

# KATHAMBI, WATER AND NGOLANO

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## **Origins**

Kathambi ritual activities were very strong with relation to water sources across the whole of Kitui district according to field interviews, conducted in the first half of 2002, in Kitungati sublocation of Kisasi Location, up to early 1960's. Informants claim that this strength was triggered in the area around hundred years ago when the southern part of Kitui Central experienced a very severe scarcity of water. Kathambi is the Kamba female goddess and is believed to control water sources. This control is enforced by controlling activities on the land and by extension all natural resources in as far as they relate to water.

## **Practices**

The Kathambi women leadership enforces protection over the water sources from contamination, as Kathambi requires it. The Kathambi women leaders use 'Mbingo' (literally closure applied to individuals, animate, inanimate, space and time categories) to demarcate their physical or social territory such that activities sanctioned and sanctified by their Kathambi ritual activities and the influence of Kathambi, their goddess, were the only activities allowed within a particular arena. The most interesting thing is that Kathambi women at Kitungati sub-location, which is at the south of Kitui Central, could not deal with Kathambi directly. Informants claim they used a male mediator, Mutila. This differs fundamentally from data in other parts of the district where there are no males in Kathambi rituals. They had several places, which they regarded as shrines, where they offered sacrifice to their mediator such that he could mediate between them and their goddess Kathambi. They believed their goddess shared the shrine with the mediator.

For the Kathambi women leaders to offer sacrifice, they historically used to request one person in the community to give them either a goat or a bull whenever they wanted to

sacrifice. That was not hard as in the past many people had extensive livestock holdings .The culture valued livestock as the ultimate expression of wealth. By the 1950's livestock keeping started reducing due to the forced culling related to meat provision for the colonial army and urban areas during WW2 and reduction in grazing land as a result of increased population in the area. This created a problem for the Kathambi women leaders as they had to devise other methods of getting the livestock offering.

From the fifties they decided to start working for people such that they could be given either a bull, a goat or money according to the amount of work they did. There is no clear historical data, from informants, for all the years and whomever they worked for, since sometimes they could collect money from the community to purchase the animals they wanted to sacrifice. To get a live animal from the community or to work for money to buy an animal for the sacrifice, they began to rely on authorisation from the village elder and had to have a permit from the sublocation Assistant Chief. This pattern of raising sacrificial animals continued in the decade of the sixties. Informants, for example, state that in 1960 they worked for Mwambu who gave them a bull and in 1966 they worked for Mutia who gave them a goat.

All in all, by the decade of the seventies, most of the Kathambi women leaders were old and could not do physical work. They therefore, started using the young and energetic men and women to work for them to raise funds for buying sacrificial animals. The experience of these young people, working collectively to raise funds for Kathambi women, led them to appreciating the need to develop their community by creating some of the public goods such as roads, schools and wells. This was over and above the traditional group work whose benefits were mainly for private individual or group consumption. The young people then formalised their groups, which would undertake the Kathambi work and other work of benefit to them selves or the community. When

development agencies came to the region, mainly in response to the droughts of the seventies, their organisational base for implementing different development activities were overlaid on these existing groups. Currently, the Kathambi women leaders do not co-ordinate with these groups and the development agencies hence from 1980's up to 2001 they collect money from the community to purchase whatever they want to sacrifice. The contributions are made by most of the people, including the willing Christians.

### **The Cost of Failing to Sacrifice**

Along Mwiwe River, the Kathambi women leaders have a shrine where they offer sacrifice every year just before the onset of November rains. These are the reliable rains in the area as in other semi-arid parts of Kenya. The informants say that, in the past, the community in this area used to walk for over five kilometres to get water. They used to fetch water at Nzeeu River. Since the Kathambi women believed that their goddess was able to provide them with water, they organized to offer sacrifice through their mediator. It happened that, after the sacrifice, the water table rose up and the community started getting water from Mwiwe River even during the long dry seasons. The sacrifices are supposed to be annual. In general this has been practiced from as far as the informants remember save for a few years, which led to problems. Whenever the community fails to offer sacrifice, Kathambi punishes it for the disobedience. This can be illustrated by the cases below.

In the first case, the community failed to offer sacrifice in 1920. The result was that it rained only once in that season and a very deep dam (Ndia) was dug at a place currently known as Kwa Mathuva on Mwiwe river near, one of the shrines. Whoever dug the dam is not known but a man called Mathuva drowned in that dam immediately. It is this man to whom that particular place and dam were named after. His body was removed and buried by his people. Afterwards the Kathambi women leaders consulted their mediator and were required to sacrifice a black bull so that the dam could fill

with sand to prevent further loss of life. Sacrifices were routinely made every year and the depth of the dam started reducing year after year.

