and the Potato Park, but they can emulate them and even do better — what was done in the Potato Park and Tharaka was led by elders. He said, “We also found it useful to do participatory ecological mapping of the landscape, and how it used to be, and prepare traditional farming calendars. We aim to revitalise customary governance to protect Sacred Natural Sites such as forests that are embedded in territories. We work with the clan governance structures, and hold intense dialogues at different levels, and perform rituals. We use a multiple evidence base approach, we don’t need scientists to validate our traditional knowledge.”

Questions and answers

Kwale elder: In the Potato Park, children of ten and above have to be educated in how the traditional knowledge system works. How do they do that in Tharaka and deal with loss of traditional seeds?

Simon: Yesterday we talked about that — about how as elders we educate young people.

Daniel (Kaya elder): In Tharaka Nithi, we saw a lot of cohesion among stakeholders.

Roundtable on establishing a BCHT

Participants were asked: Would it be useful to establish a collective BCHT in Rabai and why? What would it look like? Many community members including Kaya elders, village elders and village chairmen, women and youth said that there is a need to establish a BCHT. One Kaya elder noted that in fact it already exists, it just needs to be enhanced. Participants noted that a BCHT is needed because it will:

- Bring cohesion and unity to Rabai, and unity will bring about development and agriculture. The Rabai people has shared cultural values, and coming together from different parts of Rabai is very important. If they come together as a group, they will have a stronger voice; and donors will want to fund a group that is organised.
- Strengthen core values — *soyosoyo* (balance) and so on. — that are important for safeguarding our environment. “Our values of *soyosoyo*, *umwenga* etc will not be diffused if we don’t have a platform.”
- Preserve Rabai culture and hand it to the next generation. It is important to document culture so the next generation can refer to it. If they don’t preserve their culture, it will be lost when people die. Today the youth do not even know why Kaya elders wear traditional dress. The government has a ministry of culture, and not having such initiatives will be going against the culture.

Kaya elders stressed that the clan system should be the basis for the BCHT, and that the BCHT should include all groups. The problem is unity among Rabai people, as those across the river consider themselves separate. A woman urged the community to come together on both sides of the river. An elder from Kaya Kambe urged that the BCHT should even extend to his territory in Kambe: “We are all in the same subcounty”.

A woman insisted that Kaya elders are co-operative and look for ways to bring others on board, but they should also involve the church elders in establishing a BCHT, and take time to explain it to religious leaders so they can understand and come together in co-operation. A Kaya elder noted that being religious does not stop you embracing your culture, so he thinks more elders will embrace culture. In preparation to be a Kaya elder you are given three months to be taken to the next level.

A youth noted that the proposal is that the BCHT governance body would include elders, representation from women, the government and marginalised groups, as there are very few clans in the Kaya clan system. IIED clarified that a BCHT is a self-governed territory — in Peru they have not included government representatives in the Potato Park association, but they work closely with local government, and the NGO ANDES provides technical support. It was proposed that experts and farmers should also be included in the BCHT governance system, to incorporate traditional seeds, as well as one or two Muslim and Christian religious leaders.

A participant recalled meetings to develop a constitution for registering a BCHT and asked if the registration process was going ahead. KEFRI explained that there will be a landscape-level meeting to agree the bylaws before registration.

A number of community participants expressed thanks to the Darwin Initiative for the support to establish a BCHT: “It has given us a lot of self-assistance, we even went to Tharaka and even Tharaka has come here”.

Reflections from key stakeholders

Chief Jao: “We have learnt a lot — we need unity and togetherness. I agree that we are all Rabais, we should embrace our culture and conserve our forest and we should mean what we say. We have a duty and responsibility to ensure our forest is conserved. Our Kayas are better preserved than others elsewhere — soon destruction of forests will be a thing of the past. I am urging you to report destruction and make use of the chiefs in various areas. I am also ready to assist. Kaya destruction in other areas

have affected so many, so we should avoid the same. I decided to embrace culture regardless of the issues with the church. I have my own cultural dress that I wear for traditional festivals and I am not ashamed of that. I encourage tradition, especially for weddings. We are our own destructors of our own culture — traditional attire (sarong) is very comfortable. Forest guards have started working today in Kayas and I have assured my support. We should educate the community so they embrace Kaya forests as their own instead of arresting them and taking them to court. I urge youth to embrace Kaya eldership.”

Omari (Kaya elder): “Thanks to KEFRI for facilitating this workshop. Thanks to visitors from Tharaka for the education they imparted to us. If you join the eldership while still young, you will learn a lot. Thanks to Kaya elders as they have worked with so many organisations such as Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) on community mediation/conflict resolution mechanisms. Thanks to Krystyna for a good history of the Potato Park. We are also involved in providing traditional knowledge for the meteorological department for weather forecasting. I urge the whole community to support Kaya elders in conserving Kaya forests. Thanks to everyone attending this workshop.”

