

Learning exchange and community dialogue

24–25 March 2025
Rabai, Kenya

Event report

Establishing a biocultural heritage territory in Rabai

Organised by IIED and Rabai Community, with Society for Alternative Learning and Transformation (SALT)



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About the event

For more information about this report, or the process to establish a biocultural heritage territory in Rabai, visit www.iied.org/establishing-biocultural-heritage-territory-protect-kenyas-kaya-forests or contact Krystyna Swiderska at krystyna.swiderska@iied.org. For more information about the Biocultural Heritage Initiative, visit www.biocultural.iied.org/who-we-are


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Contents

Summary	2
Introduction	4
Establishing a self-governed biocultural territory in Rabai	4
Community dialogue: objectives and co-design	5
Community dialogue methodology	7
Day 1: 24 March 2025	8
Opening session and introduction to community dialogue	8
Introducing the community dialogue approach (SALT)	8
The story of the Rabai Mijikenda sub-tribe	9
The story of the Potato Park — a far-away success	12
Adapting the Potato Park model and registering a BCHAT Association in Rabai	13
Day 2: 25 March 2025	15
Opening and traditional prayer	15
The Story of the Tharaka — a nearby success	15
Community dialogue approach for cultural revival (SALT)	17
Rabai clan dialogues: feedback from group discussions	18
Addressing key challenges: religion and traditional governance	19
Registering Kaya forests as community land	20
Next steps	21
References	22

Summary

Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework aims to ensure that 30% of land, waters and seas are effectively conserved by 2030, through equitably governed protected areas or other effective area-based conservation measures “recognizing indigenous and traditional territories” and “respecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, including over their traditional territories”. Evidence shows that where communities have primary control or autonomy in conservation, ecological and social outcomes are strongest.

Biocultural heritage territories (BCHTs) are collectively self-governed Indigenous and traditional territories. The Potato Park BCHT in Peru is a successful example. It is governed through Andean customary laws and has had multiple impacts for biodiversity, livelihoods, food and nutrition, climate resilience, rights and culture. From 2021–2024, IIED and Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI) worked with Rabai community, a Mijikenda sub-tribe in Kilifi county, coastal Kenya, to support a community-led process to establish a BCHT inspired by the Potato Park model, with funding from a Darwin Initiative project. The aim is to conserve biodiversity in sacred Kaya forests and surrounding landscapes by revitalising associated cultural heritage and conserving biocultural heritage as a whole. Kaya forests, part of a global biodiversity hotspot, have traditionally been conserved through customary laws and taboos, but are being degraded as many young and many middle-aged people have turned away from traditional culture and adopted external religions.

A two-day community dialogue and learning exchange was held in Rabai on 24–25 March 2025, to further support the process to establish a BCHT. The event brought together Kaya elders, village elders, community researchers, women and youth from ten Rabai villages, as well as Rabai Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs (local government), National Museums of Kenya (NMK), and KEFRI. It was co-designed with and facilitated by Kaya elders and Society for Alternative Learning and Transformation (SALT), and used SALT’s community dialogue methodology, which has successfully revitalised traditional culture and governance in Tharaka, central Kenya. The dialogue aimed to share the stories of Rabai, Tharaka and the Potato Park for mutual learning, explore how Rabai’s BCHT governance institution can be rooted in traditional governance and be self-sustaining, identify priorities for collective action to address key challenges, and inspire a process to revitalise culture in Rabai.

The community dialogue was held in Chang’ombe village under a tree. Participants sat in a circle to reduce knowledge hierarchies, and traditional food was cooked by the community. Community dialogues aim to encourage and inspire cultural revival through storytelling, lamenting the loss of culture and creating the conditions for culture to emerge. They are a sacred process, not a normal meeting, as they involve deep traditional prayers, reconnection with ancestors, transmission of traditional knowledge from elders to youth and immersion in traditions and culture. People are asked to share their clans and totems to connect to culture and nature. Facilitators pick up on what participants say so the content comes from them. The aim is to stimulate community discussion and a self-sustaining process of dialogues.

A Kaya elder shared Rabai’s story of origin. The Mijikenda migrated from Somalia in the 1500s and settled in nine locations, including Rabai, or ‘Rahai’, meaning happiness. They settled in four Kaya forests as safe places, and used the forests for medicine and everything. They ate traditional foods, which were healthier as people didn’t get diseases like cancer and children’s memories were better. They used to have traditional administration and conflict resolution, which was better as it centered on restorative justice and never brought hatred as it does today. But now many people can’t remember their clans and don’t know the relevance of certain trees and there is a lot of destruction of Kaya forests so there is much less rain.

Participants noted that many aspects of Rabai culture have been lost. Previously, seeds had to be blessed by Kaya elders before planting and more elders conducted rituals. Christian and Muslim religions have weakened traditional religion, Kaya elders are accused of witchcraft and sacred Kaya forests are disrespected. There is a need to bring different religions together to enhance mutual understanding. Scarcity of rain has also led to increased forest destruction. Parents do not cook healthy traditional foods as children don’t like the taste. Elders can no longer read natural signs or speak fluent Rabai. There is a shortage of Kaya elders because of other religions and modern life. Things started going wrong when people started embracing different religions and colonial administrations more than their own. In areas where Chiefs incorporate themselves in traditional governance things work well.

IIED told the story of the Potato Park in Peru, a far-away success. Peru was colonised by the Spanish in the 1500s. In 1998, six Quechua communities in the Andes decided to join their lands in order to restore native potatoes and defend their territory and culture against mining. The Potato Park has a different climate and culture but has sacred mountains, just as Rabai has sacred forests. It established a Potato Park Association with elected Indigenous representatives from each community, which governs the landscape collectively based on the Andean concept of holistic wellbeing and customary law principles. The Park has established several economic collectives, which generate income from sustaining biocultural heritage. Ten percent of their revenue is shared equitably among the communities through a communal fund and benefit-sharing agreement.

Rabai participants who visited the Potato Park noted that most people are Catholics but really embrace their culture, have strong unity, and continue to use medicinal plants. How can the Potato Park model be adapted to the Rabai context? A proposal for registering a Rabai BCHT Association was developed, which includes village- and landscape-level BCHT committees. These committees were established as part of the Darwin Initiative project but have not met yet, and although they include Kaya elders, only four of the ten villages have Kaya elders. Hence it was proposed that the traditional clan governance system should be strengthened and then linked to the BCHT Association or landscape committee. The size of this committee should be reduced to lower travel costs. A key challenge is that Chiefs and village elders are appointed by the government, and don't involve Kaya elders in decision making.

SALT presented the story of Tharaka, "a nearby success". The same European who went to Rabai (Dr Krapf) also named Mount Kenya and claimed to have discovered it even though there were people living there. Tharaka elders visited Colombia and South Africa, which were also colonised. In these places people have revived their culture because some children were getting sick and not growing properly as their food was not nutritious — they were selling milk to get juice, eggs to get bread etc. At first, the elders shared these stories with about 15 people in Tharaka, and then three clan groups started meeting. The elders shared stories of origin, traditional beliefs and customary laws. Meetings rotated and hosts provided food. Now all 30 clans are meeting and around 3,000 people attend meetings. They held clan meetings for five years with no external funds. Now when they get given small amounts of money it goes to the group, not individuals, so it can be shared. Money has made people in Tharaka turn away from community issues.

Rabai participants formed break-out groups in Rabai's two main clans — the duck and the moon. Both groups decided to hold monthly clan dialogues to revive traditional culture and governance. Participants agreed to strengthen traditional culture first and then hold meetings with other religions to enhance mutual respect. IIED will revise the proposal for registering the Rabai BCHT Association and KEFRI will submit it. Kaya elders will develop a succession plan. Chiefs will invite Kaya elders to meetings and respect their authority. Rabai will proceed with registering Kaya forests under the Community Lands Act.



