

## Culture, Communication and Conflict in Conservation Campaigns in Participatory Forest Management in Kenya

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### Abstract

*Global forest governance is at a watershed moment. This is a crucial time to analyse existing systems to contribute to the development of 'new' methods, perhaps related with this timeline, of forest management. This research contributes to discourse on re-evaluating within the context of forest communication conservation campaigns, taking a case study of Arabuko Sokoke Forest (ASF). This is where Participatory Forest Management (PFM), was first piloted in Kenya. This study uses a culture-centred approach (CCA) to analyse perhaps a collision of cultures in ASF and tries to understand why PFM has not achieved its communication conservation campaigns potential in ASF as compared to other forests in Kenya. The findings reveal perhaps unacknowledged conflict and a lack of shared meanings between forest conservation campaign strategists and Adjacent Forest Dwellers (AFDs), at ASF. This research contributes to praxis, where, sustainable forest governance, perhaps is a governance issue in Kenya. Contributing to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG, 13, 14 & 15), Theoretically 'advancing', contradistinction studies of communication studies and forest resources management.*

**Keywords:** Community Forest Associations, Shared Meanings, Pristine, Culture Centered Approach

## Introduction

Participatory Forest Management (PFM) is an inclusive approach that ideally brings stakeholders together, interested in forest conservation and management. It gained prominence in late 1990s and early 2000s (see Mbuvi & Ndalilo, 2021; Blomley et al., 2017; Frank et al., 2017; Kagombe et al., 2017; Kairu et al., 2018; Kenya Forest Service, 2015a; Mbuvi et al., 2007; Muratha, 2017; Ongugo, 2007; Polansky, 2003; Schreckenberg & Luttrell, 2009). It can be argued it drew its origin from debates from perhaps, CBNRNM – Community Based Natural Resource Management, Southern Africa community conservation efforts as iterated by Balint & Mashinya, (2006; 2009).

However, decentralized forest management gained popularity in those years in ‘developing’ countries (Agrawal et al., 2008). Schreckenberg, Luttrell and Moss (2006) indicate that most countries in Africa and Asia promoted the participation of rural communities in the management and utilization of natural forests and woodlands through some form of Participatory Forest Management (PFM) corroborated by Agarwal, 2009; Anderson et al., 2015a; Kagombe et al., 2017; Shahi et al., 2022; 2016.

Moving on to Kenya, Participatory Forest Management is defined by communities and other stakeholders in the management of forests within a framework, and which contributes to communities’ livelihoods. This is relevant to the management of dry woodlands, tropical forests, mangroves or plantations, but crucially management is for the mutual benefit of both the species of flora and fauna and the community.

Several studies analyse community participation in forest management, the effects of PFM on household poverty and the opportunity cost of forest conservation. Numerous benefits were expected to flow to individuals from participating in community forest associations and consequently increased access to forest products such as fuel wood, herbal medicine, honey, tree seedlings, thatch grass and fodder (McDermott & Schreckenberg, 2009).

Other activities allowed within the co-management framework include eco-tourism, beekeeping, fish farming and growing of crops (Schreckenberg & Luttrell, 2009). With these benefits, it was expected that communities would quickly embrace the system and participate effectively (Musyoki et al., 2016). However, progress has been slow and often Community Forest Associations (CFAs) have collapsed shortly after the formation (Ongugo et al., 2007).

Anderson *et al.*, (2015, p. 50) succinctly captures this dismal picture: nine years after the passage of the Forestry Act (2005) that was intended to better liaise with communities has not produced the hoped-for environmental, economic, and empowerment benefits.’ Further, it has been argued that PFM has ended up generating other problems that impact on forest adjacent communities such as inequality and insecure land tenure (Anderson et al., 2015a; Lund et al., 2017).

This present research examined the case of PFM in Arabuko Sokoke Forest (ASF) on the North Coast of Kenya. The purpose of the study was to explore the possible reasons for which PFM has neither achieved its intended objectives nor produced the much hoped for benefits. This paper is a product of more than five years of research and practical field experiences with AFDs in ASF. It also relies heavily on the field research conducted by the first author during his MSc dissertation research (2018).