Truphena Keah (KFS): “My origin is associated with Rabai as I belong to the Munga clan. I have worked for this community since 2015. KFS cannot work in isolation but needs other stakeholders to preserve the forests. We went around the four Kayas of Rabai — some of the big trees were felled, the report is negative — there are issues that we missed somewhere. Grazing livestock is the number one cause of forest degradation. When I went to Gede I was handed about 48 police officers to assist me. When I went to Kaya Bomu, I found people making charcoal. I encourage agroforestry. There are similar forests in Taita Hills but many Taitas have planted trees on their *shambas* so they don’t need to go to the forest. I am celebrating international forest day this week, so will be planting trees. I am stationed in Gede but am in charge of forests down to here.”

Linus Wekesa (KEFRI): “Mijikenda Kayas are well conserved compared to others. We are looking for means to enhance Kaya conservation, and to connect Kaya elders and other stakeholders with other successful areas. The purpose of development is linked to environment. Before, there was arranged marriage, it was customary then so it was in order. Rabai members are fortunate that they will visit the Potato Park in Peru.”

Lawrence Chiro (NMK): “How can we hold our leaders responsible for conservation of our forests? Rabai has four Kayas — Fumboni/Bomu (409ha), a World Heritage Site; Mudzi Muvya (178ha), a World Heritage Site; Mudzi Mwiru (140ha), and Mudzima (30ha). They are under the county and the owner is the community, under the county government. Some parts of Kayas were destroyed due to community development, and some charcoal is being made/burnt in the forest. The National Museums and Heritage Act, Forest Act, Environment Act, Culture Act, World Heritage Act — all these acts are in force, and no one is above the law. The leaders now have a responsibility to ensure these laws are enforced. In Kaya Fungo in Giriama an MP wanted to start a campus for Kwale University but was not successful. In the area where the dialogue was held yesterday an MP wanted to start a football pitch and the area was cleared. This destruction is an international issue because it is a World Heritage Site. Some youths were arrested over that destruction. NMK have already got donors who have donated seedlings so reforestation can be done in that place. We should be very careful as leaders because all this funding has come because of the forests so forests are very important.”

Christine Kiamba (Office of the County Director of Planning): “I have learnt a lot about Kayas. We also plan for Kayas in our office — we have a five- or ten-year plan in every sector, including forests. I have heard that the BCHT project funding ends in December this year, so we think we should also factor the BCHT into our plan. Culture and heritage is one of our priorities — from July we may also chip in as the new financial year starts and the Culture Department has plans for conservation and heritage. Communities are powerful so they should also factor in the issue of forest conservation with participation. There is a need for political goodwill for the county to factor in funding — so our member of the county assembly (MCA) should be informed about this.”

County director for culture: “Thanks to all stakeholders on the frontline of the BCHT project in Rabai. I agree with the project as it also brings us together as stakeholders. There are visitors from different areas, but the community should play a bigger role because they are the owners of the culture. Are the Kaya elders able to ensure Kaya forest conservation, or do they need to involve the government?”

Kaya elder: “We need government support. In the olden days, no officer who is non-resident could go into the forest, but now outside destructors can go in and out — there is no order. More dialogue is needed to bring everyone on board. Very soon the county will have a court system to help hold people to account including for the Environmental Act. Every leader blames another. So we will have a meeting for all forest conservation stakeholders — chiefs, environment officers and every department so they all take responsibility and enhance co-operation between them to stop forest destruction. We’ve identified youth near the forest so the county government can pay them to be forest scouts. I will ensure support even at the end of the Darwin project. I will promote all departments to take this on; for example, the agriculture department should help deal with livestock grazing in forests. Some aspects of culture are outdated (for example, female genital mutilation). I wish that one day we have a whole Mijikenda community BCHT.”

Chemuku Wekesa (KEFRI): “We will prepare a report of the workshop and share it with all participants. We will take all contributions in the project for its success. The dialogues will continue, then the BCHT will be registered. We should take the BCHT to another level, to create an even bigger BCHT that extends to other places, for example, Kambe. Rabai should start as an example — so after it succeeds then we can extend it to other communities.”

Dr Musingo Mbuvi (KEFRI): “Thanks to the county government for being with us. Thanks also to Krystyna and the Tharaka visitors, and the knowledge imparted to us. I wish to say KEFRI is committed to co-ordinate the change that we need. I think we are still very much behind but we made a step in the right direction. I wish the Rabai community to emulate the Tharaka community that is a step ahead. I assure you of support from KEFRI. Kaya elders should go back to doing what their predecessors did. We are privileged to have a chief that is very committed. Cultural values and religion should not destroy us. We need more co-operation between Kaya elders and religious leaders. I heard that villagers from Rabai are visiting the Potato Park. I urge us to find a better way so that when the Potato Park people visit us we are organised. I also urge the project team to involve the Ministry of Health so that they can upscale the BCHT. We should keep our differences aside. Challenges will be there but we have to forge ahead.”