Community dialogue in Rabai. Image credit: SALT

Introduction

Establishing a self-governed biocultural territory in Rabai

Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IP and LCs) have conserved biodiversity for centuries or millennia based on their traditional knowledge, cultural and spiritual values and customary laws. Global evidence shows that biodiversity is better conserved on Indigenous Peoples' lands and territories than on any other lands (IPBES, 2019).

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework recognises the important roles and contributions of IP and LCs in conservation as custodians of biodiversity, and emphasises the need to ensure that their rights, knowledge, values, worldviews and practices are respected. Target 3 aims to ensure that at least 30% of land, waters and seas is effectively conserved by 2030 through equitably governed protected areas or other effective area-based conservation measures, “recognising indigenous and traditional territories” and “respecting the rights of IP & LCs, including over their traditional territories”. Kenya's implementation of Target 3 (30x30) involves expanding community-led conservation through conservancies to protect biodiversity on private and community lands.

BCHTs are Indigenous and traditional territories that are collectively self-governed based on customary laws. Self-governance enables the historical continuation of traditional stewardship practices, without imposing external conservation models, conditions or restrictions. Research shows that where communities have primary control or autonomy in conservation, ecological and social outcomes are strongest (Dawson et al., 2024).

BCHTs are rooted in Indigenous and traditional values, worldviews, rights, autonomy and cultural identity. They recognise that biodiversity and cultural heritage are inextricably linked in the holistic worldviews of many Indigenous and traditional peoples, and seek to protect this interlinked heritage. They aim to revitalise traditional knowledge, values and governance institutions, to strengthen biocultural economies (monetary and non-monetary economies rooted in collective biocultural heritage), to strengthen Indigenous food systems and climate resilience, and to secure rights to land and self-determination (Swiderska et al., 2020).

Box 1. Biocultural heritage and biocultural heritage territories

The following definitions have been developed by Indigenous Peoples and their close partners:

Biocultural heritage: “Knowledge, innovations and practices of Indigenous Peoples and local communities which are often collectively held and are inextricably linked to traditional resources and territories, including the diversity of genes, varieties, species and ecosystems, cultural and spiritual values and customary laws shaped within the social-ecological context of communities” (Swiderska et al., 2022). Indigenous and traditional languages are also a vital interlinked component of biocultural heritage.

Biocultural heritage territories: “Land use mosaics encompassing Indigenous and traditional land tenure, production and exchange systems, cultural identity, community organisation and simultaneous goals of endogenous development and biodiversity conservation” (Argumedo and Swiderska, 2014).

The Potato Park in Peru is a globally recognised BCHT — a landscape of nearly 10,000 hectares, which is collectively governed by five Quechua communities. It was established in 2000 with support from Asociación ANDES (Peru), an Indigenous nongovernmental organisation (NGO). The Potato Park effectively conserves rich Andean agrobiodiversity, wildlife and ecosystems based on customary laws and the ancestral concept of Sumaq Kawsay, where the human, the wild and the sacred communities must be in balance to achieve wellbeing. The Potato Park has restored biodiversity and traditional knowledge, increased food and nutrition security and climate resilience, doubled incomes, built strong

community organisation, protected community rights, reduced conflict between communities, and is largely self-sustaining (Swiderska et al., 2020; Asociación ANDES, 2016; INMIP, 2025).

From 2021 to 2024, IIED and KEFRI worked with the Rabai community, a Mijikenda sub-tribe in Kilifi county, coastal Kenya, to support the establishment of a BCHAT inspired by the successful Potato Park in Peru, with funding from the UK Darwin Initiative. The project aimed to protect and restore biodiversity in Rabai's sacred Kaya forests and surrounding landscapes, including by establishing a collective self-governance institution at landscape level and biocultural enterprises.

Rabai has a functioning Kaya Elders' Council and Kaya court, and Kaya elders have traditionally conserved Kaya forests through customary laws and taboos. However, most young people and many middle-aged people in Rabai no longer recognise the value of traditional knowledge and culture. There has been significant erosion of traditional knowledge, culture and governance systems, due to the impact of colonial religions and administration and modernisation. Thus, there is an urgent need to reverse the loss of traditional knowledge and culture and strengthen traditional institutions, in order to protect Kaya forests, which form part of the Coastal Forest global biodiversity hotspot but are being steadily degraded.

The Potato Park provides a useful model for integrated management of landscape mosaics with protected sacred sites — in Rabai's case, forests instead of mountains. However the model needs to be adapted to the context in Rabai, which is different and more challenging, with more acute cultural erosion, greater pressure on sacred sites and weaker recognition of community rights.

Kaya forests are gazetted under the National Museums and Heritage Act and two of Rabai's Kayas are recognised as World Heritage Sites. However, this has not been enough to address degradation pressures from within the community and externally due to industrial development and proximity to Mombasa. While National Museums of Kenya recognises and supports the leadership of Kaya elders in forest conservation, Kaya forest land is owned by the county government (and held in trust for the community). Most non-Kaya land in Rabai is owned privately rather than collectively, posing a further challenge to collective governance.

This report introduces the community dialogue methodology developed by SALT and provides a record of the discussion. It aims to provide insights on how to facilitate community dialogues for reviving traditional culture and stewardship, and to inform future work to revive biocultural heritage and establish a biocultural territory in Rabai.

Community dialogue: objectives and co-design

To strengthen cultural revival and traditional governance, IIED worked with the Rabai community to organise a learning exchange and community dialogue in Rabai in March 2025. The two-day dialogue and learning exchange was facilitated with support from the Society for Alternative Learning and Transformation (SALT), an NGO which has successfully revitalised traditional culture and governance to protect sacred natural sites in Tharaka central Kenya using its community dialogue approach.

The event brought together 50 Rabai community members from ten villages involved in the process to establish a BCHAT in Rabai, including Kaya elders, village elders, community researchers, women and youth, as well as three Rabai Area Chiefs or Assistant Chiefs (local government), and representatives from KEFRI and National Museums of Kenya. It aimed to support the process to establish a BCHAT in Rabai by:

1. Sharing stories of the Rabai, Potato Park and Tharaka experiences, for mutual learning and to help address key challenges in Rabai
2. Exploring how to ensure the BCHAT process and collective governance system is self-sustaining and rooted in traditional governance
3. Identifying priorities for collective action to address key challenges, and
4. Inspiring and energising a self-sustaining process to revitalise culture in Rabai by using a community dialogue approach.

The dialogue was co-designed with Rabai community in line with the BCHT community-led approach, which seeks to revalue the knowledge and leadership of Indigenous Peoples and local communities. IIED held three meetings (video calls via WhatsApp) with Rabai's Kaya Elders' Council, community researchers/experts and village chairpersons that had been involved in the Darwin project (as part of the BCHT landscape committee, now Rome al Ravai Association). Through these meetings the objectives, agenda, facilitation roles and participants to invite were co-defined and agreed with the community. The meetings were held at a convenient time for the communities (after the weekly Kaya Elders' Council).

The dialogue was facilitated by a Kaya elder (Omari) and a community researcher (Asha), who formed part of a coordination group along with IIED and a community researcher/elder (who also acted as translator). Usually workshops in Rabai are organised and facilitated by external actors, not community members. The coordination group met each morning before the start to discuss the agenda and roles. SALT provided advice to design and facilitate the event using the community dialogue methodology. Traditional food was prepared by the community, and the event was held in a community setting under a tree rather than in a formal workshop setting, to reduce power hierarchies. Participants sat in a circle rather than in rows to denote that everyone's knowledge is equally important.



A breakout group in clan dialogues in Rabai. Credit: Krystyna Swiderska/IIED

Community dialogue methodology

The community dialogue approach developed by SALT centres around storytelling, which is not new in the African context — traditionally elders meet and tell stories. It aims to create conditions for traditional knowledge and culture to emerge, not to teach people their own culture. The purpose of dialogues is to build relationships between people, and between people and nature, and to promote knowledge sharing between elders and youth. The focus is on reviving the traditional knowledge and practices that sustained communities for generations before colonisation and all that followed, and on restoring confidence as Indigenous and traditional peoples and elders have been undermined and regarded as uneducated. The dialogues also aim to rebuild community cohesion and collective decision making.

