

Simbi Nyaima: An Interplay of Nature and Mythology in the Lake Victoria Region; Planning and Management for Ecotourism Transformation in Kenya

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ARTICLE INFO

Available Online January 2014

Key words:

Simbi Nyaima,

Nature;

Mythology;

Planning;

Management;

Ecotourism Transformation.

ABSTRACT

Many countries in the world exploit cultural heritage to reduce poverty, transform the community and support local livelihood. This paper focuses on ecotourism transformation, namely, nature (Simbi as unique Crater Lake) and mythology associated with the lake depicting the curse of a village by a strange old woman in the name of Simbi. These two constellations have been used to preserve the site and need to be used in the planning, conservation and management of this unique heritage by the stakeholders. The study aimed at mapping the site, examining its cultural identity, assessing the values and potential of the site, identifying the challenges facing the site and developing appropriate strategies for ecotourism promotion. The study used ethnographic and phenomenological modes of data collection based on purposive sampling method. The data was qualitatively analyzed and yielded themes with respect to research objectives. The research documented the location, nature and mythology of the site as planning, conservation and branding tools, established the level of community participation in its planning, conservation and branding, identified its potential and challenges for ecotourism promotion, and proposed appropriate strategies for planning, management and conservation of Simbi Nyaima for upscaling ecotourism in the study area.

1.0 Background

Cultural Heritage may be defined as things, places and practices that define who we are as individuals, communities, nations or civilizations (Onjala, 2011). It is that aspect of our lives or environment which we want to keep, share and pass on to future generations.

This definition is in line with that provided by the World Bank (2006: 173) that includes historic urban areas, vernacular heritage, cultural landscapes, living dimensions of heritage, as well as, all aspects of the physical and spiritual relationship between human societies and their environment. This include values, norms, traditions, folklore, music and dance, traditional skills and technologies and the meaning a society derives from them and perpetrates for posterity. The World Bank (2006: 175) for instance, uses a broad definition of physical cultural resources to mean movable objects, sites, structures, groups of structures and natural features and landscapes that have archaeological, paleontological, historical, architectural, religious, aesthetic, or other cultural significance.

Lake Victoria region of Kenya is very rich in cultural heritage that remains largely unexploited for economic gain. This rich reservoir consists of historic places, large cultural landscapes, monuments and other built heritage just to mention a few (Fig.1). While the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), as a state corporation has a broad mandate and a wide range of activities focusing on heritage management and works with communities and other government agencies to ensure proper conservation of these resources, sustainable use of the same, to benefit the communities, has not been realized and the main question is how this can be done. National Museums of Kenya has only been responsible for the conservation of Kenya's heritage and

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collection of cultural, ecological and fossil exhibits, documentation of sites and monuments which are unique in Sub-Saharan Africa and biomedical, and bio-conservation/ ecological conservation research (NMK, 2009:7) but has not reached the level of translating the heritage into sustainable development for the communities around cultural heritage sites.

In the new constitutional dispensation, management of cultural heritage sites requires reorientation to the constitution to meet the demands of a devolved government system. In Article 11 (3) (a) of the Constitution of Kenya, the Government is to ensure that communities receive compensation or royalties for the use of their cultures and cultural heritage in general. In pursuit of this, this study intended to assess the potential of the site, identify the challenges facing the community in the management and utilization of the site and to develop appropriate strategies for sustainable development of Simbi Nyaima cultural heritage for income generation to directly benefit the local community. This has not been the case, especially, in the Lake Victoria region where a lot of cultural heritage sites have been considered non-economical resulting into destruction of some of the historic places meaning, the irreplaceable cultural heritage has been swept down the drain.

The study aimed at locating and mapping the site, establishing its potential, identifying the challenges at the site and developing appropriate planning, management and conservation strategies to make it beneficial to the community in the area. The site is likely to become one of the major tourist and heritage attractions within the Lake Victoria region if well packaged and properly managed.

This project intends to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) To map and document Simbi Nyaima site.
- 2) To engage the communities in an assessment and valuation of the site in order to rate potential for use as economic entity.
- 3) To identify the challenges facing the management and conservation of the site.
- 4) To develop appropriate strategies for the planning, management and conservation of the site.

