

# KATHAMBI: STATUS INVERSION, RITUAL INVERSION AND CONTROL

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## Introduction

Since 1990, SASOL Foundation has been involved in construction of water sources in Kitui District, in Kenya. Initial operations were to supply schools but later community water supply became the central focus. Efforts were initially in Central Division but currently work goes on in Yatta and Mutomo Divisions.

The district is classified as one of the arid and semi-arid lands of Kenya. Varied physical features dictate the distribution of rain. The hilly parts of central and eastern receive 510- 1015 mm. of rain per annum. In this zone, Mulango, Nzambani, Kisasi, Miambani, Kyangwithya and Matinyani locations receive between 760 and 1015 mm. of rain annually. Endau and Makongo hills, to the extreme eastern part of the district, receive between 510 and 1015 mm of rain per annum. No recording exists for Mutha, Mutomo and Kanziku hills in the southern part of the district. The rest of the district receives between 225-510 mm of rain per year. Lack of water is therefore a perennial story in most parts of the district.

The climate is hot and dry for most of the year and is characterized by high rate of evaporation. A combination of high evaporation rates -SASOL has recorded as much as 2,000 mm open pan evaporation rates in Central Kitui- and unreliable rains (less than 1000 mm) limits intensive and meaningful land use and other related development activities.

SASOL has built more than 700 sand dams, in cascades, with the express purpose of providing a water platform on which other developments can be built on. SASOL is not the first organization to build sand dams in the district. As early as 1928, Nzamba, an ex-WW1 soldier, built Mung'eto wa Nzamba in Mathima location, in Mutomo Division. He had seen them in Ethiopia! It still functions. The African Land Development Board, between 1947 and 1963 built a few. The Kenyatta government built a few more in the sixties. The Kitui Catholic Diocese, USAID, DANIDA and an assortment of NGOs have built some. However, SASOL's technical construction contribution is to build them in cascades thereby maximizing water retention, recharge of ground water and making of ephemeral rivers run all year round. The social technology contribution is to organize communities for their construction. Typically, the local communities finance 60% of dam costs. Of the construction crews, 80% are women. 60% of the households are female headed.

It was in mobilizing local communities to undertake sand dam construction that the development salience of **Kathambi was revealed**. There are many dam sites where **Kathambi** women had refused Kenya Government, bilateral donors, local and international ngos and churches from constructing water structures. There were times where SASOL had to negotiate with **Kathambi** women to be allowed to build on specific sites. The reason for these strictures was simply that all water sources belong to **Kathambi** in the Kamba tradition.

This paper presents data on **Kathambi** gleaned from SASOL's work on developing water sources in this semi-arid district. It also raises issues about how social sciences have ignored traditional institutions in their quest for explaining how change and development came in these base societies during the past 100 years. We emphasize data from Mutomo Division where the phenomenon of **Kathambi** is more marked. We think that this case study links to water policy debates about water issues at the National and Africa level and conclude that there is utility in documenting similar cases in aid of planning sustainable water resources development. The case study was initially written by many in SASOL to clarify our operations in Kitui. Colleagues have urged us to offer it to others.

### **Kathambi: Supreme Female Deity**

In general Southern and Southeastern Kitui has very limited water sources. Up to the beginning of the twentieth century, this area was seen by the local community as **weu-** i.e. livestock temporary grazing land, where households established **syengo-** temporary grazing homes- for there was not enough water either for humans or livestock all year round. Some households in Mutha location currently walk between twenty and forty kilometers round trip to get water during the dry season. However, over the past hundred years, population growth in the area, in Kitui and Machakos districts in general, has led to many more people having to earn their living in the area permanently. Historical demographic data is not systematically available to allow researchers to document in detail how many people were in the larger Mutomo division before the census data of the sixties. By interviewing many community groups and administrators and reviewing some archival data, we have been able to establish some key conceptual and operational benchmarks in terms of population and water relations over time.

First major point about the relations of water and population is the fact that its scarcity since historic times led to the rise the **Kathambi** cult. Prof. G. Akong'a in ***Drought, Famine and Policy*** (Department of Sociology, University of Nairobi: February 1980) discusses the importance of **Kathambi** from a rain cult point of view. In ***Culture and Soil Erosion in Ukambani: the Colonial Factor in the Disintegration of African Culture and Environment, 1895-1995*** (Oxford, Ohio: MA Thesis, Department of History, Miami University) J. M. Kitunda shows **Kathambi's** import in the development of resistance to colonial society. **Kathambi** is the supreme Kamba Female Goddess. Field interviews suggest that her female mediums and women, have total power over all matters related to water at all times and over food management during disaster periods.