When they failed to offer sacrifice again in 1968, there was tragedy at the same site. A boy, named Kilonzi, drowned in the same dam. As the people collected at the site to remove the body of the boy, an intense rainstorm started although it was not the rainy season. The flood water carried a lot of sand and as people tried to hide themselves from the rains, under trees at the bank of the river, they saw the sand transported by the floods water cover the dam where the body was trapped. On filling the dam completely with sand, the storm abated and the floods ceased. However, nobody could dare step where the dam was because the place was shaking hence the boy's body was buried in the sand. The Kathambi women consulted their mediator and were told that they should sacrifice a black bull again as their goddess was not happy with them. This they did and since then no dam was dug there and nobody else drowned as it was covered once and for all. The Kathambi women leaders sacrifice a goat every year for four years and a bull on the fifth year in general. The last bull was sacrificed in 1997 and it is supposed to be sacrificed this year, 2002. It is interesting to note that 1997 was the El Nino year and it is expected again this year.

### **Controls over Water**

The impact of Kathambi on water table is also seen in the case of Wingoo stream also in Kitungati sub-location. The water table was too low for Mivuko (scoop holes) to yield water in the sand in the past according to informants. The residents of Kanzau and Kamulu villages had to walk for almost ten kilometres in search of water. Their reliable source again was Nzeeu River. Although Mwiwe River was nearer, it was only partially used for it had water only for a short time after the rains.

Kilonzo, who resided near Mwiwe River shifted to his land

near Wingoo stream in 1951 in keeping with the slash and burn agriculture attendant in the area then. Wingoo river scoop holes dried up after he moved. Kathambi women then fined him for carrying their moisture with him when he translocated his farm. He was advised by the same Kathambi women leaders to give a goat for sacrifice through Mutila, who would then intercede with Kathambi to recharge Wingoo stream. He gave the appropriate sacrificial animal and after the sacrifice was done, the result was that the water table rose up and this was an advantage to the people in the locality. Currently the people with shambas along Wingoo stream are growing vegetables and sugarcane and it is where they are earning their living.

Kathambi, the goddess, is also believed to have control over the amount of rains received. Before the onset of the rains the Kathambi women offer sacrifice to her so that she can bring them enough rains. To the Kathambi worshippers, it is clear that the years that the droughts are experienced are the ones that Kathambi ritual activities are neglected like in 1980 and 1984. The field interviews suggest that the goddess does not control the seasonality pattern but the amount of rainfall. This is seen when sometimes it rains in patches such that, if their goddess is happy with a particular community, their area gets high yields while the neighbouring areas may not harvest anything if they do not make sacrifices. If their goddess is not happy, harvest may be minimal or non-existent. Therefore the informants in this area see Kathambi controlling the harvest they get from their farms. This is seen in this year's (2002) harvest of pigeon peas in the whole of Kitungati sub-location. The harvest is poor but in the neighbouring villages the harvest is high.

### **Protecting Water from Contamination**

Protections over water are not just in the physical source but also in assuring that rituals for the regeneration of water through rainfall are pure. The Kathambi women leaders protect the water sources from contamination as they term

this as the spiritual arena of Kathambi their goddess. They do this because any contamination or interference with the arena may disappoint the goddess and lead to the community or individuals in it being punished. If anyone misbehaves, Kathambi could punish the community or the individual either through the mediator Mutila, or through the women. Such punishments are seen in the following cases narrated by informants.

First, in 1987, a man called Mulu interfered with the sacrifice by carrying his share of the sacrificial meat from the river shrine to his home, which was against the Kathambi rules. The rule, which governs this, says that, all the meat should be eaten at the shrine and not even a small piece should be carried away from the shrine after the sacrifice. That man was seen as a thief who had stolen from Kathambi and the punishment was death. The man died just after eating the meat at his house. Luckily none of his family members joined him in the eating.

In 1996, another man, called Kamitu, took his greediness to the shrine. It happened that he carried salt secretly to the shrine so as to season his share of the meat after the sacrifice. This was against the rules of Kathambi as all sacrificial meat is supposed to be eaten without salt. He became sick there and then. He was fined a goat to facilitate a second sacrifice for he had contaminated the previous sacrifice with his salt! Since he was unable to produce a goat there and then he died.