## Participatory Forest Management: Case of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest

Arabuko Sokoke Forest (ASF) is on the North Coast of Kenya, and it is the largest remaining block of indigenous coastal forest in East Africa which once stretched from Southern Somalia to the Eastern Cape (Forest Department, 2002; Oyugi, Brown and Whelan, 2008; Ming'ate, Rennie and Memon, 2014 Collar *et al.*, 1988; Bennun *et al.*, 1999). ASF has been ranked second in Africa in terms of conservation of rare and threatened bird species<sup>i</sup>. In addition, it has been recognized as a repository for biodiversity containing 50 species of globally and nationally rare plants, 6 globally threatened bird species and 3 globally threatened mammal species (Oyugi *et al.*, 2008). In terms of its governance, the forest is currently under the *de jure* management of the Kenya Forest Service (KFS). However, it's governed through a *de facto* management arrangement by the Arabuko Sokoke Forest Management Team (ASFMT), made up of Kenya Forest Service (KFS), Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), National Museums of Kenya (NMK), and Kenya Forest Research Institute (KEFRI) (Forest Department, 2002). The management team has also brought on board three Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) namely: Nature Kenya, A Rocha Kenya and Friends of Arabuko Sokoke Forest; and three Community Forest Associations (CFAs) - Gede, Sokoke and Jilore CFAs.

### Research Design and Methods

This research initially was informed by the reciprocal altruism theory advanced by Trivers

Trivers (1971; 2002) in socio-biology to explore why non-related individuals cooperate. It was used in that study as it offered an understanding of participatory approaches such as co-management or PFM as problem-solving systems since they are organised on the premise of multiple non-related actors cooperating to address the problems related to forest conservation (Plummer & Fennell, 2007). Therefore, the study focused on the various actors (stakeholders) involved with PFM to explore how the design and implementation of PFM in ASF has shaped forest conservation, economic benefits, community empowerment and intrinsic motivation of local communities to conserve forests.

We employed qualitative research between June to August 2018. It drew a purposive sample of 23 key informants and made use of in-depth interviews as well as participant observation. The sample size was 23 individuals which comprised all the major stakeholders involved in the management of the forest. These are representatives of organizations that form the *de facto* ASFMT which includes: CFAs, government agencies and three NGOs. The sample size was in line with the recommended number of interviewees in a qualitative study of 10-30 (Gomez & Jones, 2010). In addition, the representatives of the 3 CFAs were selected from different sides of the forest about the side of the forest they were located. This was to facilitate data triangulation to enhance the validity of the study (Guion *et al.*, 2011). The validity of the data was further enhanced by the selection of three community members playing different roles: the leader of Arabuko Sokoke Forest Adjacent Dwellers Association, a local forest tour guide and a local forest surveyor.

Participant Observation involved the first author actively participating in a forest activity known as *de-snaring* which began at 0700hrs and ended at 1800hrs on 27th June 2018. De-snaring is an activity that tends to involve multi-stakeholder engagement that is groups and organizations involved with PFM of ASF. The main aim of the activity is to involve the CFAs in a hands-on forest management and conservation activity. It entails going into certain sections of the forest (that are selected depending on what the organisers of the exercise think is the section that might be facing destruction, probably informed by information

passed on by community members). Then, following paths while surveying on both sides of the path to spot any animal snare.

As an analytical framework, five parameters were used. Three of these parameters were modified from Patenaude and Lewis's framework on the analysis of natural resources governance in Tanzania (Patenaude & Lewis, 2014). The said framework was employed in the critical analysis of existing policy approaches for ecosystem services and poverty alleviation in Tanzania, based on the governance themes of decentralization, intersectoral integration, community access to resources, operational simplicity and equitable benefit sharing (Patenaude & Lewis, 2014).