Up to independence, in 1963, **Kathambi** rituals were strong with relation to water sources across the whole of Kitui district but more so in the south. Nobody was allowed to bring any metals into the streams or springs for to do so is to contaminate the arena of **Kathambi**. **Kathambi** women leadership enforced this. Metal is in the realm of the male arena and is related to fire, which is the opposite of water in many African cultures.

Men have never had any roles in **Kathambi** worship rituals or any ritual activity directed by the women followers. If a man is needed to do something related to a **Kathambi** function, he is transformed into a woman for that express activity. We saw this practically when we sought to interview women leaders in Mathima Location. The born again Christian preacher, who was our escort, had to be **womanized** so as to facilitate discussion and to be bound so as not to discuss their secrets. He was given a female name and the rank of an **askari!** The poor soul was trembling like a leaf during a storm throughout the interview even though his mother was in the chair!

### **Water Shortages and Kathambi Control**

**Kathambi** related control over water sources led to the total protection of Mutha hill and a few other inselbergs, during centuries past, for they were places of survival assets -water, vegetation and food- even during the worst droughts. The massive Mutha hill, jutting out of the flatlands, enabled local populations to survive through the worst droughts for food, mainly millet and sorghum, could be grown in its environs even at the worst times. Also significant was the availability of water in the hill springs to support livestock in the worst years. District Commissioner Kelly, during whose tenure more water structures were built in Kitui district than at any other period, convinced the Kitui County Council to create a protected forest on Mutha hill in the late fifties. It is significant though that planting of exotic trees - found in all the other Kitui hills- e.g. Endau, Makongo and Mutitu in Eastern Kitui, Mumoni in Kitui North (now Mwingi) and Central Kitui Ranges, never took place on Mutha hill. The **Kathambi** women refused this biomass pollution. Persons sent to initiate these activities did not dare fight the women who not only threatened to curse them but got snakes and bees to attack those foolish enough to climb the

hills to begin preparations for planting trees. To date, anybody constructing water projects on the hill must get permission from the women. The same is true in a few other inselbergs in the south. Those who need to use the hills for collecting building wood and other forest products must also get permission from the women.

Water shortages became even more problematic than when, driven by rainfall variation, after the populations of Kitui South lost their extensive grazing and survival cultivation lands, which were in the area zoned as Tsavo Park in 1947. Whilst the Tsavo grazing land was generally used all year round, the marshes were mainly used as a reserve grazing land for the really bad droughts. During those times, the marshes were also used as food production areas. These marshes are created as the Tiva River, the main river draining the district, goes underground. This area is locally called Ndia Ndasas i.e. the Long Dam. Tsavo Park also blocked the utilization of the perennial Ganzu springs by the population. The gazetting of Tsavo Park also meant that about 50% of the population of the period had to collapse back to the remaining area. Their animals had to move out of the park. The people and livestock put a lot of ecological pressure on the Southern Kitui land resource and it has never recovered to date. No doubt the localized desertification led to drying of some springs.

The loss of Tsavo land and the two significant sources of water sources strengthened the power of the **Kathambi** women followers in the fifties as they adopted very stringent measures over the utilization of water sources in the remaining areas of Southern Kitui. Many informants in the area and the rest of the district tell the story of their accumulation of massive power to enable them to fine Chief Nzuki, arguably one of the most powerful colonial chiefs in Kitui. They were also able to encroach on the Christian families who had ignored them in the previous fifty years of colonial rule and evangelization by the African Inland Mission. Christian families needed to get water in sources controlled by the **Kathambi** women as supply areas shrank driven by the reduction in available land resource and the inability of the ecology to regenerate as population and livestock pressure eroded the natural resources. The **Kathambi** women, who were definitely not sympathetic to the Christian way of life and the attendant favors granted to Christians by the colonial regime, dictated terms on how Christian women were to be incorporated into the **Kathambi** water control rituals. The control process, now applicable to everyone, is still intact another fifty years later.