Day three: Microenterprises, agrobiodiversity and forest conservation

Day three was held under a tree, with participants sitting in a circle, and discussions further explored the progress and challenges with microenterprises, on-farm tree restoration, *jikos*, farmer field schools and Kaya forest and wildlife conservation. Feedback was provided by each community researcher, responsible for facilitating the work on two villages and by microenterprise leads. This power equalising format enabled detailed and honest discussion and fostered knowledge sharing between villages and by Tharaka visitors to find solutions.

The opening session and final sessions were facilitated by SALT to continue the dialogue for cultural revitalisation and reaffirmation. For the Tharaka opening prayer, participants were invited to remove their shoes to connect with ancestors and with other animals under the soil, such as worms. The prayer requested for Kaya elders to connect more with Kayas, since “destroying this forest is like killing the community”, and for community to speak with one voice and work together, adding “having economic power should not make us disregard traditional knowledge and practices”. A young woman said she spends much time with elders and so gets their wisdom, both male and female elders. Simon Mitambo asked why people don’t join in when they sing traditional songs, and a youth responded that they do not have a good understanding of what the song means. Krystyna Swiderska (IIED) provided an overview of the Darwin project outcome and outputs.

Microenterprises and tree planting: progress and challenges

Bwagamoyo and Mwamutsunga

Microenterprises: A briquette press has been installed in the village. There is a huge market for briquettes, but there are challenges in getting raw materials. The briquettes group can obtain charcoal dust from Mazeras, but need to find a sustainable solution, and plan to train the group to use forest floor litter. The broom-making project started well but was affected by drought. Rains have now returned so soon they should have adequate raw materials. Beekeeping was also affected by drought — only a few people’s hives were colonised, so they harvested some honey but not much. They are selling half a litre for KSh600–800, but market links need to be enhanced beyond the local market in Rabai.

Tree planting on-farm: Nearly all trees planted are doing well, only a few have been lost due to browsing by livestock.

Mikahani and Mleji

Beekeeping: Two beehives have been installed in five households, so 20 in the two villages. Most have been colonised and there are households in Mleji that have already harvested honey. It is being sold at KSh1,200 per litre (about US\$10). The beekeeping group is waiting for the BCHT logo to be provided so they can brand the honey.

Broom making: The enterprise involves six out of the ten villages where they have a substantial population of coconut trees. When brooms are taken to the collection centre, people are given a down payment and are given additional funds once they are sold. They receive 50% of the profit, which is more than middlemen provide, and 10% goes to a communal fund for the six villages that participate. Of that, 5% is for emergency use in case it is needed to boost the business. One challenge is competition from middlemen: “Ware almost being muscled by middlemen, they are trying to close us down”. So the middlemen have been forced to increase their prices. The brooms co-ordinator (Mr Tsui) has been to Nairobi and other counties to check the market price. But due to the cost of transport and insufficient bulking they can’t reach markets like Nairobi. They would like to expand the business beyond six villages so they can continue bulking, and so the middlemen are forced to go to their collection centres where they can negotiate for a better price.

Miyuni and Jimba

Briquettes: The machine has been installed, but the briquettes group needs help to market the briquettes. The community will form the first market and they will then look outside to find a further market.

Cultural village: The villagers have developed a master plan for the cultural village, which they have shared with KEFRI. They are looking for materials to construct more traditional houses.

On-farm tree planting: Because the villages are very dry, most of the trees planted have been lost, so the farmers would like more seedlings. They prefer fruit trees and fast-growing native trees that are drought tolerant.

Beekeeping: Jimba has ten beehives and one farmer has already harvested four litres of honey. But in some hives, there is a pest that interferes with the bees.

Mwele and Buni

Briquettes and coconut oil: The briquettes group is already making and selling briquettes, but obtaining raw materials is a challenge. Charcoal dust is out of stock in most areas. The same group makes coconut oil and uses coconut husks to make briquettes. They are producing coconut oil, but again, sometimes it is a challenge to get raw materials — when there is a drought, coconut yields go down. Also, during the rainy season they can't produce coconut oil as they use the sun to separate out the oil. They also require branding.

Beekeeping: The beekeeping group have not harvested honey yet as there was a delay in colonisation, but the hives have now been colonised, and will produce honey very soon.

Broom making: Many coconut trees do not have sufficient leaves to make brooms.

Indigenous vegetables: The price has not picked up but in the farmer field schools the villagers participating exchanged ideas and a few seeds.

Kaliangombe and Mgumo wa Patsa

Tree planting: Trees are not doing well because it is very dry, so very few have survived. The villagers would like seeds for fruit trees to plant this rainy season.

Briquettes: Group members contributed some funds to get a site for the machine to be installed and get power from the polytechnic. They received an order of 20 bags of briquettes but they could not meet the demand because of a shortage of raw materials. They only produced five bags and the electricity for the polytechnic was disconnected.

Beekeeping: The beekeeping group require some more training. They had also hoped to start producing baskets and weaving mats.

Jikos: All villages have been trained to make *jikos* (fuel efficient stoves), and have looked for suitable soil/clay, but no suitable soil has been found in Rabai that can withstand heat without cracking, and they need a kiln to fire the stoves.