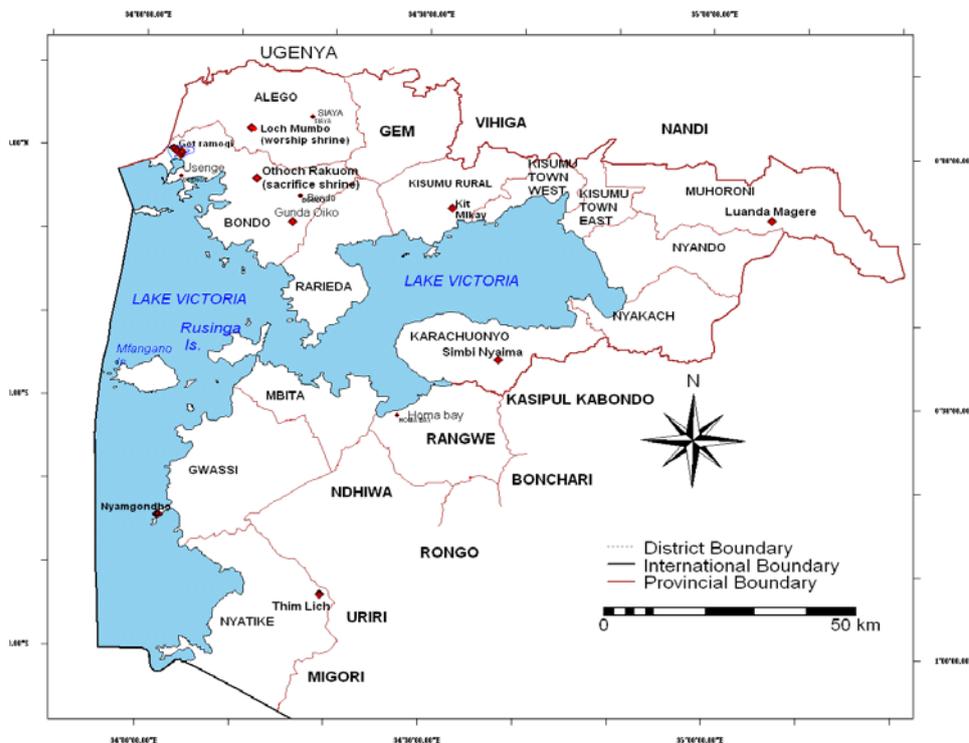


Fig. 1: Simbi Nyaima and Other Heritage sites in Nyanza Region, Kenya
Source: Author, 2013

1.1 Problem Statement

Cultural heritage resources are used by many countries in the world for sustainable development and transformation of the livelihood of the local communities (ESOK, 2007). In Kenya, the lake region has numerous and diverse cultural heritage resources that include Simbi Nyaima, Nyamgodho, Kit Mikayi, Luanda Magere, SemeKaila, Thimlich Ohinga, Fort Tenan, Jaramogi Oginga Mausoleum, Tom Mboya Mausoleum, Got Ramogi, Gogo Falls, Sarah Obama Cultural Centre, WathLango, Muguruk, Kanan & Kanjira, Rusinga Island, Ndere Island, Dunga, and Ruma National Park (Fig.1). In addition, the region has vast lake resources such as scenic sandy beaches with traditional water sports, wild game and birds, traditional cuisine, ecological wetlands with rare and unique species, and prehistoric settlement sites, which should be harnessed to transform the lives of the local communities (Loehr, 2002). These resources have been described as a virgin and unexploited in comparison to the Coastal and Rift Valley regions of this country. This cultural capital, through a people driven process, can be translated into place and product branding of the region's unique sites and resources (Johnstone, 1999). Not to mention the modern Kisumu International Airport as an entry point for visitors into the region. For example, the branding of the region as eco-friendly attraction is likely to attract many travelers to Lake Victoria region, which is envisaged to increase revenue, foreign exchange and create employment to the local people.

Despite these potentials, the Lake Victoria region is experiencing high poverty levels, youth and women unemployment, general under development, environmental degradation, continuous loss of cultural heritage, and declining fish resources that have been the main source of livelihood for the region. The concern therefore is how to harness and conserve these resources, in particular, Simbi Nyaima site, to generate income, and conserve both cultural and natural heritage for posterity and sustainable development (Republic of Kenya, 2007). This study intends to establish the potential of Simbi Nyaima, examine the values and significance of the site, and propose appropriate conservation and management strategies as well as branding and image-creation models in order to generate income and revenue to support community livelihood.

1.2 Literature Review

UNESCO has been the world's most important institution responsible for the management, conservation and promotion of world heritage sites as well as the establishment of various international conservation charters. This world cultural umbrella has played a significant role in presenting to the general public various cultural properties of outstanding universal value from all corners of the world, Kenya included, since its establishment (UNESCO, 1985:3).

The concept of a charter or code of ethics promoting the highest standards of practice in work on cultural heritage has been with us for over 50 years. The first attempt to promote such principles occurred in 1931 during the Athens Congress on restoration of historic monuments. It became necessary that the principles guiding the preservation and restoration of ancient buildings be agreed and laid down on an international basis, with each country being responsible for applying the plan within the framework of its own culture and traditions (UNESCO, 1985:2; ICOMOS, 1965). World conventions organized by UNESCO concerning the protection of cultural heritage have been held (UNESCO, 1985:2) but it was the International Charter of 1964 that established the standards most often applied in conservation work today, introducing for the first time the notions of maintenance, social use and the value of proven techniques of repair (Fielden & Jakilehto, 1998:6). The convention which took place on 16th November 1972 addressed the problem of the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage (UNESCO, 1972:3).

Since the UNESCO Convention of 1972, regional and international conservation organizations have sprung up in different continents and even in Africa with the help of UNESCO. Such organizations in Africa include the Africa 2009, PMDA (Programme for Museum Development in Africa), AFRICOM (International Council of African Museums), SAMP (Swedish - African Museum Programme), and ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property). These heritage institutions have acted as sources of funds, technical personnel and resource persons for heritage management and conservation. They have organized regional and international workshops, seminars and training programs on the management and conservation of cultural heritage where Kenyans have been invited to participate either as a student or as a resource person (Odede, 2007: 62).

The National Museums of Kenya (NMK) is a state corporation established by an Act of Parliament, the National Museums and Heritage Act Chapter 216, 2006, Kenya Gazette Supplement No. 63 (Republic of

Kenya, 2007). The National Museums of Kenya is a multidisciplinary institution whose role is to collect, preserve, study, document and present Kenya's past and present cultural and natural heritage. It is the principal cultural institution on whose shoulder is placed the identification, preservation, protection, conservation and presentation of the country's cultural heritage, which is reflected in the various monuments and heritage sites (but has not reached the level of translating the heritage into sustainable development for the communities around cultural heritage sites (NMK, 2009:7; Odede, 2007:61).