### **Kathambi and Social Sciences**

In *Kenya: Politics, Policy and Society* (Nairobi: EALB, 1976) Prof. G. C. M. Mutiso discusses how colonial Christianity and attendant education created status inversion in Kenya especially in the rural areas. Those allied with the new beliefs and lifestyles, driven by Christianity and education, became the new powerful in local and national power configurations for the basis of traditional power and its organisational salience shifted. Similar themes are found in a lot of writings about the colonial period and on African Nationalism. In contradistinction to this, it is interesting that **Kathambi** women-given local ecological deterioration driven by population pressure, loss of land and shortage of water- not only survived but also became the dominant development control institution by the turn of this century. This was achieved by their inversion of the water rituals and takeover of other traditional institutions.

There have been many studies of what are called earth, rain or territorial cults across the continent. In *River of Blood* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992) Prof. J. Matthew Schoffeleers, who studied the evolution of the Mbona cult over several centuries, in Malawi, notes the import of these organisations and points out that they should be evaluated as territorial cults for "...they are centrally concerned with the political life of a specific land area and since their constituency is a group identified by common occupation of and rights in that land area"(p.7). The main concern of territorial cults is intermediation between social differentiation and the inequity it leads to. Intermediation is achieved by ritual inversion. He writes: "Ritual inversion is a source of hope, because it signals that things are not what they seem to be and there is power that can turn

negative experience to positive...The outside, threatening, cruel or unexpected situation or element can be incorporated into a world view if it can be made to contrast complementarily with the inside, secure, old, and routine areas of existence" (p. 148).

We would like to suggest that this has happened to the **Kathambi** rituals. Historical data is not yet available to enable us to sketch the actual origins of the **Kathambi** cult but at the level of theory, it probably is found at the nexus of matriarch and patriarchy competition. Whatever the origin, the cult was denigrated during the colonial interlude as statuses were inverted. As Christianity and its rewards expanded in the wider Kamba society, the **Kathambi** cult remained strong in the ecologically, and by extension socio-politically marginal Kitui lands. Southern Kitui is part of the really marginal Kamba lands. When this area was confronted with the reduction in grazing areas, the deterioration of the land driven by the loss of survival farmland and grazing to the park, **Kathambi** rituals had to address the needs of a society in crisis. Rather than remain only women issue oriented and only claiming traditional women followers, the old **Kathambi** rituals were transformed to embrace all women, Christian and non-Christian. Men were included since there were processes evolved for **womanising** them. That is not all. Whereas the traditional ritual concerns were in the water and food sector, the new concerns embraced the whole panorama of community development.

In the fifties, sixties and seventies, the **Kathambi** rituals emphasised support to family mutual help (**Mwethya**) to improve farm structures and other family based production processes like planting and cultivation. Since the eighties, the women argue, it has become clear that development of the community is accelerated by creation of public and not family (private) goods. Hence the **Kathambi** emphasis on wells, roads, schools etc.

Further, the new **Kathambi** leadership has taken the control attributes of the most supreme of the Kamba traditional institutions- the **Ngolano** -to enforce compliance in the collective development of the public goods as well as to enforce morality in the community. During the pre-colonial period, if an individual deviant or an issue threatened society, all the people met and made binding decisions on the particular individual or created solutions to the problem. **Ngolano** in this sense was the ultimate socio-political control and mobilisation institution embracing all women and men in a particular community assembled. The calling of **Ngolano** was by the male and female leaders of a village. This function is now found exclusively with the **Kathambi** women of Southern Kitui but is stronger in the area between Mutomo, Mutha and Kanziku currently.

Consequently then, in Southern Kitui, the **Kathambi** women do not just control water as is expected of **Kathambi**, the Goddess. **Kathambi** women have final authority not just on water construction and management issues but also on all construction and management of structures deemed important for the overall development of the community. They continue the originally **Kathambi** initiated process of protecting Mutha hill and other inselbergs as sources of water and other natural resources. They are the controllers of how and where water structures are to be built. They have, over the past twenty years, blocked the building of some water sources when the development agencies, bilaterals and ngos, did not consult. In Mathima location, they have been involved in the mobilisation of as varied development activities as construction of local roads, primary schools and lately of a community secondary school. Their power can be illustrated by several cases. Elaboration is in order.