Discussion: addressing the challenges

Briquettes: The villagers can use leaf litter, twigs and coconut/farm residues as raw materials, but need training for this. The co-ordinator of the briquettes enterprise (Catherine) asked the county government energy officer to provide further training on briquette making but he was bitten by a snake, so training has not yet been provided. It is difficult to resolve the issue of electricity supply because the briquette machine depends on the polytechnic for electricity, and it has been disconnected. It is possible to buy charcoal dust in large quantities from Mombasa (where it used to be free), and KEFRI has agreed to support its purchase. When the people begin to make a profit they can buy their own. At the moment they are just making small quantities of briquettes for use at home. When they produce at scale, they can use 10kg of charcoal dust and 1kg of normal soil. Catherine used charcoal dust, soil and added cow dung. The briquettes are very good, they burn with a lot of intensity and use three to four times less fuel than using wood.

Beehives: In Kaliangombe a beehive was stolen; that type of behaviour needs to be discouraged. In Tharaka there are rules that need to be followed relating to beekeeping: if you steal honey they believe that bad spirits will follow you and something bad will happen to you. In Rabai, this is also the belief if they use traditional beehives that are connected to culture. In Jimba some beehives were not colonised as they were in the wrong location where there was no water and no trees with flowers. Giving communities free things means some people do not care for them. In Tharaka they use local ash to discourage ants from attacking bees.

Traditional beehives are easier to harvest. Some people don't have protective gear and so cannot harvest honey. One person said they have harvested honey using traditional methods — using long gloves and a torch to harvest at night. There is also a young man who is an expert in honey harvesting and can do it for a small fee. KEFRI mentioned that Rabai Cultural Village members have a kit to harvest honey. Some participants noted that their honey enterprises are doing very well.

Addressing challenges together: It was suggested that the community needs to come together to discuss problems and solutions: “When we're here, everyone is a teacher to everyone”. The BCHAT process has made a difference, for example, to beekeeping and tree planting. Those who have been trained should share the information with others. Each enterprise has a special committee with a chair and secretary.

Dependency syndrome: This is a challenge for the community. They need to own the process — if they keep associating the initiatives with KEFRI and IIED they will not go far. The community should also forget about politicians because they will not solve their problems.

Agrobiodiversity, water and farmer field schools

In Jimba village an organisation called Feebs has been promoting hybrids. They sell seeds and fertiliser, and that has really affected the revival of traditional crops. Feebs has been training farmers to use hybrids and to tell the community to buy seeds, but hybrids need a lot of chemicals. The farmers have water pans sunk by the irrigation board, but don't have pumps to get the water. When they go to the county government they are told to go to the national government and vice versa. It was suggested that when they seek support from the government, they need a good strategy and a group of elders to go because government officials are often reluctant to provide support.

A community researcher encouraged participants to use their own local seeds, as they know which seeds are drought tolerant and pest resistant, and said they should not listen to organisations promoting hybrids. It was suggested that, given this problem, the indigenous vegetable initiative should be prioritised. A Kaya elder mentioned that there are cheap water pumps costing KSh40 or even KSh15 from China, and there are traditional pumps that can be locally made. He said he is already irrigating using electricity to pump water from a far distance. Indigenous vegetables have very big market demand. One lady grows *muchicha* and can sell 200g in a single day (1kg fetches KSh5,000, approximately £30).

One farmer has planted many trees on the border of his farm. Obtaining water is a challenge but he uses waste household water to irrigate the trees. However when he leaves home for the day, the trees are grazed by goats. An elder has planted tamarind trees and mango trees. The tamarind died but during the last farmer field school he got some papaya seeds. He is also into poultry farming and is learning from Daniel Garero, a Kaya elder. The chicken production is good — numbers have multiplied three- to fourfold.

Farmer field schools

Participants shared progress they have made in revitalising traditional crops, following the Farmer Field School initiatives held with KALRO and traditional farmers. One farmer said he learnt about cassava farming and has planted traditional cassava. He also accessed papaya seeds and has planted ten papaya trees. He gets water from an abandoned mine that acts as a dam. He also learnt to make biopesticide using tobacco, chilli and neem, which can be mixed with seeds to store them.

A Kaya elder learnt about cassava farming and has planted a lot of it. Another farmer said he has planted 50 stems of cassava — he learnt the traditional way to plant it in small pieces and germinate it, and when it is moved to the field it establishes very fast, matures very fast and produces a high yield.

A Kaya elder said he gets fuelwood for cooking from his farm — he has planted trees on the whole farm. He has also planted maize, cowpeas, cassava and lemon after attending the farmer field school. He now gets all his food from his farm.

A woman farmer reported growing *kunde* (cowpeas). She observed that “if you use traditional maize, you can eat a small amount and feel full, but with hybrids you need to eat more”. She is looking for a traditional solution to control rats, which can destroy maize and cowpeas.