In planning the reconstruction of cultural heritage, the main guiding principles of cultural heritage conservation indicates that it should help a community not only protect economically valuable physical assets, but also preserve its practices, history, and environment in a sense of continuity and identity (Weilin & Svetlana, 2012; Angela, 2009; World Bank, 2006:2). Communities should prioritize which cultural assets to preserve, considering both cultural meaning and livelihood implications, although reaching a consensus may be difficult.

Communities in collaboration with local government and the lead agency for heritage conservation should identify and prioritize cultural resources that require conservation and document the condition of these resources as well as develop and implement appropriate plans to address post-conservation cultural heritage risks (Tiffany, 2011; World Bank, 2006:1)

Effective protection of cultural heritage can be achieved only through wide community participation in recovery and reconstruction planning (World Bank, 2006:176). Participatory planning of cultural heritage should focus both on cultural importance and livelihood activities that depend on the conservation of these properties (Honey, 2008). This study is an attempt to ensure that community participation is upheld in the management, conservation and branding of Simbi Nyaima for up-scaling local community livelihood.

2.0 Methodology

This section presents detailed information on methods of data collection and modes of analysis suitable for answering the research objectives.

2.1 Data Collection

The research was mainly qualitative. The study employed ethnographic phenomenological collections of oral history of site from elderly members of the host communities (Fig.4). It began with the identification of resource persons who were knowledgeable about the lake. These were persons considered knowledgeable because they had grown up in the area surrounding the site, had often used the lake for different purposes. In addition, they were aged seventy years and above thus could be viewed as custodians of the community's wisdom. Purposive sampling was used to identify these informants. Face to face interviews were used to collect the myths. Tape recording was done during the narrative sessions. The myths collected were transcribed, and then translated for the researcher's use. Observation of the cultural sites was done through a tour of the cultural site to ascertain the existence of the cultural sites. In addition, focused group discussions among the youth (Fig.4), elderly women and elderly men were carried out with special emphasis on the opportunities, challenges and appropriate planning, management and conservation strategies for ecotourism upscaling of Simbi Nyaima to support community livelihood (Hayombe *et al*, 2012:165).

2.2 Data Analysis

The primary data was organized into thematic areas using content analysis. Nachmias (2009) defines content analysis as any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages. Kothari (2009) further argues that content analysis consists of analyzing the content of documentary material such as books, magazines and the content of all other verbal material which can be either spoken or printed. Before 1940s, content analysis was frequently used in quantitative analysis of documentary material regarding particular characteristics that could be identified and counted. However, since 1950s content analysis has been qualitatively used in analyzing primary data. Qualitative content analytical approaches focus on analyzing both the explicit or manifest content of a text as well as interpretations of latent content of texts- that which can be interpreted or interpolated from the text, but is not explicitly stated in it (Granhein & Lundman, 2003). In the current research, analysis and interpretation of data was done to develop thematic areas with respect to the research objectives. This was accomplished through use of the Functionalist Theory. Functionalist Theory was applied in the analysis to

establish role of the myth, the potential of the site, the challenges facing the site and enhance the development of appropriate strategies for planning, conservation and management of the heritage through stakeholder participation.

3.0 Research Findings

The study realized several outputs that include location and description of the site, management status, the stakeholders, history and mythology, challenges, potential, and strategies for the conservation and management of the site.

3.1 Location and Physical Description of the Site

Simbi Nyaima cultural heritage site is situated in Homa Bay County, about 3 Kilometers north-west of Kendu Bay Town in South-Western Kenya (Fig.1). Lake Simbi occupies a depression, which is naturally a caldera that resulted from volcanic activity. The landscape around the lake is generally flat and gently sloping towards the shoreline of Lake Victoria which is only but a few kilometers away. To the southwest is the imposing Homa Hills, which may have been formed by the same geological processes that gave rise to the Lake.

The Lake can be easily accessed from Kendu Bay town. An all-weather marramroad connects Simbi-Nyaima Lake to the main Kendu Bay-Homa Bay tarmac road. This road meanders between homes as it leads to the Lake where it forms a ring enabling visitors to drive or walk around the Lake.

The Lake is small and round in size and shape respectively. The ring road that goes around it runs at a height compared to the real water margin of the lake, which can be approximately 6-10 meters below the road level. The circular shape of the lake is characteristic of Caldera Lakes resulting from volcanic eruptions which end up with the cones being blown away to leave circular depressions. Such depressions may be filled with water forming a lake, similar to what is represented at Simbi Nyaima cultural heritage site.



Fig.2: Simbi Nyaima: A Legendary Crater Lake.



Fig.3: Flamingoes residing at Simbi Nyaima.

The Lake has neither outlet nor inlet. Water drains into the lake through rain surface run-off forming small temporary streams. We cannot rule out the existence of underground outlets from the Lake, however, this has not been established and given the nature and content of the water, there is probably none.

The water at the lake is alkaline and has a foul smell. The locals always talk of using the water to cure skin ailments. The lake has no major waves or currents, a situation that may be explained by the low level of the water compared to higher ground around it where wind blows. It may be explained by the heavy mineral content of the water.

The immediate lake margin is characterized by whitish mineral locally known as *bala*, which is a salt mined for a variety of uses, including cattle feed. It is evident that as the lake water recedes, especially, during dry seasons, this mineral is left in abundance and heavily harvested by the locals, who sell it to people coming from as far as the borders of Tanzania and Kisii County. On a normal day, several women and/or children would line up the lake shore mining this important mineral.

The lake is surrounded by homes which show a relatively dense population in this particular area. This high population has compromised the natural environment which has started showing signs of pollution and other anthropogenic effects, such as, lack of natural vegetation or zone around the lake. The natural beauty of this environment is, therefore, greatly affected and is almost non-existent. It will take time before this is eventually put in place.