Community dialogues need to happen regularly so that communities get back into the traditional habit of meeting frequently to reflect, discuss, analyse and make decisions. They rely on the community's elders — especially healers and custodians of seed diversity and sacred sites — sharing their traditional knowledge. Through the dialogues, communities begin to remember their origins, their identity, their knowledge and practices around seed and food diversity and customary laws and governance systems to protect their ancestral territories. Through this process communities are able to analyse their challenges and make decisions from their own cultural perspectives. Communities realise that they have answers in their rich heritage, which gives them confidence to take back control of their lives and ensure that new ideas do not undermine their integrity and autonomy.

Dialogues are also about asking if people practice their culture. Through dialogues people realise that they have lost culture, and nutritious food which forms part of culture. Taking time to lament the loss of culture is important (before discussing solutions). Dialogues can help communities to remember and revive customary laws. The Tharaka community has documented its customary laws to share with the community and government, and through that process it has adopted its customary laws. The elders respect customary laws and believe they complement government laws as they are not very different to some of them, such as the Forest Act.

Dialogues are not normal meetings, they are a sacred process — a process of remembering and reviving traditions and culture, which is also experiential, immersing people in culture. Sometimes the stories shared are mystical. Dialogues start with a traditional ritual and prayer that connects people with the ancestors, who are not just people but also the sun and moon, rocks, water, plants and animals. People may face the sun or the forest to pray, which reflects and reaffirms their cosmology. When people introduce themselves they are asked to share their clan name and totem, which helps to revive these and to strengthen relationships with nature and between people with the same totem. The first session often includes a 'mystica' to ground people, where participants walk out individually to connect with nature (for example, to a forest) and then share reflections on what they saw and heard, which stimulates sharing of traditional ecological knowledge (see Swiderska et al., 2024).

The dialogue process is not a blueprint but is adapted to different contexts. Facilitators do not set an agenda but "come with an intention and tap into the energy" (Simon Mitambo, personal communication). This starts right from the self-introductions (or 'check-in') — the facilitators pick up on what people say, so the content of the dialogue is shaped by participants. The facilitators repeat things that participants say so everyone feels that they have contributed and own the process.

Community dialogues can also entail participatory mapping. For example, each household can indicate if they are using traditional or modern varieties and whether they have a Kaya elder or someone with traditional knowledge, using colours (as elders may be illiterate). This can create a baseline to monitor progress — the Tharaka did this in 2023 and again in 2025.

Day 1: 24 March 2025

Opening session and introduction to community dialogue

Omari (Kaya elder) and Daniel (Chair of Rabai's Kaya Elders' Council) opened the workshop with the traditional Rabai saying "mudzi similani" meaning "attention homestead". Rabai's Chiefs from Mwawesa Ward (where the workshop was held) and from neighbouring Ruruma Ward also welcomed participants. IIED introduced the objectives of the dialogue and learning exchange, emphasising that it is a space where everyone's knowledge is valued equally. A Kaya elder performed a traditional prayer.

Participants were invited to introduce themselves stating their name, organisation or village, clan name and totem. Most people from Rabai remembered their fathers' clan names and totems and some remembered their mothers' clan — for example, Monso, Cuva, Kavio, Mansaro Mamuru, Kariaka, Mamkamba, Pagala, Gaya, Tsongo (bird), Mamtukuyo, Kisere, Mandeje, Mbetsa, Mamunga, Kulo. The Tharaka participants also shared their clans and totems: Mwaniki's is the Tuiga clan (giraffe), and Simon's are the moon clan and the elephant clan.

Introducing the community dialogue approach (SALT)

Mwaniki Mwanaah (SALT): I can see that you are eating traditional food and that you are happy because you are sitting in a circle. I can see that elders and youth are participating — in Tharaka we have a traditional school so kids can learn about their culture.

We tell stories. Do you tell stories? Sometimes we forget our clan names and traditions because we don't use them every day. If we eat cassava and don't cultivate it then it gets lost. We started dialogues since 2013, so that elders sit together and talk. When you sit together as Kaya elders there are things that you share. For example, if taking coconut wine you talk, or in the mosque or church. If we continue talking with elders and clans we don't forget our traditional knowledge.

In Tharaka when we started having dialogues we realised we had lost so many values. Some of you came to Tharaka and saw that dialogues are just about talking. So if some people can't remember we can start training the clan just through our talk. Some people from Rabai came to Tharaka, they learnt about Tharaka and its culture, and we have also learnt about Rabai's culture.

We don't come to teach you your culture but to learn. Like when you go to a mosque you hear prayers, it is the same for traditional culture, so it is ongoing. Some people may say it is witchcraft but we should not be scared. If Kaya elders go to the forest it should seem normal. We have come to encourage you so you can continue your culture.

Simon Mitambo (SALT): Tharaka is near Mount Kenya — we believe our god resides on top of that mountain. We've not come to teach you your traditions, but to encourage you. Customs are not just about praying in Kaya forests but also about the food we eat, for example, cassava. The food we eat here is different to in Tharaka because it reflects our culture. Our customs may be identified by the food we eat. The traditional food was good. Elders don't wear shirts — that shows they are strong and that is because of the food they eat.

The clans come from certain relationships, like with birds, animals, and show there is relationship with them. My clan Nyaga is connected to the moon, which shows we are connected to our environment. Our communities are killing animals and cutting trees, which shows that culture is being lost, so we should try to reverse that. Culture comes with religion, environment and our traditional clothes and dances. Our talk today will help us to identify ourselves — we have not come to teach you. If we stick to our customs then when someone mentions their name we know they are from a particular clan.

At the community dialogue in Rabai last year, we took off our shoes and went for a walk and that way we can identify ourselves with our culture and clan — for example, the Tsonga (bird) clan. Sometimes if we take off our shoes we can connect with the land, but if we keep our shoes on there is no connection with the land. There is some magnetism when you take your shoes off. If lightning strikes and you are not wearing shoes, you get a shock so that shows the connection.

The difference between this meeting and other meetings (for example, in the Chief's office) is that in those meetings you are not asked about your clan. This meeting is connected with culture — that's why we asked about your clans and totems/environment — it connects us with our culture. Life is like a

cycle — we start as a baby and end as a baby, so we believe there is no death and so our ancestors are still connected to us. Here you have names like birds, and in Tharaka we have different animals, so it shows that our cultures are different. Culture is carried forward from elders to young people so it's good to be close to elders so that culture is passed on.

The story of the Rabai Mijikenda sub-tribe

Omari (Kaya elder): We've learnt a lot from SALT and Rabai community can now focus on how to forge ahead. I want to talk about the origin of Rabai. All Mijikenda sub-tribes — Giriama, Digo etc., migrated from Shungwaya in southern Somalia. We all started as one tribe and now there are nine sub-tribes. Rabai or 'Rahai' means happiness because when they came to this place they saw that there was happiness so they called it Rabai. We settled in Kaya forests in Rabai. There are different Kayas — Mudzi Muvya, Bomu, Fimboni etc. Kaya means home, and Mudzi means homestead, so for Rabais home is the Kaya forests. Soyosoyo is a core value, meaning peace.

Deep in Kaya forests our elders used to stay in small houses. Because we love God there are even places for worship in Kaya forests and places where we offer sacrifices. When the Maasai came to take our cattle, the Kayas were a safe place, so our ancestors hid there. There was no medicine like today, they used trees for medicine so the forest was everything to them. Even for cooking nowadays people don't use good oil, and people get sicknesses like cancer because their oil and food is not good. In the past food was usually boiled not fried. We had different traditional foods like cassava — those foods were healthy, unlike the foods that people use now. Traditional foods build our memories — now our children's memories are not as good as before.