Therefore, the five parameters used in this study were: the perceived status of the forest regarding deforestation and degradation; economic outcomes based on the presence or absence of a formal benefit-sharing mechanism; community empowerment; and crowding out of intrinsic motivation due to income-generating activities implemented under PFM.

We used information based on the first author's prior engagement with AFDs in ASF (2014- 2017), to analyse in what ways, if any, is PFM incongruent and/or congruent with the bottom-up forms of participation employed in marginalized communities. The research used a culture-centred approach (CCA) as a theoretical framework (Airhihenbuwa, 1995; Dutta, 2008).

## Results

### Perceived Status of Arabuko Sokoke Forest

The results indicated that Arabuko Sokoke Forest is perceived to be a degraded forest with the years 2015, 2016 and 2017 mentioned as the period in which the forest faced high frequency of the drivers of degradation (CO22 2018, Personal Communication, 25<sup>th</sup> June). Degradation was driven by activities including firewood collection, cutting trees for timber, carving wood and bush-meat hunting<sup>1</sup>. Respondents had diverse opinions on the primary cause of the perceived forest degradation. An overwhelming majority blamed the Arabuko Sokoke Forest Management Team. The role of ASFMT in ASF management has become weaker due to lack of transparency and the conflicting interests of the institutions involved (CO22 2018, Personal Communication, 25<sup>th</sup> June; NG25 2018, Personal Communication, 28<sup>th</sup> June; GA26 2018, Personal Communication, 28<sup>th</sup> June; GA27 2018, Personal Communication, 28<sup>th</sup> June; NG31 Personal Communication, 3<sup>rd</sup> July). Other factors that can be considered to impinge on the success of PFM in ASF included; the high levels of poverty of the adjacent community corroborating the findings of Luvanda *et al.* (2018); corruption perpetrated by government officials in cahoots with CFA officials and some community members (NG13 2018, Personal Communication, 13<sup>th</sup> June; CO18 2018, Personal Communication, 21<sup>st</sup> June; CO22 2018, Personal Communication, 25<sup>th</sup> June; CO24 2018, Personal Communication, 26<sup>th</sup> June; CGA30 2018 Personal Communication, 2<sup>nd</sup> July); contradictory policies and mandates regarding forest management and wildlife management (GA26 2018, Personal Communication, 28<sup>th</sup> June; NG32 2018, Personal Communication, 13<sup>th</sup> August); stifling bureaucracy in government agencies, CO24 2018, Personal

<sup>1</sup> Conducted on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2018 as part of the field work where participant observations were made. The activity involves random selection of forest sites by community forest association leaders in conjunction with the Kenya Forest Service and Kenya Wildlife Service rangers. This is followed by involving the rest of the community forest association members in surveying transects found in the selected sites for any signs of illegal activities such as presence of snares or cut stems. On that day more than five snares were spotted and de-activated

Communication, 26<sup>th</sup> June; NG25 2018, Personal Communication, 28<sup>th</sup> June; GA29 2018, Personal Communication, 2<sup>nd</sup> July) ; and increasing demand for firewood and charcoal (CO10 2018, Personal Communication, 12<sup>th</sup> June; NG13 2018, Personal Communication, 13<sup>th</sup> June; CO17 2018, Personal Communication, 20<sup>th</sup> June; CO18 2018, Personal Communication, 21<sup>st</sup> June; CO21 2018, Personal Communication, 23<sup>rd</sup> June; CO23 2018, Personal Communication, 26<sup>th</sup> June).

### Benefit Sharing Mechanism

The results showed that there was no formal and clear benefit-sharing mechanism in ASF. The benefit-sharing mechanisms were embedded in legislation but were not realized on the ground. However, government officials, NGOs' representatives and a few community members indicated that benefit sharing exists through various projects targeting the AFDs such as butterfly farming, beekeeping and the Jamii villas eco-tourism facility. However, despite the presence and availability of these income-generating projects, most AFDs interviewed indicated that there are no formal and clear guidelines on how to share benefits accruing from them.