3.2 Management Status

Lake Simbi Nyaima and a land abutting it, probably enclosed by the ring road that separates the lake from the private homes, belong to the Government of Kenya as the land was gazetted as a bird sanctuary. This means that the area occupied by the lake is protected just like other game sanctuaries or national parks under the management of Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). Currently, there are no visible management activities but Kendu Bay Town Council has direct jurisdiction over this area and should be consulted in case of any serious development around the lake. However, it is partially managed by a Community Based Organization since 2003. The CBO known as Simbi Nyaima Bird Sanctuary, has made attempts to fence the lake but the process has only realized the foundation of a gate structure. Detailed management structure to address environmental concerns, population-heritage interaction and implementation of conservation and development plans, is yet to be put in place. In the absence of detailed management structures, it means sustainable and strategic approaches for management are yet to be put in place. Equally, the cultural background and foundation of the mythical aspect is yet to be fully exploited. The story remains un-harmonized with everybody telling it the best way they know how. There is also no control station which is usually a clear symbol of management.

The heritage is not a revenue collection area currently. The CBO has not organized itself to collect revenue. All visitors, therefore, do not pay anything. There is a great potential for revenue collection if infrastructure and facilities can be improved. Minimal management and conservation is, instead being carried out by the community members who have organized themselves into a CBO. Simbi Management Committee was founded to manage the affairs of Simbi Bird Sanctuary. The committee has also taken over the management of Simbi Cultural heritage site. The officials include Kefa Otung-Chairman, Magaret Agwa-Secretary, Henry Osika-Treasurer. The community organizations must, however, recognize the fact that the area is government protected and should operate and carry out their activities in consultation with the County Government of Homa Bay.



Fig.4: Youth Focused Group.



Fig.5: Flamingoes along the shores of Simbi Nyaima.

3.3 The Stakeholders

A stakeholder is someone (or persons, group of people, organization or institution) that has an interest, claim, benefit opportunity, shares, right, control, authority, roles, special capacity, or other legitimate claim on a resource. At this level, the various stakeholders, through organized workshops and individual interviews have provided information defining their interest and spelling out their expectations from would-be managers of the heritage. Some of the stakeholders are expectations are discussed below.

3.3.1 Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS)

Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) becomes the first stakeholder having registered interest in this heritage by gazetted the lake as a bird Sanctuary to take care of the welfare of migratory birds, namely, flamingoes that

visit the Lake annually. KWS is a State Corporation mandated to take care of the country's wild animals. It was established by a Parliamentary statute through an amendment (No.16 of 1989) to the Wildlife Conservation and Management Act (CAP 376 of 1975). Its overall mandate is to conserve and manage wildlife in Kenya. Simbi Nyaima is important to KWS as it forms part of the lakes system that support seasonal migrations of birds, especially flamingoes. This contributed to the Lakes' gazettement as a bird Sanctuary, therefore, making it join the league of other lakes, particularly, those found in the Great Rift Valley of Kenya and Lake Natron in Tanzania (Figs. 3 and 5).

3.3.2 National Museums of Kenya (NMK)

NMK is another State Corporation mandated to take care of the Country's Cultural and Natural Heritage. NMK was established through an Act of parliament and operates currently under the Museums and Heritage Act 2006 CAP 216. NMK's interests at Simbi Nyaima include working in collaboration with other stakeholder. NMK would like to oversee all forms of conservation, research, marketing and promotion of the heritage to spark beneficial social and economic development.

3.3.3 The Community

The community, consisting of different groups including farmers, business people/groups, and women groups among others, form a category of stakeholders that interact with the heritage almost on a daily basis (Fig.4). These groups continue to use the heritage to get some income used for supporting family units. The community also links with the lake through the mythical story which has clear lessons on hospitality (Hayombe *et al.*, 2012:165). While the story may be only a myth to many, it is equally an inspiring lesson to welcome strangers whenever need be.

3.3.4 Tourism Industry

Ministry of Tourism joins the list of Simbi Nyaima stakeholders due to the interest of the tour operators to organize visitation to the destination. This heritage can become a major attraction translating into economic benefits if conditions are improved. Currently, there are no facilities to support vibrant tourism activities. Despite the good road network to the site, there are no other facilities, such as, information Centre, take away brochures and restaurants among others. Development of such facilities would attract more visitors and enhance the status of the lake within the Western Tourist Circuit. Tourists would achieve satisfaction and fascination by visiting the lake. As influx of tourists would benefit other stakeholders and boost economic status of the region. This makes Tourism industry an important stakeholder.

3.3.5 Learning Institutions

Schools and other learning institutions form another category of stakeholders. This category benefits from the heritage through educational programs. Visits to the heritage are usually organized as part of history lessons in which the pupils and/or students learn about mythical origin of the lake to contrast with the scientific geological explanation of origin of the lake.

3.3.6 The Scientific Community

The scientific community, particularly, researchers in different areas form another category of stakeholders. Simbi Nyaima contains information that requires collection and interpretation and dissemination to the public. Different scientific interests like the medicinal value of the water and the geological information touching on drainage and depth of the lake need to be researched and information disseminated to the public.

3.3.7 The County Government of Homa Bay

The Republic of Kenya's Constitution gives the County Government the mandate to promote tourism by enacting legislation for protection and conservation of cultural heritage sites and natural habitats. This includes policy formulation, development of guidelines and plans that include allocation of budgetary provision and actualization of investment plans for ecotourism transformation. The County Government of Homa Bay has therefore taken keen interest to tap on this virgin resource.