The other case is of contamination of the water source. In 1998, a girl, daughter of Katolo, gave birth and put the baby in a box and dumped it in the river at a place called Ngoma, on Mwiwe River, where some Manzini and Musosya people fetch water. She did this at night with her mother. They expected the box to be carried away by the moving water, but they were surprised the following day as the box was still at the place where they had thrown it into the fast flowing river. The case was reported to both Provincial

Administration and the Police when the child was seen in the morning. Police officers came and removed the baby and after the contaminator was identified, the Kathambi women demanded a goat from the mother of the girl to cleanse the water source. The girl was not fined by the Kathambi women but the by the state. She was imprisoned and then released after sometime.

### **The Uses of Ngolano**

The Kathambi women leadership enforced compliance of Kathambi ritual rules by the Kamba traditional institution, the Ngolano. Ngolano was the traditional mobilization of all men and women in a particular community. The Kathambi women leaders organized it when an issue threatened the well being of the community. In such cases, the Kathambi women met, discussed the issue, then sought the solution on the issue amongst themselves and then made a binding decision on the particular deviant or the issue threatening the society. If the case was an individual deviancy, they sent two representatives to that particular individual and if he or she complied with their decisions they never called for Ngolano. This can be illustrated in a case of a certain primary school headmistress called Kaiyu this year (2002). The details are that, there was a certain piece of land she had bought where she wanted to build a shop. Then Mutinga, the person who had sold the land to her, continued using the piece as a shamba. In January this year, Kaiyu decided to build her shop when the piece of land was full of maize, beans and pigeon peas. She therefore cleared the plants and started her construction. That was against the rules of Kathambi worship for food plants should never be wasted, as they are bounty from the Goddess. The Kathambi women leaders, on hearing about her wasting crops, sent the village elder, Kasyoka to the headmistress. She was ordered to give them a chicken for sacrifice as she had destroyed their land. The fine was just a chicken because she did that unknowingly and the area was very small. She never argued with the elder, she just accepted and gave them a chicken. That was all; they never followed her any more.

Ngolano came into play when a social deviant disobeyed Kathambi women leaders representatives. In such situations, all the men and women, in a particular community, were mobilized and marched to the home of the person. They carried twigs and were led by the Kathambi women leaders. The Ngolano was very strong and it was believed that if it went to one's home crying, they definitely left a curse in that family and nothing good came out of that family from that time on. In such a case therefore, the social deviant met them before they reached the home, stopped them, apologised and complied with their decision. Moreover, if it was an issue threatening the society, the Kathambi women leaders met and if they failed to get the solution for the problem, they called the Ngolano so that they could address the issue together with all adult members of the particular community deemed to be exposed to Kathambi's retribution. Whatever Ngolano decided was final and no individual could go against the decision. Ngolano sanctions were enforced if an individual did something which isolated himself or herself from interests of the other people in the community. The power of Ngolano can be demonstrated in several cases narrated by Kitungati informants..

First, in 1940, one of the most powerful colonial Chiefs, Nzuki Maliti, tried to impose an impossible idea in the community. He passed a rule saying that no one should light a fire in his or her farmland. In the existent farming system, fire was necessary for the preparation of farmland. Fire was used to clear the rubbish from the land in both existing farms and when new lands were opened. The rule, supported by colonial agriculture recommendations, was problematic for the community could not carry all the rubbish from the farmlands. The Chief was not ready to change his mind as he claimed that in the process of burning the rubbish most of the essential elements for crops were destroyed by fire as he had been taught by colonial agriculturalists. His Assistant Chiefs, namely Kalungu Mulinga, Aluni and Mbui could not convince him to change his rule for they were afraid of



loosing their jobs. They decided to use the Kathambi women as this issue affected the community negatively in their opinion. The Kathambi women organized Ngolano, which evicted that Chief from the community by breaking his house using stones. He and his family had to disappear from the particular community and go to establish a home in another community. The colonial state, with all its powers and need to change agricultural processes in the district could not protect him. The traditional farming system continued in this community after he was evicted.

The power of Ngolano is also demonstrated in a case when Kilonzo shifted from Manzini village to Wingoo village in 1951. It was against the rules of Kathambi to shift home area during rainy season and more so crossing a river or a stream. That man had prepared himself to shift just before the onset of the rains but then the rains started earlier than he expected, he was warned to postpone the shifting but disobeyed. According to Kathambi women he had carried their moisture. Two representatives were sent to him such that he could provide a goat for sacrifice.