According to the biodiversity status report of ASF: 'in the absence of equitable sharing mechanisms for forest-based benefits, communities continue to engage in illegal forest activities' (Luvanda *et al.*, 2018). The Forest Management and Conservation Act, 2016 does not highlight exclusively the establishment of a formal and equitable benefit-sharing mechanism (Government of Kenya, 2016, Article 53 p. 715). According to the Kenya Forest Service, there was a framework launched in November 2017 to spearhead mobilizing resources for CFAs, entitled: *Community Forest Association Development and Financing Cycle Framework* which is meant to facilitate the implementation of PFM though not necessarily the implementation of a benefit-sharing mechanism (Muratha, 2017). However, some community members have taken the initiative to start a formal benefit-sharing mechanism. For instance, Sokoke CFA held a meeting and discussed what the guidelines on a formal benefit-sharing mechanism should contain (CO21 2018, Personal Communication, 23<sup>rd</sup> June). When it comes to benefit sharing it has been highlighted that there is a need to ensure that the poor and marginalized are part of the decision-making process as it might ensure equitable benefit sharing (Schreckenberk & Luttrell, 2009).

### Community Empowerment

Community empowerment was assessed based on three parameters: decentralization of authority in terms of the level of management and control delegated to communities; the level at which communities can access and utilize resources from the forest; and the level of community involvement in projects being implemented under PFM. These parameters were informed by Patenaude and Lewis's analysis of forest governance in Tanzania which focuses on PFM (Patenaude & Lewis, 2014).

Given the above, the decentralization of authority regarding the level of management and control delegated to communities, was further assessed based on whether the community had full, partial or no authority to manage and control ASF's conservation. According to the Forest Conservation and Management Act, 2016, members of the community who live where there is a public forest are allowed to participate in the management and conservation of the forest through the formation of Community Forest Associations (CFAs).



These associations must sign an agreement with KFS and develop a management plan before being allowed to co-manage and conserve the forest (Forest Conservation and Management Act, 2016). The Act does not specify the level of influence that CFAs should have over forest management and conservation, although most CFAs and NGO representatives interviewed perceived that management should be equally split between CFAs and other institutions. These interviewees argued management is not equal as power dynamics are skewed in favour of the government agencies who disputed this. For instance, KFS suggested that under the Forest Conservation and Management Act 2016, management has not been stated to be equally shared with CFAs. This is because there is a hierarchy and protocol to be observed, with KFS being the primary custodian and manager of the forest.

To further understand community empowerment, we looked at communities' access to the forest. The results revealed it is restricted to the AFDs who have registered as members of the CFAs and have been given certain user rights such as firewood collection. According to the Forest Conservation and Management Act, 2016, only AFDs who are registered as CFA members, and whose CFA has signed an agreement with KFS are conferred a range of user rights such as 'harvesting honey, collection of medicinal herbs, development of community wood and non-wood forest-based industries', (Forest Conservation and Management Act, 2016, p. 712) among others. The argument behind this restricted access is to ensure the pristine nature of the forest is maintained while allowing sustainable utilization of the forest resources. However, this disenfranchises the rest of the AFDs who not registered members of a CFA are.

We also examined community empowerment from the angle of the level of community involvement in projects being implemented under PFM. This was based on the measure of AFDs being involved in projects or a section of AFDs being involved. Most of the interviewees stated that, while AFDs are involved in projects, this involvement is often not inclusive of the whole community. Involvement is typically restricted to AFD groups which are closely affiliated with CFAs. It was highlighted that there are only two projects that have involved the whole community: butterfly farming, which was instrumental in inspiring ASF to be picked as a PFM piloting site; and beekeeping (GA16 2018, Personal Communication, 20<sup>th</sup> June).