Kaya forest and elephant shrew conservation

Kaya elders shared reflections on progress and challenges. They expressed gratitude for the project’s support. In Kaya Mudzi Mwiru they planted indigenous endangered species in degraded areas. A significant number of trees have become established, especially *Azelia quanzensis* (Mbambakofi), which is endangered, but grazing in the Kaya and drought affected tree survival. There are some butterfly species that have been seen that could not be seen before. The elders believe that the elephant shrew population has not changed as people keep hunting bushmeat.

In Kaya Mudzi Muvya, livestock grazing is a major challenge for elephant shrew habitats. Although the Kaya elders have planted new trees, big trees are being harvested continuously. Even talking to livestock elders has not helped as they are unwilling to listen. Forest guards have not been able to contain the situation. In Kaya Bomu and Fimboni, they planted trees but some were lost to drought and livestock. The chief’s office was put on Kaya land to act as the eyes for conservation of the Kayas but that has not helped (the chief allowed an MP to clear part of the Kaya for a football pitch). There is also a separatist group from Mombasa (MRC) that meets in the Kayas and makes them insecure. KFS patrolled the forest and found that there are only approximately 46 monkeys left as people eat monkeys even more than cows. There are about 1,218 baboons.

Kaya elders should work with the administration to ensure it stops the grazing in Kaya forests. It was suggested that Kaya elders and community researchers should visit the assistant county commissioner (ACC) in charge of Rabai subcounty, that Tsui (a community researcher) could lead the process and that KEFRI can help set up the meeting. The ACC can help ensure that chiefs are accountable and instruct them to enhance their accountability. The president of Kenya made a statement a few days ago that there should be no grazing in forests.

A participant asked if Kaya forests can be fenced, like Arabuko Sokoke forest. It was agreed that they should visit the deputy county commissioner and ACC first, and then think about fencing if that does not work. The county director for culture said he will employ forest guards but that can take time, even ten years, and county forest guards may not be for Rabai.

The project (with IIED co-funding) will purchase goats, as requested by the community, to enhance livelihoods and food security and reduce pressure on bushmeat. However, a Kaya elder said that giving goats to poachers is unlikely to reduce poaching of elephant shrew as those who are not given goats may start poaching so that they also get given goats.

Kenya Wildlife Service has laws that prohibit hunting bushmeat, and if they catch people hunting, they arrest them. It recently revised the laws to impose a heavy penalty for poaching elephant shrew, but it has not made a difference.

People are even cutting down trees in sacred areas of the forests. Kaya elders should look for a long-lasting solution. They used to administer oaths, which created fear of going to the forest and stopped people going there. A woman suggested that the community could go to the forest and collect what they need, but only dry matter, once a year. In the past, Kaya elders could allow a family to collect in the forest but only for three months. But now “because of the huge demand of the stomach, people go there all the time”, and the population has increased.

Dialogue: cultural revival for forest conservation

Simon Mitambo (SALT) asked why the community couldn't also perform an oath. A Kaya elder explained that oaths are no longer being performed to conserve forests, because according to Rabai culture, people have a responsibility to take care of their sister and brother and if the elders perform an oath it could kill Rabai people, so it would go against that responsibility — “those going to the forest are Rabai people and I know them”.

Simon suggested that perhaps the community can have dialogues to find a solution. They had a similar problem in one forest in Tharaka, and the elders said they could perform an oath and if a person dies that is OK. They had a community meeting to discuss the issue and clearly indicated to the community that the forest was being destroyed but when they had asked people to stop destroying it, it was not happening. They told the community that they would perform a ritual — after which people should not go to the forest and whoever does would face consequences — and they asked the community to spread the message. After the ritual the community stopped destroying the forest. “In dialogues we keep on discussing these issues and those stories should not be forgotten. On the first day we heard that *rome* and *chikokoto* have been lost and the Kaya Court is weak, but we didn't come to an agreement on how to address these issues. The dialogues should make elders stronger so when they say something the community listens.”

Simon added that the question of oaths is a difficult one, but the elders should provide leadership. “The kind of fire we light here should be very big and should be able to go over rivers and water bodies all across Kenya”. He said that “the connection between the community and the landscape — birds, insects and so on — is very important. The community and elders should put everything we are doing on a weighing scale of culture, these should be connected to cultural issues we want to revive. If you perform a ritual for eight days it will give you strength. So, rituals should be regular, they are a very important element of culture. Community meetings should be encouraged because they bring people together. Being old is about wisdom, not age, and white hair does not mean you are a witch. Ancestral wisdom is very important and should be integrated in the dialogues. As a woman said earlier, there could be an arrangement where they can go to the forest for a few months only, but not take any machete or tools. Since youth are in the dialogue they can explain to the rest of the community that elders do not perform witchcraft.”

Daniel Garero, a Kaya elder, responded that for this process to succeed, the community should first accept that they are Rabais. “If they accept that and practice their culture then they will protect their resources. But if they adopt other peoples' way of life that is not going to happen.”

A village elder added that “our life is anchored in traditional knowledge, practices and beliefs”. In the past every household that was not Muslim or Christian had a *tego*, and when they felt threatened, they would use it to protect the family. Kaya elders should sit and agree that they can perform an oath to stop everyone from destroying the forest, not just the Rabai community. So if someone goes to the Kaya forest they will become sick and it will be a lesson for others. Simon added that Kayas are like a church.