We used to have traditional administration and conflict resolution. Nowadays people must go to the police station, but before our elders sat and arbitrated. In the past, elders sat with kids to try to advise and resolve issues, and when they persisted they involved uncles and aunts. The traditional way of solving disputes was friendly and never brought hatred as it does today, so it was better. Justice was restorative, not like a court case. We've come together to talk so we can see how we can revive our culture and bring more friendliness because in the new system there is a lot of hatred and unfriendliness. There are other places where culture is still observed by religious leaders and government officials. Now many people can't even remember their clan and don't know the relevance of certain trees, so soon our kids will be totally lost. It is good to learn from each other and about our culture so we can try to restore our culture.

This Kaya forest was very important for our rains, it used to give us a lot of rain. There were trees like Mwensi that gave us signs and we knew the rain was coming but now those trees are getting lost. There is a lot of destruction and logging so the rains are a bit scarce and the situation is worsening.

Chief: I'm not that old but I saw good things in the past. The traditional governance system was more active — when people missed a meeting there were traditional fines. Before planting seeds they had to be blessed by Kaya elders, but Christian and Islamic religions have destroyed that a bit. We need to have a meeting that brings together different religions and levels the ground, so that things that are important for culture and customs are incorporated and people who go to church and mosques don't feel that Rabai culture is witchcraft or something bad. Rabai customs are not documented but at least there should be dialogue between different actors so they come together. Before we had chairs made from coconut trees (not plastic).

Catherine (community researcher): In the traditional way of cooking we used coconut oil but nowadays people use animal fat so it is not healthy, and kids don't like the taste of traditional foods. Everything should start from us — from the elders to our children, so we teach them. I used to cook traditional food but now parents don't give it to their kids. It is high time we restart giving it to our children. We are not badly off but our kids and grandkids have problems.

Village elder: Omari said that trees gave signals to indicate when it is going to rain and how the environment was, but as elders we can't even read the signs or speak fluent Rabai language. In the traditional new year ceremony ashes were spread around houses and roads. The rains were reliable but now they are not, and some traditional foods are getting lost. Because of scarcity of rain, we are getting forest and environmental destruction.

Kaya elder: I encourage us to embrace our culture because there was a saying that if we forget our culture we suffer — now we are suffering because we are starting to lose our culture. When we were young there were only three religions — Christian, Islamic and traditional. We've lost our customs and now we are suffering, are we not? Nowadays even charcoal is being made inside the forest. There was a certain tree that we climbed every year and attached a flag of Rabai to it, but now the tree has been cut down. We need to have a community dialogue so we can restore whatever was lost. When we went to Tharaka different religions came together but here it is not possible. When I pass a church with young people, they see me as Satan. Now people have started disrespecting Kaya forests, there are even condoms in Kayas, it is like defecation in a church or mosque, very bad. We blame lack of rains on road construction but that is not the case.

Woman: We used to use traditional utensils, my grandmother was a Kaya elder and used traditional utensils, but nowadays we are turning western. I bought a traditional pot but my kids couldn't even take it out of the fire, they said it was too hot. Nowadays people are dressing differently, have lost the traditional dress. People should start the change to revive culture. Even some youth now admire it and want some traditional things to be done.

Village chairman (BCHT): As Rabai we have clans. It is good that Rabai Chiefs are here, as they can help to bring clans together. For example, the Chief from Mwawesa can call communities to a meeting and say every clan is supposed to be there, and can help communities to choose their own leaders. Nowadays people are buried facing upwards but before they were not buried that way.

Village elder: As Rabai we don't appreciate our clan whereby every clan has its own tradition, but every clan has left it. Nowadays most people want to be associated with western ways so we don't want to see ourselves as us. We don't have to be like western people, we thank God for the way we are. It's not a must for us to be like western people. In Tharaka at home they are united so I want to go there to learn more. If you are from Rabai and a Christian you have to appreciate that you are a Rabai. In Tharaka there are Christians and Muslims but they are united as clans. So people from Tharaka want to help us to bring back Rabai culture.

Daniel Garero (Kaya elder): As Rabai people we should appreciate we are from Rabai so we can come together.

Chief: For a person to be a Kaya elder, how old do they need to be? Can everyone go to Kaya forests or only specific people? Some people call themselves Kaya elders but are not. Can anyone be a Kaya elder or are there some rules which mean some people can't be? There are young men who call themselves Kaya elders. Can a priest be a Kaya elder?

Village elder: There are things I used to see from my grandfathers' time but nowadays I don't see them. My grandfather never slept in an iron sheet house or a bed. They used to clear the roads towards their home every year. My grandfather used to do certain rituals but he is not here now. So I want to ask the Tharaka — how do you deal with modernisation in your place?

Village chairman: There is a group of youths, male and female, who claim to be Kaya elders and go to the forest for prayers. It seems like a cult. I am seeking clarification from Kaya elders.

Omari: We've come to learn so the people who asked us about this may also have answers.

Daniel Garero: In Rabai there are two clans — one from the duck and one from the moon. The Chief is aware of what is happening and knows that the young boys and girls who say they are Kaya elders are not going the correct way. The Chiefs have responsibility to help, so they need to take action.

Omari: There is a protocol for anyone to join the Kaya elders, and those young people have not followed it so they can't be called Kaya elders. The clans of Rabai are the moon and the duck — if you are in one of the clans you know where to construct your home.

Daniel Garero: There is a shortage of Kaya elders because now so many people don't want to embrace it. When a clan elder dies people are meant to inherit this role but they don't want to now because of external religion. Some clans are not represented as Kaya elders, but because of modern life people don't want to volunteer to be Kaya elders.

Omari: Once a person volunteers to be a Kaya elder they have to get seven bottles of coconut oil and 120 Kenyan Shillings to be integrated, so it is very cheap to be a Kaya elder but people don't volunteer.

Lawrence Chiro (NMK): The Chief was asking questions about youth claiming to be Kaya elders but these questions are security issues so the Chief should take action, it is his responsibility.

Simon Mitambo (SALT): This is a very healthy discussion regarding modernisation and how we deal with it. In Tharaka we also see that culture is practiced by people who never went to school. We assume that people who are Islamic or of another religion can't observe traditional customs. We don't have to go back to the olden way of life, but if there are good things we can maintain them. There is no harm in modern practices or in traditional culture — so the good things from culture should be incorporated. There are people who feel that God is only found in churches and mosques. Even God may not go to church because he is everywhere. If a person is sick and there is a medicinal tree we may still opt for western medicine, but traditional medicine may be better, so we should embrace the good we have and not always go for things from outside.

Traditional language should also be embraced, and we should not just speak English in schools. Most of the time we don't see the goodness that is there until it disappears — such as Kaya elders, trees, insects. We should not forget about our traditional crops such as maize because they are very important for health. Sometimes the food we eat now in hotels is not as good as traditional food, but we don't question how healthy it is.

In Tharaka we have hills and mountains where we conduct sacred prayers and sacrifices, and we also have stages and protocols to become elders. As elders, myself and Mwaniki have undergone some rites of passage (ie stages). We have to respect the forest in the same way as the church, and we also need to respect the customary laws and culture of the community. The first name we use should be the name given when we are born, and not names such as Agostine (Mwaniki's other name) as that is a western name. In Kenya he can drop the name Agostine and use his traditional name, but others use western names as people have been colonised.

Lawrence Chiro: This is a good discussion. We talked about clans in Rabai — about fathers' clans — but many people forgot about their mother's clan. I am very interested in today's discussion because you are insisting in embracing tradition because tradition is living. I suggest that whatever religion people are, they should embrace culture because it lives on. I encourage similar discussions and dialogues so that culture can be passed on. We learn culture through practice so it's good to practice it, for example through traditional food. Self-identity as a community is important — where we come from, our attire. If we wear a sarong, then we know we are Mijikenda.

Even before the Christians and Islamic people came we knew God and worshipped God. We could read the stars, we had dances and songs and drums, and had people who could prophesy (ie foretell the future). Different tribes have their own dances. We had traditional governance before the colonisers came — there was peace because of the traditional governance system and people lived in harmony. We should now start to trace where we started going wrong and see how we can go back and bring back our culture.