First, the Mathima community decided it wanted to build a road. Every body was expected to contribute labour. One primary school headmaster argued that his wife was not a labourer and thus could not go to dig the road! He was employed and thus could not leave his work to go and do community work. The women met and decided to punish him. He and his family were sentenced to stay inside their compound and not to use any road since all the roads had been built by local people and he and his family had not contributed to that public good. That was not all. Nobody in the community was to give him any assistance or even talk to him. He and his family were confined

to the home totally. Some may ask, how come he and his family did not just leave the homestead and just walk. They were prevented from exiting their homestead by the belief that the **Kathambi** women had put magic on them. He ultimately had to make peace with the women. His road labour contribution was monetised and doubled. After payment a chastised headmaster returned to the school but has not been the previous arrogant self. His children returned to the local school and the family resumed inter-actions with the neighbours.

The second case again is a local primary school head master that had refused to contribute to brick making for a local primary school. His very young children were sent to a school more than twenty kilometres away as punishment. Of course they could not cope for they claimed to see ghosts on the way over and above the rigours of the walk. He had to negotiate with the women for a compromise.

The third example is that of chiefs' interaction with **Kathambi** leaders. Above we mentioned that in the past **Kathambi** women had punished Chief Nzuki who was possibly the most dictatorial chief in colonial Kitui. The details are that when the Tsavo Park was created, people were supposed to only be moved to outside the park. Chief Nzuki, in his selfish wisdom, pushed the people all the way back to the Kanziku hills and privatised the beautiful grazing land, including water sources, between the hills and the park. This was to be his private family land. It is not that Chief Nzuki was greedier than his contemporary chiefs. Other chiefs did this in Kitui or Kiambu, for example, as the histories of Nzalai, Mwakini, Yatta, Karai etc attest. But when Chief Nzuki was privatising public land, he got control over some **Kathambi** ritual spring sites at the bottom of the hills. These springs appeared only during extreme droughts, according to local informants. The women went to him and asked for a permit to sanction somebody. Since colonial local administration was more systematic than is the case now, he had to write a letter authorising them to sanction an unnamed individual. As soon as he gave them the letter, they arrested him for deviant behaviour! They took him to their meeting place and detained him until he paid the fine -his best bull- for blocking access to the water. He accepted that other people would use the springs.

Chief Nzuki, long since dead, is not the only chief the **Kathambi** women dominated **Ngolano** has exercised power over. In 2001 one local community decided to build a secondary school. The local community had to make the bricks, provide labour and bring water and sand as well as feed the masons but some community people did not attend regularly. The local chief asked the women to camp on the ground to ensure that those who were supposed to contribute bricks, labour, water etc for its construction did so expeditiously. What is interesting in this case is the fact that the women are now being used by provincial administration to compel compliance in a community activity, which is really in the public good arena. The Chief has less power on this than the **Kathambi** women. Further, when we were collecting data in the field for the baseline survey of Mutomo Division, in 2002, the **Kathambi** women had called a meeting of one village and the local chief had called another the same day at a different site. All the people in the village went to the **Kathambi** women meeting. They then asked for permission to go to the Chief's meeting after having finished part of the agenda deemed more urgent than the Chief's by the **Kathambi** women.

It is important to conclude this discussion with an example of **Kathambi** women sanctions to deviant social behaviour. In the past fifty years a group of men had a habit of repeatedly raping women at a forested place called Mwanyani, in Mutha location on their way to Kanziku market. One the individuals in this gang was believed to be interested in sex with young primary school girls from the time he was a small boy. Women ultimately captured him. He was brutalised by **Kathambi** women to the extent that he currently does not have front teeth. He was banned from the community and now lives in a forest reserve demented. He survives by looting honey from people's beehives. When he sees or hears a female voice, he crashes into the thorny acacia running away from their presence as attested by our field researchers.

### **Kathambi and Gender Models**

The limited data on Kathambi challenges the feminist theories, which see Kenyan rural women as totally male dominated throughout history. At a wider meta-theoretical level, the issue of understanding the role of **Kathambi** women in the affairs of Kitui maybe may be a challenge to our understanding of the relationship of African patriarchy and matriarchy roles in a specific society.