3.3.8 Other stakeholders

Other stakeholders include the National Environment Management Authority whose interest is a healthy environment able to sustain biodiversity species of both fauna and flora. Kenya Tourist Board working in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism is another stakeholder that whose interest would be the

development of infrastructure to promote tourism around the Lake. The Ministry of Local Government, through Kendu Bay Town Council, would form another Stakeholder group.

3.4 History of Simbi Nyaima

History of Simbi Nyaima has two dimensions in regard to its origin. A mythical story that explains the origin of the Lake through a curse on merry-making villagers, who denied a needy woman shelter and food, is the first version. The second story has it that the lake is simply explained as a result of geological processes that gave rise to a Caldera Lake like any other found elsewhere. The two explanations hold but the cultural explanation remains so strong that even scientists, who are aware of the geological processes and explanation seem to accept the myth associated with the Lake over the centuries.

It is believed that Simbi Nyaima came into existence long before the arrival of Jo-Karachuonyo, currently occupying the area. The occupants of the area by then were a Luo sub-clan known as the Jo-Waswa, who are thought to have been the first occupants of the area. After Jo-Waswa people then came another group of immigrants known as the Jo-Wagwe who were in turn followed by Jo-Kagan. Other groups also occupied this area in successive settlements and passed to other places before Jo-Karachuonyo eventually arrived and have been the occupants of the area up to the present.

The settling of Southern Nyanza has been elaborately discussed by historians (Odede, 2000; Onjala 1990; Ochieng, 1985; Ogot, 1967). The Jo-Waswa have been mentioned as belonging to the first wave of settlers who eventually, moved into northern Tanzania to occupy the current Tarime Districts. They have also been mentioned to have scattered in several places within Nyanza Province, and particularly, among the Jo-Kano where they form part of the sub-clans. The Jo-Kano people later moved and settled in Simbi Nyaima-Kendu Bay area before relocating to their current localities around Ahero and Kisumu areas.

3.5 Myth and Legend of Simbi Nyaima as a Branding Strategy

The Simbi Nyaima myth holds that one cloudy afternoon, an ugly-smelling woman entered a village at Kolonde, which was located near the current Simbi Nyaima Lake. She found the villagers in a celebration. The men of the village were taking traditional beer, while at the same time feasting on meat from animals that had been slaughtered. Women were busy ensuring that men got enough beer and meat for the feast. The strange-looking woman entered the feasting arena and requested for food and shelter. On seeing the woman, and especially her unpleasant looks and odour, the feasting villagers did not listen to her request and instead able-bodied men were instructed to throw her out of the beer venue and escort her out of the village. She did not receive any food which was abundant as the feast was just nearing its climax.

As the woman dejectedly left that village, she took shelter in the next village where she was welcomed by a young woman with her children. The young woman gave her food which she ate as she warmed herself next to the fire place. When the strange woman had eaten, she asked the young woman if she was married. The young woman replied in the affirmative and said her husband was at a feast in the next village. The strange woman then asked the young woman to go to the feast to get her husband. She obediently left to go for her husband. Unfortunately, when her husband learnt that it was the strange ugly-smelling woman whom they had thrown out of the beer hall who was the one calling him, he slapped his wife and sent her back home, refusing to go with her. On reaching her home, the young woman narrated her ordeal to the strange woman stating how her husband had beaten her up and refused to come with her. The strange woman then advised the young woman to take her children and leave the village as quickly as possible. This command was immediately followed by the woman and no sooner had they stepped out of the village than a heavy down pour with frightening lightening started. It continued to rain for 24 hours and the whole area containing the two villages got flooded. The village where the strange ugly-smelling woman was thrown out became submerged together with all people and animals. The village sank during the heavy down pour due to a curse from the strange old woman on the greedy villagers who refused to give her shelter and food. To date, it is believed that this curse is what caused the origin of Simbi Nyaima Lake.

Over the years, different versions of the story continue to be told. While it is agreed that there was a celebration on this particular afternoon, it is unclear what type of celebration it was. Other versions state that it was a marriage party and that the villagers were celebrating the marriage of their daughter. In this version, however, there is lack of details as the man who was marrying the village daughter is not mentioned. Yet another version states that the villagers were celebrating a bountiful harvest. Here again there is lack of details and seasons and crops are not mentioned anywhere. Most historians and anthropologists leave it at the level of the villagers having a party, a celebration of some sort. Details are

unexplained making the whole episode a mystery and a myth as these are rarely explained in totality. Consequently, Lake Simbi Nyaima emerges after the mysterious woman appears and pronounces a curse on the village and villagers by invoking a heavy downpour of rain. She, however, saves one hospitable woman and her children and where they go to, remains part of the mystery that makes up the myth.

This history and cultural narration of the origin of Simbi Nyaima contrasts greatly with the scientific and geological point of view. Geologically, Simbi Nyaima was formed as a result of weaknesses in the earth's crust which triggered volcanic eruptions leading to the formation of a Caldera Lake. The same processes that led to the formation of Homa Hill and the hot springs currently visible in the area are the same ones that led to the formation of Simbi Nyaima Lake. The dates for these activities are thought to be in the late 17th century (about 1680). This coincides with the early settlements in the area.

The choice whether to go by the cultural myth or take the scientific geological explanation does not, in anyway, dim the radiance of Simbi Nyaima as a cultural and natural heritage site. This history and nature make it a place worth conserving and developing for the benefit of future generations.