When I started coming to Rabai in 1994 there were Kaya elders who were very persistent in adherence to culture. Kaya eldership was also different and better than it is now. All Kaya elders were conversant and consistent in customs unlike now. When did we start going wrong? We started going wrong when Christianity came and we believed that our customary religion was not worshipping properly; when we started embracing other religions more than our own; and when colonial people came and brought a different administration system and we embraced it more than our own. So the Chiefs and administrators appointed by the colonisers started talking more than the traditionalists so they felt they were superior, and the traditional elders were labelled as 'witchcraft' — there was even a Witchcraft Act. My grandparents were traditional herbalists so they used to hide as they were scared of being arrested.

In some areas Chiefs incorporate themselves in traditional governance and it all goes well, but in other areas Chiefs feel they are above the traditional system and that's when it goes wrong. And at school children listen to formal education not traditional knowledge. So alternative learning is important — formal education is realising that. Politics has brought more harm to traditions — sometimes if traditional leaders are not supported by politicians, it makes things very difficult for them.

The story of the Potato Park — a far-away success

Krystyna Swiderska (IIED): Peru was colonised by the Spanish in the 1500s — they wanted gold, killed many people, and imposed their administration systems and Christian religion. Peru became independent in 1809 but the government is still mainly composed of White people. In the 1990s, Alejandro Argumedo and his brother visited Quechua communities in the mountains. The communities started sharing stories and realised that they had lost many potato varieties and that their land and culture were threatened by development, such as mining. So in 2000, six communities decided to join their lands and establish a Potato Park Association, so that together they could better defend their ancestral territory and restore potato diversity. They realised that to restore potato diversity they needed to restore traditional knowledge, cultural and spiritual values and customary laws — as these are all interconnected.

The Potato Park Association governs the Potato Park based on customary laws. It is composed of the elected Indigenous leaders of five communities (ie villages). About ten Indigenous technical experts (two from each village) and Asociación ANDES (an Indigenous NGO) provide advice to the Potato Park Association, which meets every month. But the mountain gods are the highest authority in the park governance system.

The Potato Park has developed an intercommunity agreement, which sets out the rights and duties of the village communities that are members of the Association. The agreement also sets out the customary law principles that guide the governance of the Potato Park: balance, duality, reciprocity and solidarity, with nature and in society. The goal of the Potato Park is the ancestral concept of Sumaq Kawsay, or holistic wellbeing, rather than western development and conservation concepts.

At the start they realised that they needed to generate income for youth and women, so the Potato Park established several economic collectives: a medicinal plants group which makes herbal teas, shampoos and creams; a traditional crafts and weaving group; trekking and homestay groups; and a traditional gastronomy group with a restaurant for tourists who come to learn about the Potato Park. Each economic collective (or biocultural enterprise) contributes 10% of its revenues to a communal fund, which is shared among the Potato Park villages at the end of each year, in accordance with the customary laws set out in the intercommunity agreement.

The Park has maintained and revitalised a strong traditional knowledge system, tripled potato diversity (to about 1,400 varieties), doubled incomes, conserved wildlife (such as sacred mountains and lakes), enhanced resilience to climate change and nutrition, and protected land rights against mining. People are very proud of their traditional culture and self-governed territory.

Simon Mitambo (SALT): What is important for Rabai from the Potato Park story?

Abdalla (youth): The Potato Park's success is built on the foundation that God exists and they depend on God. For us, religion is very different because Dr Kraft came and made people think that they had no god and really discouraged them. So that is the difference between us and them. So we need to embrace our culture now.

Asha (community researcher): Peru is far away and its soil is like clay, it looks like the ground is wet, like it has rained when it has not. It is cold. I never saw a church, a mosque or a school. Cultivation starts from childhood. They make clothes — the women have to know how to do traditional weaving to get married. If we embrace cassava cultivation we can easily succeed.

Rehema (community researcher): Most people in the Potato Park are Catholics but they really embrace their customs. They rely on herbal medicines and don't use tablets like us.

Daniel Garero (Kaya elder): I saw and loved their unity.

Mwaniki Mwanaah (SALT): There are similarities between the Potato Park, Rabai and Tharaka. SALT and KEFRI are not here to teach but we will learn from each other and then move forward. In Tharaka when we pray we face the mountain and pray to God and when we do that the rain comes. Christians, Muslims and traditional religions all pray together and pray to one god. Cultural revival is a slow process, it requires patience. In Tharaka we started in 2013 with 15 people and now we have almost 500 people participating, and recently we had a meeting with 3,000 people.

Simon Mitambo: People from Rabai first went to the Potato Park in 2014 and now it is 2024 — what has Rabai tried to do so it can achieve that also? The people there are united, that's why they have achieved many things. How are we going to unite ourselves so we can achieve like them? How can we ensure we also have unity or Mwenga?

Adapting the Potato Park model and registering a BCHT Association in Rabai

Krystyna Swiderska (IIED) recalled that in order to establish a collective governance institution for the BCHT in Rabai, meetings were held with ten Rabai villages and at landscape level, and BCHT committees were established at village and landscape level, as part of the Darwin Initiative project. A proposal for registering a Rabai BCHT Association under the Societies Act was prepared, to enable formal recognition of the BCHT institution, so that Rabai community can speak with one voice, enter into agreements with others, and register Kaya forests under the Community Lands Act.

The proposal with by-laws for registering the BCHT Association centres on the village and landscape level BCHT committees established by the project, with the Landscape Committee composed of the chairpersons of the ten village BCHT committees, village elders, Kaya elders, one person with good knowledge of bioenterprises, two youth and one woman.

Krystyna explained that the Potato Park Association is composed of the elected Indigenous leaders of each village, and joins existing village governance systems rather than creating new institutions. It does not include government representatives as BCHTs are self-governed based on customary laws, which is an important motivation for people to work together to conserve their landscapes. She highlighted a few questions to consider before the proposal for registration is finalised:

- How can the BCHT Association be a representative structure that links the traditional governance systems of Rabai villages (ie Kaya elders and clan elders)? Only four of the ten BCHT villages have Kaya elders, but Kaya elders say that they can represent other villages through the clan system. Do we also need to include clan elders in the Association? Should we go ahead and submit the application, or wait until the traditional clan governance system is revived so we can integrate it in the application?
- The BCHT village- and landscape-level committees have not met since they were established — is that because they are not based on a functioning traditional governance system and because of the costs for its 33 members to travel to meetings? Would a more representative structure be smaller? Should village elders be included in the Association if they are appointed by the government?
- BCHTs are meant to be governed by traditional institutions, so should the BCHT Association be chaired by a Kaya elder? Should it include traditional knowledge experts?

Leila Ndaliilo (KEFRI): What have we achieved in ten years? We organised Farmer Field Schools to revive traditional foods and seed varieties. When we started working in Rabai in 2012 through the IIED SIFOR project (Smallholder Innovation for Resilience) there were no community-level meetings and now there are football tournaments. In 2014 in the Potato Park we saw male and female elders, so we thought we could incorporate female Kaya elders and encouraged Rabai to do this. Krystyna is asking some of the same questions that we asked at the last meeting on the BCHT committee. How can the committees be self-sustaining and how can it cover travel and other expenses if it has 33 members? The Potato Park Association has fewer members and has an NGO supporting it, unlike here in Rabai.

Krystyna Swiderska (IIED): My feeling is that it would be good to strengthen the traditional governance system first (for example, including clans), as externally designed committees or structures are often not sustained by communities when projects end.

Rabai community member: Under the current national administration, every ten houses should form a 'Nyumba Kumi' surveillance group to reduce crime, so each one could send a representative.

Tsui (community researcher): Some clans are not represented by Kaya elders because some people don't want to associate themselves with Kaya elders. Another problem is that Chiefs (who are appointed by the government even at village level) don't use local rules, they use national government rules, but at village level there are some people who don't associate themselves with the national government.