In *Reinventing Africa* (New York: ZED Books, 1997.) Ifi Amadiume writes: “Patriarchy and matriarchy are social and political ideologies which directly decide the role and status of women in society; how society is to be organised; and how social subjects are to relate to one another. They are also ideologies, which directly decide the degree of violence and abuse of human rights that is permissible in society. Matriarchy as was constructed by African women, had a very clear message about social and economic justice. It was couched in a very powerful goddess-based religion, a strong ideology of motherhood and a general moral principle of love.

*This is not the case with patriarchy, which seeks to control and rule women-indeed everyone. It always seeks to appropriate people’s right to self-determination and to bring everyone under the rule of the male. It has a basic masculinist ideology, which celebrates violence, valour, conquest and power in varying degrees. It is usually imperialistic. However, this patriarchal masculinist imperialism takes different characteristics under different political economies, or under different social systems.* (p. 101). These ideas resonate with our experience with **Kathambi** women.

### **Kathambi and Future National and Regional Water Policy**

The existence of **Kathambi** dominated **Ngolano**, the former being the structure of organising and the latter the process of control, is a challenge to the existent models about social control and development structures and processes in rural Kitui society, and by extension, other rural societies across this continent. But perhaps its most salient relevance is that it challenges the internationally sourced and privatisation driven development theory as practiced through state policies. This is more so if one wants to think about developing water sources for human consumption and improved production in the dry districts.

In Kenya the policy document currently governing the water sub-sector is the **2002 Sessional Paper on Water Management**. Over and above its basic provision that the future is about privatization, the document states that existing supplies will be rehabilitated, affordable supplies will be installed and appropriate technologies and cross subsidizing of tariffs to improve accessibility will be implemented. This was also echoed by the government’s position during the third World Water Forum held in Kyoto-Japan from 16-27 March 2003. There, the Ministry of Water Resources Management and Development issued a statement that the country is set to privatize water services. The policy document states that water structures will be privatized to local communities in the rural areas. Policy statements have not yet disaggregated who in the community and how, other than talking about water associations and their being “federated” into river basin associations.

In the less tradition bound rural areas of Machakos and Kitui districts, we are beginning to get local elites privatizing boreholes or pumping schemes. At the macro-policy level this is seen as good in the global theoretical framework (or should one say in the meta-theoretical framework) singing praises to privatization. Does the **Kathambi/Ngolano** type institution offer a more efficacious and therefore more just alternative where there is no water?

In *An Eastern African Position Toward A Global Convention On Water*, (June 2004) by the partner networks of African Reference Group on Water (ARGOW), Social Development Network (SODNET) and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA)’, who have links with the International Secretariat for Water (ISW) for the purposes of working on the proposed People-Driven Global Convention on Water, note that in Africa little water is harvested. Only about 2% of the rainwater from the 54 trans-boundary basins, is being used. 98% of Africa’s water runs to the sea without having been

put under productive use. They further point out that traditional social norms, including our relationship to water, had evolved overtime and existed as the distillate of trials of new ideas and refinement through more inputs adaptation and further trials. This evolution involved both social and physical technologies for its provision. For example, pastoralists know very well that boreholes are contrary to their tradition, and that water extraction is counterproductive to their historic water management system. They also know that the technology and lack of community ownership of the decision making process are increasing their vulnerability and threatening their livelihoods. These communities, which have been marginalized need to be enabled to produce and manage the resources, they have for individual and community improvement. Central to this is water.

A new social contract needs to be defined. This contract should be for the people, guided by the people, and based on what the people know. The social contract should recognize the African character, knowledge, expertise, wisdom, leadership, decision-making systems and collective self-help. Local communities, as expressed through the response to the water challenge from the international community, perceive the reality, as lack of respect for their accumulated learning through generations. They see their livelihood threatened by irrelevant state policies, physical technologies but, and perhaps most important, social organizational formulae, which do not borrow from their traditions thereby leaving them out.

### **Conclusion**

It is time we documented cases similar to **Kathambi** and use them to not only hold discourse with global thought but also more specifically to assist us to design development strategies-particularly with regard to provision of water-, which are not only meaningful to our people at the socio and technology operational level but also cost effective. It is in this spirit that SASOL Foundation wrote this paper-to help it think through how to provide water in Kitui south. Ironically a reviewer for IDS at the University of Nairobi commented that a Mkamba, in Kambanised English for local Kamba consumption, wrote it! This is no doubt a comment on the ever-present denigration of local knowledge! It is a clear and present danger to our creating relevant knowledge about our own development.

2002