CASE STUDY 11

Community involvement in a nomination: the traditions and practices of the Mijikenda Kayas in Kenya

The Traditions and practices associated to the Kayas in the sacred forests of the Mijikenda was inscribed on the Urgent Safeguarding List in 2009. It involves traditional music and dance, prayers and songs, the production of sacred ritual objects as well as ritual and ceremonial practices and an acute awareness and knowledge of the natural world, associated with the Kayas of the Mijikenda. Kayas are sacred places in the forests, remnants of fortified settlements in the once huge forested areas along Kenya’s coastline where the ancestors of the Mijikenda lived.

Today, the Mijikenda no longer live in the Kayas but return to them for traditional practices. Some of the Kayas have been inscribed on the World Heritage List, which has encouraged an increasing number of tourists to visit them.

#### Consultation and community involvement

The National Museums of Kenya and the Department of Culture held a series of consultation meetings with the Councils of Elders and other members of Mijikenda communities in the 1990s to discuss conservation and safeguarding issues. A crucial meeting was held on 9 March 2009 to discuss matters to be included in the nomination file for inscribing the ICH associated with the Kayas on the Urgent Safeguarding List. The Provincial Administration of the area supported the consultation process with the Mijikenda Kaya communities.

Community conservation and development groups were formed within the Mijikenda communities. These groups conserve the tangible heritage and safeguard the intangible. The groups and the Councils of Elders have continued traditional taboos and practices that help in safeguarding and respecting the intangible cultural heritage. They have also promoted appropriate development activities such as bee-keeping around the Kayas.

#### Community members contribute to safeguarding measures

The National Museums of Kenya and the Department of Culture organized a sensitization workshop involving Councils of Elders, Kaya conservation groups, women’s groups and youth groups. The community members discussed the function and viability of the traditions and practices and brought up major issues around safeguarding that were recorded and incorporated into the nomination process:

* They had a strong desire to continue with the traditions and practices related to the Kayas and thus to safeguard them together with the Kaya forest ecosystems.
* They wished to start income-generating activities such as bee-keeping, ecotourism and crafts for each Mijikenda community to enhance ownership and safeguarding measures.
* They wished to recruit community guards to work hand in hand with youth groups who act as whistle-blowers when the forest is invaded (probably by people seeking resources like wood and plants).

Community inputs about guards and income-generating activities were incorporated into the safeguarding plan.

#### Community consent

The Kaya communities, represented by their elders, gave their consent for their traditional practices to be nominated to the Urgent Safeguarding List in view of the critical state of their viability. Their agreement was captured in a video clip and transcribed. The Intergovernmental Committee in 2009 also conditionally approved a request for international assistance submitted by the Government of Kenya in order to fund some of the safeguarding measures proposed.

For further information:

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/traditions-and-practices-associated-with-the-kayas-in-the-sacred-forests-of-the-mijikenda-00313>