Rabai member: We are supposed to involve Chiefs and village elders, who are appointed by the government, in everything we are doing. For example, we can take problems to village elders and Nyumba Kumi and they refer them to the Chief. And the BCHT committee can use the Chief to help organise meetings. But the Chair of the BCHT landscape committee is not active and is not here at this meeting.

Kaya elder: Yes a Kaya elder should be chair of the Association, but most Kaya elders don't know how to read and write, that's the problem. Chiefs and village elders are not together with Kaya elders, and they don't involve Kaya elders in decision making. Village elders and Nyumba Kumi elders don't respect Kaya elders.

Krystyna Swiderska: It doesn't matter if the Kaya elder chair of the BCHT Association can't read or write because a BCHT is based on traditional knowledge. Customary laws support national policies and laws on biodiversity conservation, climate change and so on, so Chiefs should support customary laws. Only if a landscape is self-governed based on customary laws can it be called a BCHT.

Lawrence Chiro (NMK): When the BCHT Committee was established I was not there. My opinion is to cooperate with Krystyna so we can empower the society to preserve culture. In landscapes we're supposed to make our own community-based organisations (CBOs). We can make small self-help groups and engage Chiefs so they can enforce the groups. Self-help groups can form a CBO and the CBO can elect a chairperson. A CBO can empower Kaya elders, it is the same as an association.

Simon Mitambo (SALT): Self-help groups are also an external concept, they are not part of the traditional governance system.

Leila Ndalilo: During the project lifetime, village elders were always appointed by the government, but much earlier they were elected. But village elders were elected as part of the project, to form part of the BCHT committees. For the Potato Park model to work in Rabai, mindsets also need to change from individual to collective. The main river in Rabai is now very polluted due to industry, and water resources have been diverted for industry use and have declined due to climate change and forest degradation.

Youth: We should register the BCHT Association quickly as we strengthen the clan system, so we strengthen a registered organisation. We can replace the chairman of the BCHT committee as they are not active, but should include BCHT committee members from the ten BCHT villages. We could have a smaller landscape committee with the BCHT chairs from all villages but not the village elders. When the BCHT committees were established, some people came because they thought they would get benefits.

Kaya elder: The village elders included in the draft by-laws document for the BCHT Association are those elected by the project — but they can be removed.

Day 2: 25 March 2025

Opening and traditional prayer

Omari (Kaya elder): We ask God through the ancestors to bless this meeting. We ask for rain so we can plant crops.

Tsui (community researcher): In 1846 the first Europeans came to east Africa and landed in Rabai. Dr Krapf landed on the coast where we are having this meeting, here in Chang'ombe. Regarding the payment from Krystyna — this is not a payment for you to attend the meeting, but it is in recognition that you have left livelihood activities at home and to cover travel costs. It does not mean that in future you should not come to meetings if Krystyna is not here because there is no payment.

Omari: Four Kaya elders will now do a deep traditional prayer like we do in the Kaya forest.

Kaya elder: Peace be with you community. We're thankful to God and the ancestors that we've slept well. We've travelled peacefully and experienced no harm. Yesterday we had a good meeting. Today we're asking God to have a good meeting, asking for his blessing. The first people came from here — Africa — but one was married in the UK and gave birth to Krystyna and she has come home. I ask the ancestors for the four Kaya forests for their blessings — Kaya Mudzi Muvya, Kaya Bomu, Kaya Fimboni etc. I also ask for good health and for the drought to end.

Omari: I am mentioning my ancestors who died a long time ago, they are like saints. We have drought — if it is God's will, let it be, but if it is a bad omen from people let God intervene. I ask for rains.

Kaya Bomu elder: I ask for a blessed meeting, and I ask God to give you all safe travels.

Assistant Kaya elder: We started meeting yesterday and finished well. I ask for good health. We have persistent drought. A long time ago trees used to die of old age but nowadays there is a lot of destruction. God bless Krystyna who is always thinking of us even though she is very far away. So whatever she has for us, we should embrace.

The Story of the Tharaka — a nearby success

Mwaniki Mwanaah (SALT): Yesterday we learnt about the importance of culture, that Rabai has two clans, the duck and the moon, and that SALT has not come to teach you your culture. Let us all stand in a circle.

Simon Mitambo (SALT): Yesterday we heard about the Rabai story of origin, and we heard about the Potato Park. It's a faraway success, but it's a story of people who had a similar problem to us. But today I want to give a story about a community close by. The same European who came to Rabai also named Mount Kenya — he thought he had discovered it, that is written in history books, but there were people living there before he arrived. Tharaka is just like here — sunny, we have cattle like you, we grow crops that can survive like here.

I went to Colombia (the Amazon) which is near Peru, and to South Africa. These are colonial places but people have very strong culture. People saw they had been misled by the colonists and had to revive their culture. They sat together and saw they had lost their culture and food. The elders questioned how they could continue that way, and realised they were going in a bad direction. So they started meeting the way elders sit here when they see things are going wrong. They saw some of their children were getting sick because their food was not nutritious, so their growth was not proper, because they were selling their milk to get juice, eggs to get bread etc.

So when we went back to Tharaka we told the stories of communities in the Colombian Amazon and in South Africa's Vhenda who had revived their culture. We had meetings, with about 15 people at first. When we started some people said we were doing witchcraft, so we were very few people. After sharing the story, we asked how are things in Tharaka, is all well? We wanted to bring back lost culture and heritage so we thought the best way is to use the traditional structure, that is the clans. Tharaka was still structured by clans but the clans were weak. Dialogues are a way to strengthen clans and bring back their accountability to the larger council of elders of all clans.

We had two types of meetings — smaller clan meetings and larger monthly community dialogues with all the clans. We started sitting in clans with elders so we could know each other, we had three clans and the elders started sharing stories of their origin, how they related to others, where they came from etc. So the youth were learning from elders and the elders started going back to sacred places. When we met we talked about issues relating to our clan, for example that you cannot marry within the clan.

When we started the meetings, we brainstormed about how to get something to eat when we had meetings. So we started going from one house to another and the host would provide a goat and the guests would also contribute. Whenever we met, we gave priority to speak to the elders so they would explain cultural issues to the youth. I wonder if that would also be useful for you? As the three clans started meetings, others also got motivated to meet and called us to go and talk to them, so we sent an elder to talk to them. Now all 30 clans are meeting and 3,000 people are coming to the meetings.

It was proposed that we should establish self-help groups (SHGs) but we said no because some of these groups were using agroecology, but others were using hybrid varieties and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) because of the NGOs they worked with. If we work with clans it will be different because in clans we respect our elders. So meeting at clan level will be more effective and help us to be stronger because SHGs don't revive our culture. But if we go the clan way it will revive our culture because it is African to meet in clans.

We held clan meetings for five years with no funds from anyone. I didn't even borrow money. We went to a donor and asked for money to revive culture and they said if we love our culture why do we need money. We don't need money. We just need a goat for food — we got six goats and kept them somewhere for six months, and our brothers and sisters can also provide. We shared photos on a WhatsApp group of youth enjoying the dialogues to attract other young people. And a few people could provide a bit of support to bring grandparents. It is not good to depend on money because we can do it on our own. It's our responsibility to see and know how to bring back our culture.

Then a friend of mine offered some support to bring elders together to validate what we had been doing. We had some sacred sites that had been grabbed so we were happy to go to the meeting without money. When we get given a small amount of money it comes to the group, not to individuals, so we can share it. Money is very 'hot' — if you want people to fight, give them a lot of money. So when money comes we need to agree what to do and how to manage it.

The role of elders is very important — we need to give them space. Yesterday an elder said that Kaya elders are not listened to. When a Chief comes to meetings, he is not a Chief because he is a clan member and can also be punished. Clans belong to elders, that's why we keep asking elders to give their views, as they are more knowledgeable and more experienced. What the elders teach is more important than what they teach at school.