Another case is a man called Mwendwa. In 1998 he decided to rehabilitate a piece of land a long Mwiwe river, near a sacrificial site by reclaiming riverine land and fencing it. This is taking Kathambi's resources for own use.. The Kathambi women then organized Ngolano to march towards his new home, it is very funny because even though he had previously refused to give out the fine, he could not wait for the crowd to step on his compound. He therefore stopped them outside the compound, apologised and gave them the sacrificial animal.

### **Diminishing Power?**

Informants argue that currently the Kathambi worship rituals related to control of water source are not very strong as they used to be. This has been caused by the conversion of many people to Christianity, which goes hand in hand with education, in Kitungati sublocation. The oldest Kathambi

women are not getting competent people to leave with the responsibility of worshipping Kathambi. Many of the young people are educated believers. The other factor contributing to the lessening of Kathambi influence is poverty. Contributing sacrificial animals is problematic for few families have the animals needed for sacrifice.

Field interviews suggest that the Kathambi women are losing influence, as some people in the community do not appreciate their efforts. Some traditional prohibitions, like the ban on the use of metal or plastic objects (plastic is also in the fire-male arena a Kathambi contaminant) are currently ignored by many. However, the old people and some young followers cannot neglect their Kathambi worship completely as long as they live, as the wrath of their goddess would curse their issue. They cannot stop practices like offering the sacrifice. In fact significant members of Kitungati society they are adapting to the needs of the changing society under the leadership of Kathambi women. For example, the days of offering the sacrifice have been changed so as to suit all the people especially the Christians and the people who are working. In the past Kathambi leaders were offering the sacrifice every tenth day of October irrespective of the day of the week unless somebody died or there were funeral arrangements going on. The day of offering the sacrifice was very significant as it was the day the Kathambi women were meeting their goddess and thus nobody was supposed to go to the garden either to cultivate, collect firewood, cut any sort of wood using a panga or even breaking any piece of wood by hands. These prohibitions meant that no work, cooking or leisure was undertaken this day. The Kathambi leaders used to be very strict on those issues. If anyone did any of these activities, they were fined for interfering with the sacrifice. Since early seventies, many people do not observe these rules for they interfere with their scheduled activities. For example, if the sacrifice falls on a Saturday it presents problems to the regularly employed for it is the only day of the week they could work in their farms. Cases have been known where such people pay a chicken to the

Kathambi women and then work on their farms. Again the Kathambi women have adjusted to the increased number of Christians in the Kitungati community. If sacrifices were held in the week, most of the Christians continued to work on their land. Sacrifices were moved to Sunday when even Christians do not work on the land!

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The declining influence of Kathambi can be further illustrated in the following cases. One of the cases is of a man called Katuku. In 1988, he realized that Mwiwe River had really taken his land at the riverbank during its process of growth, so he decided to rehabilitate part of Mwiwe River so as to recover his lost land. This was interfering with the arena of Kathambi, but when the Kathambi women leaders sent representatives to him ordering that he stops rehabilitation and use of the land he already had rehabilitated, he agreed to the first order but continued utilising the land he had already rehabilitated. Kathambi women leaders do not follow him to enforce compliance any more.

Another case is seen with a man called Mwendwa. In 1998 he decided to rehabilitate a certain piece of land. He claimed that this piece was his father's and not as Kathambi women were saying that it was a no mans land. It is through this piece where people of Maaini were passing when going to fetch water at the river. He fenced the land but the community removed it under the supervision of the village elder. The Kathambi women ought to have intervened and dealt with the man but they were afraid for he had threatened them.

Lastly, early in 2001, a woman called Katuu decided to plant at a certain garden her brother had sold to Kinywii and yet Kinywii had already planted. She wanted to use the garden claiming that the man had not finished paying for the land and yet the brother had already died. She therefore cleared all Kinywii's planted crops and ploughed the farm. On learning that the Kathambi women met and demanded a

goat for sacrifice from the village and other two from the neighbouring villages. She was to produce the goat. She refused and harassed them by agitating against them to all and sundry saying that she was saved and could not associate with demons. The Kathambi women, on learning about her agitation, decided to appeal to the Kitungati Sublocation Assistant Chief who refused to handle her case and refereed them to the Kisasi Location Chief. The Chief ruled that the Kathambi women could not force Katuu to practice idolatry, by producing the sacrificial animal, if she was saved. Informants claim that Katuu had corrupted the Chief to stop the Kathambi women from getting a sacrificial animal from her. As a result of the Chief's ruling the Kathambi women withdrew the case against her but informants believe that they cursed the Katuu. In the past they would not have appealed to provincial administration to enforce their rules. Rather, they would have compelled individuals to obey their judgements.