3.6 Current Conservation Status of the Lake

Lake Simbi Nyaima is a small caldera Lake only 3 kilometers from Kendu Bay Town, Homa Bay County. The lake supports migratory birds, especially, from the Rift Valley lakes, and hosts upto 700 white storks in a good year and occasionally up to 6,000 flamingos. The lake's water is alkaline and carries a strong smell that can extend several Kilometers away. The lake faces a number of threats as discussed in the next section of this chapter making it look 'naked'. There is no natural vegetation around it as is common around natural lakes. The situation looks worse as there are no signs that efforts are being made to restore the lake's natural environment. The magnitude of the threats facing the lake has not been assessed. This means there is an urgent need for relevant projects to address the threats and put down strategies for catchment management and pollution control. Such projects will address man-induced threats and lessen the effects of climate change which are inevitable.

A casual assessment of the lake in the past few months indicate that it (the Lake) is becoming less and less important as a bird sanctuary due to its unfavorable surrounding. The natural lake margin, which should be a natural habitat for migratory birds is diminishing and has been invaded by humans putting up structures and mining minerals. At any given time of the day, the shoreline has miners and therefore compromises the state of the lake and ability to support migratory birds.

The lake is sandwiched between homes and other development infrastructures, such as, schools and dispensaries, just to mention a few. The main challenge that remains is how to recreate a natural lake environment that will support migratory birds and be attractive for the purpose of encouraging tourism (Figs. 3 and 5).

3.7 Challenges Facing Simbi Nyaima Site

During the community stakeholder discussion at Simbi Nyaima, a number of factors were identified as affecting the condition of the lake. These may be divided into anthropogenic and environmental factors. Anthropogenic factors include first and foremost the lack of an effective management body to ensure and maintain the well-being of the lake and its environs. Another threat is that of lack of enforcement of legal framework. Despite the heritage being gazetted with specific acreage, there is no sign that people have respected the boundaries of the heritage. They have instead encroached and built structures almost up to the lake shore. Since its gazettelement and even long before that, the lake has remained without any management strategies put in place. This has led to encroachment into the lake area and construction of homes and other facilities like schools and hospitals within an area which should otherwise form the lakes natural boundary zone.

The heritage or lake currently provides inadequate benefits to the local people. This is a big threat as people will start to see no need for the heritage leading to its neglect and abandonment. A relatively high and increasing population around the lake is a major threat to this heritage, which is also supposed to support wild migratory birds. This increase in human settlement across the boundaries of the sanctuary has effects on the normal functioning of the lake. The dense population around the lake also leads to pollution of the lake as the garbage and other materials from domestic use find their way into the lake or lake shore area. It is surprising to find a pit latrine constructed just five metres from the water margin. Uncontrolled mining of

bala at the lake margin also poses a problem. Hundreds of birds that regularly migrated into the lake now seek refuge elsewhere due to the interference with their natural habitat and feeding area (Figs. 3 and 5).

There has been and continues to be extensive destruction of natural vegetation leading to land degradation in the immediate catchment area. This also leads to erosion and siltation of the lake.

Environmental factors that affect the lake include changing climatic conditions affecting the water level in the lake. There is a visible reduction of the water level even as rainfall patterns change and less amounts are received in the area. However, during those moments when it rains, rain run-off from the adjacent areas find their way into the lake bringing considerable amounts of sediments. Siltation, therefore, is a major problem that any management body will have to contend with if the lake is to be saved from further siltation.

The major problem is that of eutrophication meaning nutrient enrichment of aqueous bodies. As a caldera lake with no outlet, everything that enters the lake basin accumulates. There has been years of uncontrolled nutrients input into the lake leading to a high nitrate and phosphorus levels initiating the formation of cyanobacteria blooms that produce various toxins. These are seen in the form of a thick mat of decomposing cyanobacteria with a foul smell, especially, during hot conditions. Because of these toxins, the lake's water cannot be used for drinking or for other domestic purposes. Even bathing with the water from the lake poses a major health hazard away from the common belief that the water will cure skin diseases. The level of toxic substances usually goes up in high temperatures and decreases with lower temptations. Causes for this situation may be both natural and man-induced. Lack of adequate waste water management and lack of sustainable farming can be major causes of this condition, especially, when added to a growing population. Additionally, multiple sources of erosion, destruction of wetlands/natural vegetation, use of non-biodegradable phosphate rich detergents and soaps and lack of adequate garbage disposal all contribute to the eutrophication process.

This condition has gone on at the lake for along time to an extent that the water condition is taken as normal. The impact of eutrophication at the lake can be seen in three forms. One, the lake is not able to support a lot of endemic species as the bacteria deplete oxygen and also block sunlight which affects all water organisms. Two, the water cannot be used for drinking and for other domestic uses as this poses a health hazard. Third and last, the beauty of the lake is taken away. It produces foul smell and looks dirty taking away its esthetic beauty and clarity that can attract tourists. Most visitors who come to visit the lake do so due to its cultural and mythical story and not because they want to see a beautiful lake. For meaningful economic use, especially for tourism, the lake must be subjected to programs that will put in place ecologically sustainable initiatives and programs that reduce nutrients input of the lake should be encouraged. For example, promotion of sustainable farming, erosion prevention initiatives, waste water management, introduction of biodegradable soaps, detergents and plastics and prohibition/control of mineral harvesting from the shoreline.

Lastly, there is the global threat of the emerging impacts of climate change which are affecting all water bodies in terms of evaporation and reduction of the volume of water during hot weather.