Poverty ('ufukara' in Swahili) is when you think you are poor, but you are not. The parameters used to measure poverty only focus on money, so if people don't spend money on medicines because they use medicinal plants they are considered poor, and social relationships are not considered. So people believe they are poor. Daniel said that in Tharaka people had unity (when he visited Tharaka) — this is because people come together regularly for dialogue meetings. First they disagree, then they agree, and then unity comes automatically.

Q: In Rabai traditional dress has gone it seems — do women in Rabai have traditional dress?

A: Before we wore sarongs.

Simon Mitambo: You could sell your traditional dress to tourists and to people in Rabai; for instance we could have bought it. We have elders here, we need them to share their knowledge so people can make traditional dress before the elders die, because then we will lose their wisdom.

Mwaniki Mwanaah: After we visited other places we came together and discussed what is useful for us.

Simon Mitambo: I am an elder but we don't have Kaya elders. If you tell the stories of your visits to elders, they will be happy because they want to revive their culture but need motivation. They don't need to go to Peru to hear the story.

Omari (Kaya elder): What have we learnt from the Tharaka experience? That a small group cannot revive culture but the whole community can.

Village BCHT chairman: We learnt that once you have learnt something good, you should not keep it to yourself but should share it with others.

Young person: We have learnt encouragement, we should not despair. The Tharaka took a long time to revive their culture but they succeeded in the end.

Village elder: I have learnt that there is some difference between Tharaka and Rabai customs. The Rabai carry culture from elders, but the Tharaka got culture from elsewhere and brought it home.

Mwaniki Mwanaah: That is not the case — we (the Tharaka) learnt that other people had revived their culture, so we did the same. As we held dialogues, we identified elders who knew about traditional crops and traditional medicine so we revived our culture.

Participant from Rabai community: Only Rabai has traditional courts so we are much ahead of other traditional tribes.

Catherine (community researcher): In the olden days there were so many Kaya elders, but now they are becoming less and less, so if the youth can learn from elders, culture can continue.

Rabai Chief: I have learnt that for us to revive our culture we should have an interest in doing so and not just do it for money.

Assistant Chief: I have learnt a lot from the Tharaka and it is good to emulate them so we succeed. We already have traditions but we need more revival.

Village BCHT Chairman: I noted that the most important thing is self-identification as Rabais and that is what made Simon Mitambo go back to his Tharaka community to make sure that culture is revived.

Hadija (woman from Rabai): I learnt that you don't have to have the whole community to start something, it can start from very few people and then extend.

George Kadilo (village elder): I have seen some similarities in our customs — people from the same clan cannot marry in Tharaka and that is also the case in Rabai.

Q: If people within the same family marry what will happen? For example, you may not know that someone is your uncle's daughter and have a child. In Rabai we do something, what do you do in Tharaka?

A: Elders do some cleansing using honey or goats, and such a thing is not allowed to happen again.

Q (Lawrence Chiro): How did you start the dialogue process and where are you now?

A: When we started we didn't have SALT, an NGO. So we thought of registering an association as you are doing in Rabai. We started with clans, which acted like self-help groups. But we had to register as a legal entity to be able to interact with the government. It became a necessity because of government technical requirements, and we didn't want to be seen as an illegal entity.

Mwaniki Mwanaah: The process of meeting with elders started a long time ago. For instance when Mitambo was doing his studies, he still used to sit with elders after school. We came together because of land issues, as land was given to the clans but the government came to sub-divide land, so there were some issues. So when Mitambo came and told us the stories, we decided to revive our traditional culture again.

Community dialogue approach for cultural revival (SALT)

Mwaniki Mwanaah: What is a dialogue — why is it different to a normal meeting? We say that it's a sacred process and helps transmit knowledge from elders to youth. What does it mean that it is a sacred process? How to facilitate dialogues?

Simon Mitambo: This journey of reviving culture is not a normal journey — it takes us back to ancient times. So whenever we meet we always start with traditional prayers. I heard that some of you are named after animals and crops. Because I was named after the moon, I'm related to the moon, like the lady here who said she was named after the rain because she was born during the long rains. So first we give elders time to pray. Those of you who came to Tharaka saw how we sang very vigorously.

When we sit in those dialogue meetings, we observe tradition and create conditions for culture to emerge and sometimes people get visions on how we should proceed. So if all the clans hold dialogues, the whole community embraces culture. Women and children also come and learn about their traditions when they are still young.

Community dialogues are not normal meetings because they have an impact. We give respect to the ancestors, but this is not the same as worshipping the dead because they are people who lived. It's like when Christians talk about saints, but we believe they are still living, in the spiritual world. We refer to them because we believe that we are young even if we are old, and that we have to learn from our ancestors. So it's a sacred process. That's why we don't wear shoes, it gives a connection to the land. It's an immersion process as you are going into tradition. Sometimes we go to the forest and sleep there — that is not witchcraft. For example, if you are from the Tsonga clan that is a bird, or if you are named after the moon, when you sleep outside you get connected to them.

This is not a meeting, we have come together. We don't have membership — we started as a small group and people joined voluntarily. So it is not a club with by-laws, anyone is welcome. It is good to start as a small group and grow. Sometimes you have to be careful about who you start with — people should have common interests and start when all are motivated. In our place, some people are scared or suspicious, they think we want to con others. Some people came and left and some stayed. If you start with a big group, people may leave. When people in Tharaka got money it made them go away from community issues.

Q: When you started were elders still practicing traditions?

A: Tradition was dying, very few people were practicing it.

Q: When you started meeting, did you have an agenda?

A: We did not have a specific agenda. In the first meetings we were just sitting because of clannism, to know each others' clan. In our place we have totems referring to animals that we don't eat. We would state our clans like we did yesterday, but people would have given an elaborate introduction about where their clan comes from, their totem etc. When you talk about the moon and duck clan, it is good to elaborate so people know what it means and how it started. The most important thing is to look at the energy that people are putting in and follow that (ie focus on the issues that people want to talk about).

Rabai clan dialogues: feedback from group discussions

Rabai participants were asked to organise themselves into clans and discuss whether they should hold dialogues, and if so, develop a plan for holding dialogues, and then report back.

Asha (community researcher): Yesterday we heard that Rabai has 26 clans. We are going to group ourselves into our fathers' clans. Originally we had two clans — the moon and the duck. All Rabai participants should join a clan group and we ask you to discuss two questions:

1. Should Rabai hold community dialogues in clans to revive culture?
2. How should they meet — when, how often, how to provide food, cover travel costs etc.

Participants decided to organise themselves into two clans: the moon and the duck.

Mwesi (moon) clan group: report back (by a youth): We should love our culture. We have decided that because we come from different areas we shall meet as a clan once a month, on every second Thursday. We will meet here as it is a central place, and wear traditional attire on the meeting day. When we wear traditional attire it will inform the community of our identity. We agreed to form a clan committee on the first day. After the meetings we will go back to our villages to educate people — we will be ambassadors of change (as we may start with just a few people). We will have 'Romes' (traditional dialogues between elders and youth) at home so that we can teach the children stories about our culture. When we meet we will make small contributions for emergencies and sometimes it will assist us to have lunch.

Q: How do you love your tradition? How do you ensure you love it?

A: By having Romes, eating traditional foods, and by elders showing a good example and putting on traditional attire. You should love your culture as you love your husband or your wife.

Rabai woman: We've stopped speaking our language but from now on we should speak Rabai.

Catherine (community researcher): When I left the workshop yesterday, I sat with family and other villagers and discouraged them from using foreign names.

Gisa (duck) clan group: report back (by former Chief and pastor): We discussed plans for holding clan meetings. We proposed an interim chair but when we meet we will elect another chair. We elected a treasurer and a secretary. There are 14 clans that form part of the duck clan. We've decided to find out where the clans reside. We will have a very big meeting for all clans together to explain the stories we got here. People should wear cultural attire. The agenda of the meetings will also focus on reviving Rabai language and how to count in Rabai — we will teach children how to count and read in Rabai. When someone dies everyone will contribute ten Kenyan shillings and the committee will contribute (there will be a fixed committee). We will meet in clans and rotate in terms of where we meet, in different wards. We will focus on how to revive Rabai traditions and how to bring back traditional foods and will exchange seeds (cassava and other seeds).