Daniel said that to be a Kaya elder is twofold. He used to go to church in Rabai and the ancestors told him to get out of the church and join the Council of Kaya Elders. The elders take an oath, which has several stages. In part one of the oath you have to commit to taking care of young children; in part two you commit to not having extramarital affairs. You don't go to the Kayas to cast someone to die, if you do that you die yourself. A person went to the forest to take wood and he died from a heavy load, but people said Kaya elders are witches.

Simon responded that Kaya elders are not witches but if you go to the Kaya and do bad things, you will bewitch yourself. In his culture, when you do something against the culture something bad will happen to you. Asha (a community researcher) mentioned that in Digo Kayas they found trees that had fallen and dried and no-one had collected them — they believe that when you cut a tree in Digo you see blood coming out.

Tsui (a community researcher) said that Rabais use palm wine. In the past, Rabai elders were the best wine tappers in the county. He wants their palm wine to be the best so it can be trusted. Elders made a law that you cannot add water to palm wine in Rabai.

Elders do not perform oaths to kill others in the community but to protect their resources. There is a group called the Rabai Progressive Association that is bringing together elites who have gone to school and want to ensure that resources are well managed. Tsui said that it would be best to include them in this discussion. Simon said that in Tharaka they also brought many elites on board.

One participant noted that everyone in Rabai has been given a herbal application to prevent them from being bewitched and bewitching others. A Kaya elder added that meeting with government authorities is the solution, rather than an oath, because “if we perform an oath it lasts for three months and if anyone is found guilty of breaking it in that time they will die”. So he is against an oath because, for example, the child of a neighbour could die.

Closing reflections: cultural revival and the BCHT

Mwaniki (SALT): “When we lose our way (that is, our culture) it takes time to come back. SALT is for alternative learning, not what you learn from school but from elders. So you have to unlearn modern education and then learn again about traditional knowledge and culture. In the morning, we asked for a Rabai song and it took time for someone to offer it, but then it went off well. When we initiated the process in Tharaka there was a lot of resistance and we were told that if we tried to revive traditional culture we would be banned, like mob justice. But we got encouragement from an elder. When we started, we asked an elder to pray and he said, “Let us face Mount Kenya when we pray”. So since then when we meet once a month, that is how we pray. We started being 15 people and now we are 300 who meet. We have saved forests which are not touched because if you cut a tree, you create a calamity in your family. Since establishing SALT, Simon has opened a school with about 300 students. Kenya’s new competence-based curriculum has traditional knowledge in it. The community should always assume that KEFRI, IIED and SALT are not here and work independently, you should not wait. We have a cultural festival every 1 September, it’s called Peace Day and even top church officials participate and even pray in the festival. Simon is still here living, he was not killed despite the threat from the community. It’s a commitment — start slowly and the process will build up.”

Omari (Kaya elder): “I am very grateful for the session, it has been very educative. If we in Rabai don’t accept ourselves as Rabai culture, nothing will change. As Kaya elders we work for the Rabai community. When resources are destroyed the community suffers more than the Kaya elders. In the past there were fines — *koma* — for destroying Kaya forests, and if we impose fines we will succeed. If people respect the traditional structures, then things will change. We have 21 clans in Rabai, but only 3 are represented among the Kaya elders, not even half. Will the ancestors be happy about that? If anyone wants to join as a Kaya elder, we will support them. I am thankful for Tharaka for coming so we can correct that and get back on track with our culture.”

Simon (SALT): “I encourage you to continue with village meetings and initiate clan meetings. The dialogue that we started has created a good rapport. These dialogues should continue at clan and village level even without us because the project has a very short time left. At some point we could come in and facilitate, and women should even have their own sessions and youth can also. Nothing is outdated, the whole world is looking at culture, and culture is not witchcraft.”

Chemuku (KEFRI): Mwaniki inspired me through his spiritual story and we should emulate that, so we will continue the BCHT process, and emphasise the process not the project so it can continue beyond December. I urge the community to continue with dialogues from household to village to clan level, because solutions should be developed locally. I also emphasise the importance of unity of purpose, so this BCHT initiative can grow and give rise to more BCHTs in Kenya and across Africa.

Day four: Biocultural festival

The Kaya elders organised a half day biocultural festival for workshop participants and other community members, including young people and children, in the Rabai Cultural Village, next to Kaya Mudzi Muvya. The community performed several traditional dances accompanied by traditional music and songs. A community researcher (Rehema) explained displays of traditional crops and seeds, including three different maize varieties (yellow, red and grey), four types of cassava with different properties including good taste and strong drought resistance, and two cowpea varieties (brown and black). The Rabai people plant the three maize varieties together so that one will survive — this is more important than yield. Biocultural products were also displayed, including honey, brooms, mats, baskets, coconut oil and traditional coconut presses to make oil.