4.0 The Potential of Simbi Nyaima

Lake Simbi Nyaima as a natural and cultural heritage has some values and significance that go beyond its immediate environ. It is these values that keep and sustain this heritage and have attracted calls for more attention, including, the need to propose strategies for management and branding of the site. Values are aspects of a place that make it important to the public or different interested groups. Values contribute to the survival of a place or heritage through time. The Burra Charter of 1983 categorizes heritage values as aesthetic, historic, scientific and socio-economic. This management plan has followed these categories in presenting the values of Lake Simbi Nyaima.

4.1 Scientific Research Value

There is a lot of scientific and research interest as many questions remain unanswered both by the locals and foreigners. Simbi Nyaima has a lot of scientific and cultural information it has held since its formation. Different research groups seek an understanding of the lake using different aspects. Areas of interest include research, formulation of conservation activities, training of community members, and education,

especially for the local primary schools. Demand for information is likely to grow with increase of visitors to the lake. Researchers, therefore, have to keep up providing all required information that different members of the public require. This demand may include information about the legend that explains the origin of the lake, the age of the lake, the nature and content of the lake water, the depth of the lake, why aquatic life is not abundant at the lake, why the lake has a foul smell and how *bala* mineral is formed at the lake among other concerns.

4.2 Educational Value

The lake forms a main cultural facility that can be used more for education purposes by schools and other learning institutions. School parties visit the lake to see and understand the site of a mythical curse that created the lake. In the process, they seek to understand the other aspects of the lake through information that may be available to them. Educational values become more real due to the fact that Simbi Nyaima's story is taught in primary school history lessons.

4.3 Cultural Value

The heritage has a long history that different generations have internalized and used to explain the existence of this natural feature. Different generations have associated with the mythical story associated with the lake. Both young and old want to tell the story as if it belongs to them, it is their own story. 'During one of the visits to the lake, a young boy of 7 years old ran to me and asked if I wanted the story of Simbi Nyaima. Fearing that I would get a distorted version, I declined'. It, however, occurred to me that the heritage has gained associative value and that is why I regret denying the young boy a chance to tell his story about the lake. At another angle, the lake has become some form of identity for the local community. Some even call themselves Jo-Simbi Nyaima or NyaSimbi Nyaima. This form of association makes the heritage gain value as more people associate with it.

4.4 Economic Value

While there are no major direct economic benefits for the community currently, there are high hopes that the lake can be developed and managed to benefit those living around it. Development of the site will create employment opportunities that will lead to a reduction of poverty levels in the local community. In small ways, the lake provides *bala*, which is mined by the locals for sale hence contributing to the economic well-being of some of the locals. The expectation is, however, that when more facilities are created at the heritage and infrastructural development put in place, there will be an economic boom from which all locals are likely to benefit. Economic value is also seen in the benefits that come to the area as a result of the lake. Researchers and other visitors who come to the lake from far distances depend on the locals for upkeep supplies. Sale of merchandise and provision of accommodation facilities are some of the economic aspects the region benefits from due to the existence of the lake.

4.5 Aesthetic Value

The heritage occupies an environment with a unique topography and geologic origin which effectively complements the cultural aspect or attraction. The look of the lake, its size and shape and the fact that it is far below the land upon which visitors stand, makes the area spectacle which forms the basis of the lakes aesthetic value. The physical form of the lake, its water which is highly toxic and the calm surface devoid of raging wave's characteristics of most lakes all combine to give the lake the beauty which ushers it within the realms of aesthetic value (Fig.2 and 5). This value is always silently observed on the visitor's faces and captured in their verbal or written comments.

4.6 Ecological Value

The Lake and its environs constitute a natural ecology that is a habitat to plants, animals, birds and human beings. The Beautiful flamingoes live in the Lake in particular periods of the year. It is mainly used as any other water bodies by the community except for its alkalinity which limits its use for a variety of purposes, such as, bathing and drinking. The water is also used for washing clothes and utensils. It is also used for drinking by livestock even though its use for more domestic purposes is limited due to its high chemical content (Figs. 2, 3, 5 and 7).

4.7 Touristic Value

Simbi Nyaima can be linked to other tourist attractions within the region and become an effective member of destinations within the Western Kenya Tourist Circuit, alongside the nearby Ndere Island on Lake Victoria, Ruma National Game Reserve, Thimlich Ohinga and Maasai Mara National Park. Other areas that

may be developed to make more points in the circuit include Odino Falls within Nyakach's Sondu Miriu Hydroelectric Power generation area, archaeological sites of Kanam-Kanjera, the Macalder Gold mines and Gogo Falls in Migori County. The lake is also used as a site for public viewing by both local and international visitors because of its myth of origin. Such visits are uncontrolled as the heritage is yet to have a visitor Centre or office from which monitoring can be done. Despite this limitation, visitors, both local and foreign, continue to make trips to the lake to see and hear about the "village that sank" (Simbi Nyaima).

4.8 Medicinal Value

The site has medical tourism potential with its water treating various body ailments such as missiles, rushes and skin diseases. It is a source of cure for skin diseases for the local people.

4.9 Recreational Value

The heritage also has the opportunity of having lodges, restaurants, boat rides and other recreational facilities put in place in conjunction with the locals.

5.0 Conservation and Management Strategies for Sustainable Development of Simbi Nyaima Site

The protection and recognition of this important heritage should be a major priority in conservation and development plans. Such recognition and protection will enhance the usefulness of the heritage and make it more attractive. Currently, there is no clear boundary for the gazetted heritage. Such a boundary would be appropriate to define an area in which conservation and development initiatives are to be concentrated. A fence around the heritage would help control the visitors to the lake as they will access the heritage through one gate or designated area points. Putting up a fence is, therefore, an activity that is long overdue.