The government agencies and NGOs claimed that while these projects were meant to target the whole AFD community, only specific groups were involved to ensure perpetuity. In addition, the lack of favourable natural conditions for a particular project to be implemented may have led to a section of the AFD community not being involved (CO23 2018, Personal Communication, 23<sup>rd</sup> June). Also, the projects target specific groups since it makes it easier for project developers to secure funds and ensure smooth management of the said projects, as highlighted by the NGOs' representatives. Picking a select group is seen as an effective way that an 'ideal' model group will transmit positive practices to the rest of the AFDs such as poultry farming or goat-rearing as an alternative means of livelihood.

Furthermore, most respondents identified the most common communication mode used to mobilize the community to join projects was through sporadic chief *barazas*<sup>2</sup> and lectures. They were conducted often when there was funding to pay AFDs travel expenses or refreshments since most of them come from distant areas. Sometimes they were called by NGOs like A Rocha Kenya or government institutions such as KFS and KWS when forest degradation activities were on the rise. These *barazas* often used presentations or

<sup>2</sup> Large community gatherings commonly addressed by local government administrators

slide shows as well as video clips of wildlife poaching and forest degradation activities (NG31 2018, Personal Communication, 2<sup>nd</sup> July).

### **Intrinsic Motivation to Conserve**

The study also sought to investigate the intrinsic motivation of local communities to conserve, specifically whether PFM had crowded out the intrinsic motivation of local communities to conserve the forest. Intrinsic motivation in this context connotes doing something without expecting a personal reward or external reward. We examined what motivates communities to conserve before PFM in ASF, and compared these to motivations after PFM was introduced. We treated areas with income-generating activities (IGAs) as treatment areas and tested community motivations for forest conservation concerning control areas which had yet to develop IGAs.

Against this backdrop, it was established that, before PFM, ASF was under central government regulation through the Forest Department and eventually three other government agencies (Ming'ate et al., 2014b). During this period the management of the forest was exclusive and AFDs were arbitrarily engaged in the conservation of the forest and therefore were not necessarily motivated to conserve (NG32 2018, Personal Communication, 13<sup>th</sup> August). Historically, the AFDs were said to be reluctant to conserve the forest as it did not have a *Kaya* (sacred grove). Also, perhaps it was due to the AFDs already having ample resources that they needed around them, thus, there was no need to go into the forest to access them (NG32 2018, Personal Communication, 13<sup>th</sup> August). From a systematic study on sacred groves in Africa and Asia, it was revealed that local communities ensured better protection of sacred natural areas compared to officially protected areas (Dudley et al., 2012) such as the case of *Kaya* forests in Coastal Kenya (Githitho, 2003).

Having established the nature of intrinsic motivation before PFM, we looked at it after PFM was piloted in 1997. Butterfly farming as an income-generating activity was introduced shortly before PFM was piloted, to change the community's attitude towards forest conservation<sup>3</sup>. At this time, about 54% to 59% of the population wanted the forest cleared for settlement and agricultural purposes (Gordon & Ayiemba, 2003). This project is said to have enhanced attitudes towards forest conservation, offered alternative livelihoods and became self-sustaining in 1999. This demonstrates that PFM didn't necessarily crowd out the intrinsic motivation of the locals to conserve since there was limited intrinsic motivation to conserve by the AFDs before PFM implementation. The use of IGAs to motivate individuals to conserve is not an isolated case in ASF but is also its being applied in the near Watamu-Mida Creek Marine Protected Area (SNG20 2018, Personal Communication, 23<sup>rd</sup> June).

Following on from the success of butterfly farming, similar projects were implemented in ASF. The Arabuko-Sokoke Schools Ecotourism Scheme (ASSETS) was a project that paid high school fees for bright students from poor families living in the vicinity of the forest to change the families' attitude toward the forest (Sinclair et al., 2011). Therefore, most respondents believed PFM in ASF has been implemented in tandem with IGAs and believed that it motivated the AFDs to conserve. It can be concluded that PFM in Arabuko Sokoke Forest didn't necessarily crowd out the intrinsic motivation of the locals to conserve.