The Kaya elders then performed a traditional ritual. They held a cockerel and a goat and an elder sat on the ground facing where the sun sets to lead the prayer. He prayed to different ancestors, saying that the ancestors connect us to God and that we share wine with them, and he poured coconut wine on the ground.

A Kaya elder explained the history and identity of Rabai people. They came from South Somalia, from Shungwaya. But there were misunderstandings so their neighbours, the Gala people, were hostile, quarrelling over ownership of livestock. So they decided to leave. All nine Mijikenda tribes were together. The Giriama settled in Godoma (they were tired). The others went on and the Kauma also got tired and settled, then the Chonyi, Jibana, then Kambe and Ribe settled. They all settled near forests as they were scared, they thought the Gala people were following them. So the Rabai settled here. They started settling outside the Kaya forests but the Gala people were still following so they settled in the forest so they were safe. They stayed in the forest for some time. The forest became a sacred place because they felt safe and close to God in the forest. That's why all Mijikenda are attached to forests. Elders were buried in forests and even today some are buried in Kayas.

He said that Rabai are a peace-loving people. In 1993 there were some wars in Kwale county and people from Kwale came and settled here in this forest. There was an army around Duruma in Kwale and it was not understood so people ran away and remained in this forest and felt safe. So those destroying forests should understand that there is safety in these forests.

Another Kaya elder (Omari) explained Rabai's cultural values. He is a Kaya elder of high rank. He explained that *mudzi* means homestead with different houses together. As Rabai people used to live together and not leave the village, they used to live in harmony. They had *umwenga*, which means unity, living together, and the coming together of people for a common purpose during different festivals like weddings. For example, Omari explained, "If I am taking a dowry to my in-laws, I have to look for some of my brothers, it shows love. If I am going to pay a dowry for my son, my brother will do it with me — this shows *umwenga*. *Umwenga* was also seen in funerals when different tribes came together and helped each other in rituals. It was a very important value, but now things have changed. *Umwenga* was also shown during farming because people farmed in groups — they called it *chicola* in Rabai."

Omari also explained that "*Soyosoyo* means peace, it goes hand in hand with *umwenga*. Brothers or neighbours will only come together when there is peace. *Kufaana* means exchange and sharing, for example, of seeds. Nowadays we don't even share food, sometimes our neighbour dies of hunger. Neighbours used to share whatever they had. *Kufaana* also means barter exchange and reciprocity. We were exemplary in conserving our forest and environment but nowadays we're becoming destructive, because of so-called 'development'. We need to come back to our olden days culture and preserve it."

He thanked those from Tharaka for the knowledge they imparted. He said, "We should be proud to be Rabais and should be serious in our culture. Religion has now divided us, but we should still be Rabais because we all speak one language — Rabai. We should preserve our core Rabai values — *umwenga*, *soyosoyo* and *kufaana*, so we succeed in preserving our culture."

The festival ended with a traditional lunch, including three types of maize and cowpeas.

Reflections on the dialogue and workshop

The biocultural festival was the first time that Kaya elders had spoken about their cultural values, history and identity at a project workshop — previously they had not been forthcoming in speaking about their culture. The dialogue process on day one stimulated some lively unfacilitated discussion among community participants about their culture. On day two, during the session to reflect on the dialogue, participants stood up and chanted that they are Rabais, so the dialogue clearly reaffirmed a sense of Rabai identity. On day three, the dialogue session in the afternoon also stimulated animated discussion among community members and surfaced some critical issues in cultural revival for forest conservation.

The format of holding the workshop under a tree on days one and three worked very well in fostering active community participation and breaking down hierarchies between external organisations and the community. It was felt that day two should be held in an indoor venue since government officials joined the workshop. Since there was only one day with government officials, and we wanted to include space for a reflection on the dialogue on day one to maintain the momentum, this day became rather long. On reflection, it might have been better to have held all three days' proceedings in an outdoor setting, including the day with government officials, so that we did not have such a long day on day two, as we had to cover a lot of agenda items with government officials present. This would have also fostered a more informal, non-hierarchical and power-equalising approach. Overall, the combined dialogue and workshop approach certainly contributed to the revitalisation and reaffirmation of Rabai culture and identity and to the building of momentum for the BCHT process to continue beyond the project.

Annex 1: Programme for the workshop, 19–22 March 2024

Day one: 19 March 2024, community dialogue for cultural revival

Time	Presentation	Responsible person
9.30–12.30pm	Community dialogues with Rabai community	Kaya elders S Mitambo
12.30–1.30pm	Lunch break	A Kisali, C Kendi
2.00–4.00pm	Community dialogues with Rabai community	Community members S Mitambo
4.00–4.30pm	Recap of day one activities	S Mitambo
4.30–5.00pm	Travel back to Mariakani	All participants