The heritage stands out for all to see but there is need to establish Information Centre from which visitors can be guided through the site or reserve relevant information before walking or driving around the lake. Such an initiative will enhance people's understanding of the heritage and make any visit worthwhile. But the lake also needs a natural buffer, a zone around it which gives it that natural look one expects from any natural lake. Since this is lacking, there is need to seek for ways on how this can be recreated.

The cultural aspect of the lake is very interesting and captivating. For this to be part and parcel of the lake, the management team must ensure this story is systematically told and presented to the visitors to the lake. The "village that sank" can be recreated and its story told in small write-ups given to visitors. Knowledgeable men and women may also tell the story live at the recreated "village that sank" to the visitors.

To have effective conservation and maintain the quality of the lake and its environ, there is need to build a cohesive human resource in a management system characterized by a clear efficient hierarchy in which to carry out continuous conservation, management and development agenda.

Currently, Lake Simbi Nyaima is managed by a CBO whose members take advice from the chairman. The chairman does not have any other higher body to report to. A new management structure needs to be put in place so as to set up a proper hierarchy that will include (i) a management team headed by either a manager or chairman, (ii) Board of Trustees and (iii) a patron. Occupants of these committees and offices should be competitively selected or appointed so as to realize desired results.

A central place or building for the management activities should be set up. Such an establishment will require relevant standby staff, such as, office support staff to help senior officers in the management process. There may be need for guides, ticket clerks and marketing persons. Additionally, there may be need for more permanent staff to monitor the lake environment and carry out detailed conservation work.

Several conservation activities will need to be undertaken. The need for these is evident given the state of the heritage and the threats it faces. Several mitigation factors will be required that will force the management team to expand the staff base. A conservation monitoring centre with facilities for data collection and analysis, photography and other documentation equipment, storage among others, will require more personnel, especially, experts in these fields who will assess any threats and plan for remedial actions to be taken.

The established management will need to put in place a smooth information flow through interpretation and presentation of the heritage to promote effective usage by visitors. Simbi Nyaima is largely underutilized in terms of tourism activities due to lack of basic visitor facilities. In order to encourage more usage, there is need for an interpretation centre in which relevant information about the heritage will be stored for the benefit of visitors. Additionally, information should be availed in take-away brochures and also placed in strategic parts of the heritage as may be required or decided by management.

The Lake and its environs are endowed with scientific and cultural data that should be collected, interpreted and used for both educational and marketing programs. This calls for more research and documentation. Different scientists should be encouraged to carry out research at the heritage. The results of such research work will form part of the information flow needed at the Heritage in the form of publications, brochures information panels and boards. A lot of information will need to be gathered from the heritage to push this agenda towards its logical end. Information from research will also help in marketing and enhancing educational programs that may be run at the heritage. Such information may also be used in other publicity campaigns, such as, in workshops and seminars, public meetings, radio programs, video shows advertisements, folk media like festivals, drama, dances, and beauty competition.

The (established) management team needs to link with development agencies, government departments and donors to build sustainable infrastructural services and facilities within and around the heritage.

The road network for Simbi Nyaima is currently described as good. However, all other infrastructure and services will need to be worked on. The management team will have to carry out a number of activities some of which are listed below;

- (i) Liaise with relevant government departments/ministries to upgrade or put in place required infrastructure.
- (ii) Generate fundable proposals to raise funds for conservation and development.
- (iii) Lobby for the recognition of the heritage by County Government for allocation of funds from the budgets to support conservation and other development.
- (iv) Encourage collaboration with the business community to come up with income generating structures, for example, restaurants, shops and merchandise, camping and picnic facilities among others.

There are vibrant communities that surround the heritage. Their participation should be encouraged so as to blend the past and present cultural practices to make the heritage relevant in the present age. Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology and other groups of people have sensitized the community as definite partners in any conservation and development agenda. The community should make use of the heritage as their cultural resource.

Plans for further development to make the heritage more useful and economically relevant will require the support of all stakeholders. Long term plans should include putting in place a community driven management team, putting in place visitor facilities/ interpretation centre, community centre (shops, restaurants) and picnic areas among others. The community and the general public should be aware that this natural and cultural resource is available to them. It is possible also to work with the community and network with other stakeholders, while creating a sense of ownership among the community members. They can be involved at the planning and implementation stages of particular projects.

More visitors and revenue will also be realized if and when more effort is put towards marketing and promoting the lake as a tourist destination. Preparation of brochures' should be considered to aid in the marketing and promotion strategy. Relevant government departments (KWS, NMK and Ministry of Tourism) should work together to sell the site to a wider public. A well designed web-page should be used for this purpose.

Conclusion

The study concludes that key components of planning and conservation of Simbi Nyaima site for ecotourism transformation is an interplay between nature and mythology. Mythology is a community narrative of the site, while nature is an explanation of the formation of a crater later as well as habitat of flamingo birds.

However, management is categorized to be the function of key agencies interested in conservation both ecological and cultural heritage as well as community participation. Through qualitative research the study came up with appropriate strategies for planning, management, conservation and branding of the site.

Acknowledgement

This paper was developed as a result of Kisumu Location Interaction Platform (KLIP) research project of MISTRA URBAN FUTURES global programme with funds from Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) in collaboration with Chalmers University of Technology and Gothenburg University in Sweden, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Maseno University and County Government of Kisumu. The agenda of fair, green and dense in urban areas, which is a pro-poor with a focus for just cities, green cities and growing cities framework for the local population and leverage them from poverty. Policy making for ecotourism transformation must embrace local participation and be able to upscale immediate benefits as a positive motivating factor.

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