<sup>3</sup> Butterfly farming was initiated in 1993, and pupae were exported beginning 1994 and continues to date although the market demand for pupae has since immensely reduced, GA16 2018, Personal Communication, 20<sup>th</sup> June

## Discussion

PFM is not achieving its objectives as intended in ASF; ASF continues to suffer from forest degradation, the management structures are weak due to corruption and lack of transparency, and there are few unclear formal benefit-sharing mechanisms. These issues are compounded by the largely unrecognized cross-cultural and intercultural communication conflicts between government agencies, international players in the conservation industry, NGOs and AFDs. To delineate reasons why PFM is not achieving its objectives, we examine the interplay of culture, communication and conflict in conservation campaigns at ASF using the Culture-Centered Approach (CCA) concepts of culture and context and participation and finding voice.

### Culture-Centred Approach (CCA)

The culture-centered approach (CCA) application in contradistinction studies argues that health and development campaigns should resonate with a sense of a community's culture, while accounting for the structural realities in which meanings and practices are embedded, foregrounding the agency of local communities as an entry point for change. Communication scholars (Airhihenbuwa, 1995; Dutta, 2008) posit that the CCA approach highlights the empowerment and agency of grassroots peoples and emphasizes the importance of community participation in identifying development needs and promoting local solutions to their problems.

### Context and Culture

Culture is a shared meaning system found among those who speak a particular language dialect, during a specific historical period, in a definable geographic region (Samovar, Larry E & Porter, 2004). Context, on the other hand, is the crucible in which meanings are contested, negotiated, and finally agreed upon.

Given the above, our findings revealed an unacknowledged collision of cultures and lack of shared meanings between the Eurocentric-thinking government agencies; NGOs and conservation campaign strategists, and the marginalised grassroots collective culture of the AFDs. The Western paradigm, from which PFM is conceptualized, structured and implemented intellectualizes conservation as a push for pristine forests. This is incongruent with AFDs' culture and worldviews of symbiotic living with biodiversity and nature. ASF is life for the AFDs; it is an integral part of their everyday living, and they cannot comprehend that it must be left untouched. Western low-context cultures can compartmentalise life, and separate forests from human beings, business from play, work life from home-life, and skill and intellect from ethics and morality. This separation is opposed to African communitarian high-context cultures. PFM must acknowledge that ASF is amalgamated into the socio-cultural milieu of the AFDs and re-structure to accommodate the daily needs of the AFDs who as destructive as commercial loggers, charcoal burners or big-game poachers may not be (Hall, 1976).

Hall's concept of high- and low-context communication (Hall 1981 cited in Muraya, Mjomba and Nicholson, 2011) provides insights into how differences in perceptions regarding communication style can render cross-cultural messages ineffective<sup>ii</sup>. In his view, all cultures can be situated on a continuum concerning how much *contexting* occurs in communication. 'A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or is internalized in the person, whereas very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message' (Hall, 1976, p. 91). According to Miller (2001), in high-context cultures, the verbal code carries relatively little of the meaning in a typical interaction and may even be somewhat misleading. Instead, people place greater confidence in



nonverbal behaviour and situational cues. Communicators in HC cultures often use indirect or vague language because they rely on their interlocutors to grasp their meaning from the context. Listeners expect this and are accustomed to actively interpreting the subtleties of the message they receive (Muraya et al., 2011).

In contrast, in low-context communication, ‘the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code’ (Hall, 1976, p. 91). Low-context communication is typical of the Western nations from which many international conservation campaign strategists hail. In these societies, people are highly individualistic. Because they maintain relatively little close involvement with others, meaning is carried in the explicit verbal code to make up for that which is missing in the context (Hall, 1976). In LC cultures you ‘say what you mean’ (Muraya et al., 2011).

The outworking of the HC/LC continuum in conservation campaigns, where the West and grassroots African communities often collide, has received limited academic attention despite the broad academic literature on community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) (Williams, 2017). The transition of conservation concepts across this HC/LC continuum could fail to convey the intended messages, a loss of meaning, and misconstrued information. From personal experiences, we observed that in the West individuals try to change the environment to fit them as opposed to AFDs and African cultures where they change themselves to fit with nature.