Day two: 20 March 2024, stakeholder workshop

Time	Presentation	Presenter
9.00–9.10am	Traditional Rabai prayer	Kaya elder
9.10–10.00am	Welcoming remarks Self-introduction	L Ndalilo
10.00–10.05am	Remarks and official opening of workshop by the area chief	A Jao
10.05–10.15am	Background to the BCHT process, recap of day one, objectives of the workshop and overview of the agenda.	C Wekesa
10.15–10.45am	Reflections on the dialogue process from day one — to keep the momentum going and build consensus around revitalising culture/establishing a BCHT association. Reflections on the dialogue.	All participants
10.45–11.15am	Tea break	A Kisali, C Kendi
11.15–11.35am	Main project activities, achievements and challenges, results of dialogues on BCHT association objectives/vision and values/principles.	L Ndalilo
11.35–1.00pm	Stories of change: perspective from ten villages in Rabai community following the process of BCHT establishment.	Kaya elders Youth and women representatives
1.00–2.00pm	Lunch break	A Kisali, C Kendi
2.00–2.10pm	Perspectives from Potato Park: approach and lessons learned	K Swiderska
2.10–2.30pm	Questions and discussion	All participants
2.30–2.50pm	Experience of Tharaka Nithi community: modalities for revitalisation of cultural practises and values, spirituality, traditional knowledge and beliefs.	S Mitambo

2.50–3.10pm	Questions and discussion	A community member from each of the villages
3.10–4.10pm	Round table discussion: would it be useful to establish a collective BCHT in Rabai and why?	All participants
4.10–4.30pm	Remarks from key stakeholders: Local administration Kaya elders KEFRI NMK County director for culture County Government for Planning	C Ngome O Jembe L Wekesa M Musingo L Chiro B Kalume N Kiamba
4.30–4.40pm	Way forward	C Wekesa
4.40–4.50pm	Closing remarks	M Musingo
4.50–5.10pm	Closing prayer, tea break and departure	A Kisali, C Kendi

Day three: 21 March 2023, community engagement

Time	Presentation	Presenter
9.00–9.10am	Prayers	Volunteer
9.10–9.30am	Welcome remarks and recap of day two activities	L Ndalilo
9.30–10.30am	Progress of implementation of microenterprises and farmer field schools, cultural village and fuel-efficient stoves	Community researchers
11.00–11.30am	Tea break	A Kisali
11.00–1.00 pm	Challenges with microenterprises	All participants
1.00–2.00pm	Lunch	A Kisali
2.00–3.30pm	Developing a common vision/agreement between all Rabai villages on the goal and key values/principles of a community/BCHT association <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group discussions and presentations • Plenary discussion of the presentations 	All participants
3.30–4.00pm	Kaya forests conservation/tree restoration/ butterflies/elephant shrew conservation – challenges	C Wekesa
4.00–5.00pm	Next steps: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogue process; cultural revival, BCHT, microenterprises, farmer field schools etc. • Activities the community would wish to continue with after the project closure 	C Wekesa
5.00–5.15pm	Departure	All

Day four: 22 March 2024, cultural festival

Time	Presentation	Responsible person
9.00–9.10am	Welcoming of guests through a traditional song and dance as guests take fresh coconut juice (<i>madafu</i>)	Rabai Cultural V members
9.10–9.20am	Prayers and Kuhasa (seeking blessings from ancestors through a ritual)	Kaya elders
9.20–10.00am	Exhibitions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional crop varieties • Landrace seeds • Traditional food • Traditional artifacts • Biocultural products (brooms, honey, virgin coconut oil, briquettes) 	Community members
10.00–11.00am	Traditional songs and dances <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ngonda: Bofu cultural village • Sayo: Mwamtsunga village • Sengenya and Chela: Buni and Mgumo wa Patsa • Ngonda 	Community members from various villages
11.00–12.00am	Overview of the history of the Mijikenda/Rabai community, cultural values, traditional concepts and beliefs	Kaya elders (Mzee Omari and Mzee Fondo)
	How can traditional festivals be used to revive culture?	Plenary discussion
	Remarks by local administration	A Jao
	Remarks by SALT	S Mitambo
	Remarks by IIED	K Swiderska
	Remarks by KEFRI	C Wekesa
12.00–12.30am	Vote of thanks	Community member
12.30–12.40am	Closing prayers and blessings for food	Kaya elder
12.40–2.00pm	Lunch (Traditional food to be served)	Community members Community researchers
2.00pm	Guests leave at their pleasure	All participants

This workshop brought together around 50 community participants from ten villages and government agencies for the third annual workshop for the project, 'Establishing a biocultural heritage territory to protect Kenya's Kaya forests'. The project aims to conserve biodiversity and genetic resources in four sacred Kaya forests and across the landscape. It also aims to enhance livelihoods and establish a community institution for collective governance of the Rabai Biocultural Heritage Territory.

The workshop included a community dialogue on cultural revival and customary governance, a review of project progress and a discussion of challenges, and ended with a biocultural festival. This report summarises the key discussions and reflections from the four days.



Event Materials

Food systems; Natural resource management

Keywords:
Biocultural heritage, food systems,
Indigenous Peoples, traditional knowledge



International Institute for Environment and Development
44 Southampton Buildings, London, WC2A 1AP, United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
www.iied.org



**UK International
Development**

Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

Funded by the UK government through the Darwin Initiative