Woman (duck clan): We have decided that we will contribute ten shillings in each meeting, so we can support rituals by elders.

Q (Simon Mitambo): You have talked about a committee but what about the roles of the elders?

A (moon clan): We have not elaborated much on the role of elders, we will discuss that at the first meeting — whatever contribution people make will enable elders to play their role. We won't have meetings without Kaya elders.

A (duck clan): Whenever we have a meeting, if Kaya elders want to pass something on that is the time, or if we want to speak to Kaya elders about something.

Q (Lawrence Chiro): When will the two clans meet? We will be guided by the traditional calendar of the Kaya elders and when they announce for a general meeting.

A (young man): The moon and the duck clans will be made to meet by Kaya elders when there is a community function.

Q (Mwaniki Mwanaah): Some of you are talking about money — if we start with money issues then maybe one person may not have money and if they don't contribute in two or three meetings, what will others feel about that? What efforts will you make to increase numbers?

A (moon clan): When a clan meeting ends we will educate others so they will come to the next meeting.

Addressing key challenges: religion and traditional governance

How to deal with accusations of witchcraft and promote unity?

Simon Mitambo (SALT): the main problem is religion — people relate traditional prayers with witchcraft and the devil. How do we ensure that people don't think our culture and attire relate to the devil, but see us as normal people? In Tharaka, traditional prayers are more powerful, ie stronger than other religions.

Rabai woman: Pastors and reverends should be included in meetings so they can be educated more about our culture.

Simon Mitambo: Who is going to call the pastors and reverends?

Rabai woman: There was a time when pastors, reverends and Muslims went for sensitisation. This month they came to Mombasa, Kilifi and Kwale and had a meeting. Only women were at the meeting, not men. It was organised by an NGO with the aim of enhancing cohesion between religions. The first meeting was in Rabai with a pastor from Rabai. It seems like a programme led by Christians and Muslims and not Kaya elders, although one traditionalist was given a chance to pray. How to ensure they bring in traditional religion and promote unity?

Kaya elder: Those people from other religions hate us but we welcome them.

Village elder: We as traditionalists should take responsibility to educate Christians and Muslims.

Simon Mitambo: People call us witches but I don't have a problem with that. When they see that your actions are good they won't have such feelings again. For instance, when people in Tharaka see drought persisting they now come to us.

Kaya elder: If as Kaya elders we are cutting down trees they won't trust us. A bishop comes to our meetings and learns about our traditional religion, so we are change agents.

Krystyna Swiderska (IIED): Should you engage different religions now or make traditional religion stronger first? What is the best strategy?

Kaya elder: It would be better for us to get organised first with the clan structure, before we call Muslims and Christians for a dialogue.

Omari (Kaya elder): Should we advocate for Christians and Muslims or just advocate for local traditions and the environment?

How to strengthen Kaya elders' leadership?

Youth: During Chief's barazas (meetings), the Chiefs could welcome Kaya elders so they are also change agents.

Simon: We are also engaging the Deputy County Commissioner so they can see that our faith is about the environment; and we go to his meetings to talk about traditional religion.

Kaya elder: No one wants to be a Kaya elder but sometimes customs must be enforced. We are powerful to some extent as we have the Kaya court. If we fail to resolve things we take matters to Chiefs and Commissions, but most of the time we resolve issues ourselves.

Kaya elder: Most of the time government laws suppress all other laws so it makes us a bit less powerful. There should be cooperation between Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs and Kaya elders. So Chiefs should be told to be with us whenever we have meetings. Maybe the Deputy County Commissioner can call all Chiefs and tell them about the functions of Kaya elders so that the Chiefs can also be mandated to respect them.

Omari: As Kaya elders we lead this community and we have not called the Chiefs to our meetings.

Krystyna Swiderska (IIED): Rabai's traditional values like Soyosoyo and Mwenga and its Mudzini concept (holistic wellbeing) promote balance and harmony in society and with nature, as we have found through research with Rabai's Kaya elders. So traditional values and customary laws can support the implementation of government policies on biodiversity, climate change and forest conservation.

Registering Kaya forests as community land

Lawrence Chiro (NMK): There are three types of land ownership: community land, private land or government land (ie public land). Titles can be given in these three ways. The procedure for registering land is open but there are problems with community land registration. Most of the time titles are held in trust by county governments. Kaya forests are community lands but are held in trust by the county government.

Communities can register land under The Community Lands Act, even ranches have been registered. The procedure for registration is:

1. The community makes a claim to own a particular land
2. The government comes to verify to ensure the land really belongs to that community.

All Kaya forests are registered as National Museums under the National Museums Act but NMK does not take the Kayas, we just help protect them, unless the community gives the land to NMK. Land claims can only be made by organisations that are registered with the Attorney General. No claim has yet been made by a Rabai group or organisation. So once the BCHT Association is registered we can make a claim and the title will be written under the name of the organisation. It should be an organisation that represents all Rabais so that we don't get a rival claim. It's a long journey, we need to take it step by step. For example, a Giriama ranch made a claim and took a loan against the forest, so you should be careful with leadership (the Giriama are another Mijikenda sub-tribe in coastal Kenya).

Leila Ndalilo (KEFRI): Should the Kaya forests be registered under the Kenya Forest Services (KFS)?

Lawrence Chiro: Last year a group from KFS was going around to persuade Kaya elders to register Kaya forest land under KFS. But then the land will be public land so communities will not be able to register it under the Community Lands Act (CLA). To register Kaya forests under the CLA, you need to develop by-laws.

Krystyna Swiderska (IIED): A Kenyan lawyer from IIED has advised that it would be best to register Kaya forests under the CLA, as otherwise the community and Kaya elders could lose their rights to sustainably use Kaya forests or even to enter the forests for rituals.

Leila Ndalilo: Some people in Rabai have told KFS to give them authority to register Kayas under the Kenya Forest Act. The matter is being discussed in Parliament.

Lawrence Chiro: Kaya elders could say that after consultation with the community there was objection, so they no longer want to register Kayas under the Kenya Forest Act.

Next steps

Participants agreed the following next steps:

1. Strengthen traditional governance and dialogue with other religions:
 - Rabai's duck and moon clans will hold monthly meetings to revitalise culture and traditional clan governance. They will meet together rather than separately on the second Thursday of each month, starting 10 April.
 - Rabai will strengthen its traditional clan system first and then engage other religions.
2. Strengthen the BCHT landscape committee and register a BCHT Association:
 - IIED will revise the draft document for registering the BCHT Association to remove village elders from the BCHT committee, include reference to clan elders, and include a Kaya elder as Chair.
 - Krystyna will share the revised application with the community and then send it to KEFRI to submit it as soon as possible.
 - The chairman of the BCHT committee should be replaced as they are not active.
3. Strengthen Kaya elders' succession and recognition of Kaya elders' authority:
 - Kaya elders will develop a plan to address the challenges with Kaya elders' succession.
 - Rabai's Chiefs will invite Kaya elders to their meetings and respect their authority.
 - Rabai will consider asking the Deputy County Commissioner to propose that he mandates all of Rabai's Chiefs to respect the functions of Kaya elders.
4. Register Rabai's Kaya forests under the Community Land Act:
 - Kaya elders will prepare a letter to say that Rabai does not wish to register Kaya forests under the Kenya Forest Act, for the Parliament.
 - Krystyna will try to engage the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to get support for the process to develop by-laws for registration.

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Rabai's sacred Kaya forests in coastal Kenya have traditionally been conserved by customary laws and taboos but are being steadily degraded, as many youth and middle aged people have turned away from their culture. This learning exchange and community dialogue brought together ten Rabai villages that have decided to establish a collectively governed biocultural heritage territory to conserve their Kaya forest landscapes and unique culture. It used a community dialogue approach to share stories about cultural loss and revival and explore how to revive traditional clan governance, while inspiring cultural revival through the process.

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