The West is more competitive and emphasizes self-fulfilment which tends to promote a notion that ‘we can destroy and again rebuild nature,’ the discourses around rewilding and net gain are prime examples of this. African culture manifests cooperation and stresses the experience of living. AFDs are more concerned with getting along with others and living symbiotically with nature because they are aware of their reliance on nature, although the presence of fences has made them associate these areas with the government. We suggest more studies on the outworking of the HC/LC continuum in forest conservation, climate change and sustainable development campaigns.

### **Participation and Finding Voice**

CCA defines the participatory approach as a process where members of the community are engaged in decision-making and sharing as well as ownership of a resource. It privileges narratives that emerge through dialogue with members of marginalized communities and highlights the interaction between culture, structure, and agency (Dutta, 2008). Our study findings suggested that PFM in ASF is not in line with the bottom-up forms of participation in marginalized communities propounded by CCA.

The PFM campaigns seem to have been “parachuted” in by external change agents—government, government agencies, NGOs and local and international players in the forest conservation industry—to AFDs through authority-based, expert-driven, non-negotiable top-down communication approaches (Ming’ate et al., 2014a).

In this kind of arrangement at the ASF, outside experts engage with AFDs to identify potential barriers to their acceptance of solutions to conservation challenges recognized by external agencies.

This process allows the external experts to identify the most appropriate ways to communicate their conservation messages, to alter the AFDs’ beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Participation of the community is characterised by using feedback from CFA leaders, who are representatives of AFDs in ASFMT to design more conservation interventions hence using elite-capture to gain community buy-in.

PFM approach at ASF conceptualizes the AFD as a passive being, a spectator and an ‘empty vessel’ that must be filled with development or conservation skills. Okigbo (2004) posits that energetic individual initiative is *sine qua non* in personal, community, and national development. Learner posits that development and social change must start from individuals who successfully transform themselves in sufficient breadth and depth to make social change self-sustaining ((Lerner 1977 cited in Okigbo and Eribo, 2004). We suggest PFM especially in ASF be restructured on a participatory model that also incorporates the concepts in the emerging framework of multiplicity. The multiplicity paradigm stresses the importance of the cultural identity of local communities and democratization and participation at all levels – international, national, local and individual (Ebigbagha, 2016).

The culture-centered approach suggests that knowledge and communicative practices of development be created in mutually reinforcing, dialogic spaces created by cultural participants and the social change agent (Dutta, 2008). This represents a fundamental shift in the role of the social change agent from an interventionist who plans and executes development (or conservation) campaigns to a listener and a co-participant who engages in dialogue with community members. PFM at ASF is fundamentally rooted in the dominant paradigm of development or neoliberal conservation (Anand & Mulyani, 2020; Büscher & Fletcher, 2015), where external agents bring new ideas and innovation and expect wholesome adoption. In cases where adoption fails—and often it does—the people are labelled as primitive, illiterate and anti-development. We see this as a scapegoat by social change agents who must account for and cover up for their failure to conceptualize and develop sound participatory conservation campaigns and development programs that resonate with the cultures of the AFDs.

Given the above background on CCA, we suggest a culture-centered approach to PFM that creates entry points for listening to the histories and voices of the AFDs, and those who have been traditionally marginalized. And create programs that meet the local needs of their communities. In addition, the constructive process of meaning-creation that the culture-centred approach to conservation communication emphasizes creating spaces for AFDs to frame their discourses on conservation rather than being told how to frame such discourses. This creates openings for local voices to be heard—local, marginalized voices that often call for access to ASF resources and structures that have been othered’.

PFM (broadly in Kenya) needs to be re-negotiated to ensure shared meanings and understanding using all available culturally relevant channels of communication. We suggest the utilization of participatory arts-based approaches such as *ngoma* dialogue circles (NgomaDiCe). Perhaps creatively re-formulates local cultural performance practices in Kenya (Mjomba, 2011). Further, participatory communication channels for organizing and mobilizing grassroots communities (Mjomba, 2011). Ngoma dialogue circles is a participatory communication approach that perhaps overcomes three challenges in designing and promoting conservation and development campaigns.

One, it moves away from the linear, expert-driven, non-negotiable, top-down lectures in chiefs’ barazas and makes conservation and development programs more participatory at all stages of development. Based on Frierean dialogic communication theory (Freire, 1970), it uses 3-5 minutes of creative ngoma pieces to trigger sustained dialogues and debates geared toward finding local solutions to local problems.

Ngoma minimizes the cultural distance between the social change agent or development expert and the people ref. Cultural distance, also referred to as power distance is defined as the extent to which less powerful members of society view the unequal distribution of power as a normal part of life (Hofstede 1991

cited in Miller, 2002). Finally, it uses available culturally relevant language(s) for articulating development issues in an intelligible manner to grassroots people that is a verbal and non-verbal communication channel that could assist in achieving shared meanings, perhaps between conservation promoters and marginalized adjacent forest dwellers.

Ngoma valorizes practical African-centered traditional media and cultural resources, thereby boosting grassroots capacity to solve its problems. Ngoma involves a communication process that is not alienating or threatening, but rather biased towards local content and ownership. The emphasis of this approach is on dialogue, debate, and negotiation, rather than persuasion and the transmission of information from external technical experts. It will make the conservation program more participatory at all levels of development, educating, entertaining, stirring thinking toward mobilizing for action (problem-solving) and utilizing *wachemshangoma* (community mobilizers)/peer educators), thus basically handing over the means of production to the people (Mjomba, 2011). Ngoma has high potential to effectively communicate and plant in the hearts of AFDs the idea of participatory forest management, what it consists of, how it can be made manifest, and for what purposes and convince them to accept the project as achievable and worthy of their effort.

## Conclusion

One reason perhaps for the failure of development in Africa is that the continent has relied on a notion of development and development agendas, which are foreign to the bulk of its people in both origin and objective (Servaes, 2004). Development programs or development agendas have not always addressed the right issues or done so in the right manner in the conservation discourse. A second reason is that development communication researchers especially in conservation have adopted research techniques designed to answer to the needs of funders which do not always suit African cultures or societies that are working and communal communities. We suggest that conservation campaign strategists who aim to mitigate against biodiversity loss and forest degradation must begin by understanding key characteristics of the target groups such as cultural beliefs about life, nature, biodiversity and conservation, conservation-literacy characteristics, barriers to conservation in the global south. If they do not develop this kind of knowledge, they risk perpetuating existing dominant paradigms of development and ultimately affecting limited positive change. We suggest sound formative research to identify and appreciate any unacknowledged conflicts that may arise from a lack of shared meanings and understanding between forest conservation campaign strategists and target audiences. The global north meanings of conservation conceptualized as a push for pristine nature do not align with most African communitarian cultures' worldviews of symbiotic living with biodiversity and nature. Low-context cultures of the West can compartmentalize and separate forests (nature) and humans or work life, and home life or business, and play as opposed to grassroots people who see life as an amalgamated and indivisible socio-cultural milieu. The participatory forest management at Arabuko Sokoke Forest needs to be restructured to take a more culture-centered approach (CCA) to resonate with the culture of the adjacent forest dwellers (AFDs). We believe AFDs are intelligent and capable people who can be active agents in forest conservation, helping address climate change and promote sustainable development at ASF. Their participation is crucial to sharing information, knowledge, trust, commitments, and the right attitude in conservation programs at ASF. Therefore, this paper calls for new attitudes to avoid stereotyped thinking about AFDs and to promote cultural diversity and pluralism. The CCA model stresses reciprocal collaboration in PFM throughout all

levels of participation—listening to what AFDs say, respecting their culture, beliefs, values and attitude, and having mutual trust. Conservation efforts at ASF must be based on trust in the local people’s capacity to contribute and participate actively in the task of transforming themselves and their communities.

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