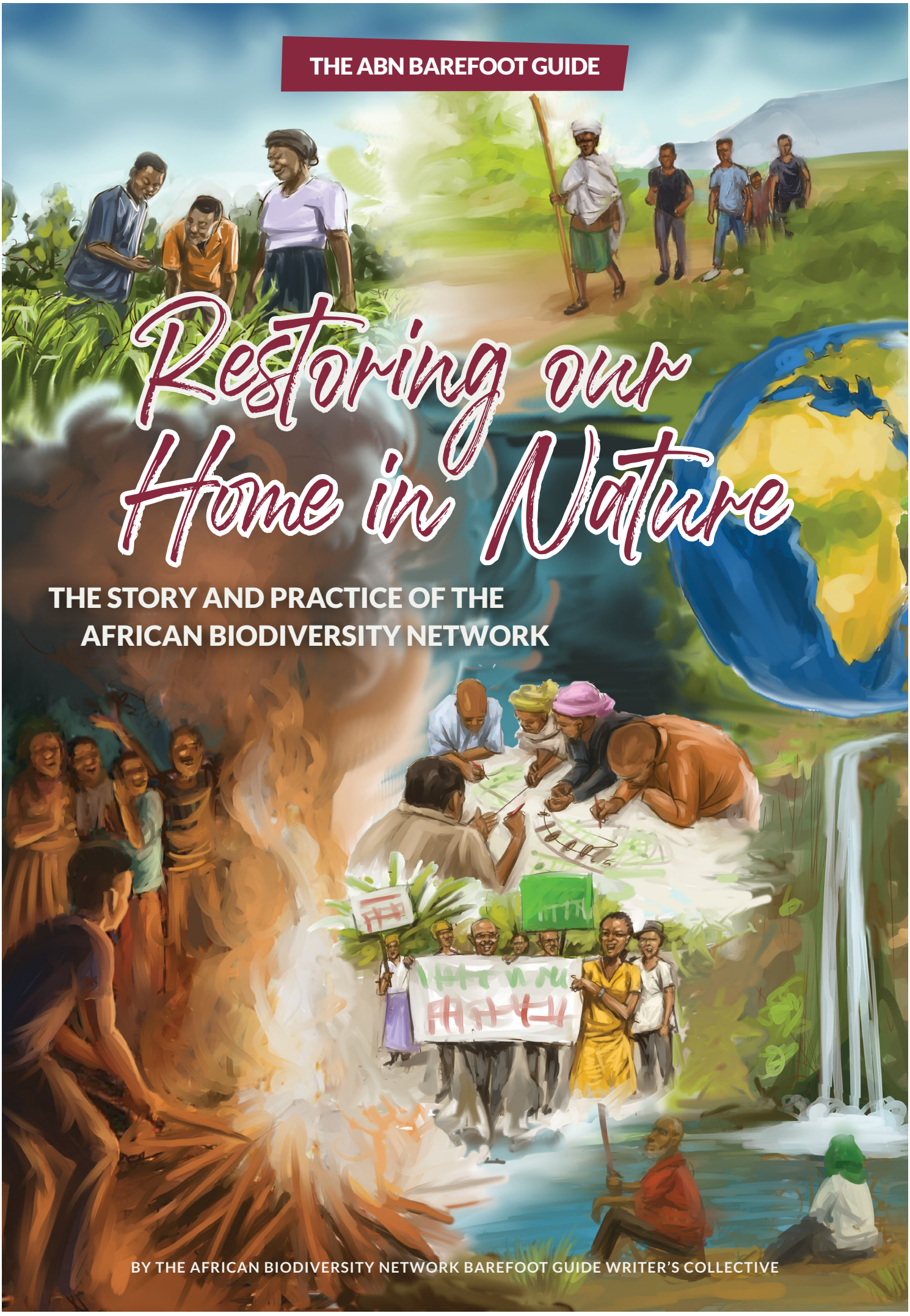
THE ABN BAREFOOT GUIDE

Restoring our Home in Nature

THE STORY AND PRACTICE OF THE AFRICAN BIODIVERSITY NETWORK



BY THE AFRICAN BIODIVERSITY NETWORK BAREFOOT GUIDE WRITER'S COLLECTIVE

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The ABN Barefoot Guide Writers Collective

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Foreword

It is with great pleasure and a deep sense of pride that I write a foreword to this Barefoot Guide, chronicling the story and practice of the African Biodiversity Network (ABN).

The ABN has long been a beacon of hope and inspiration, fostering a deep connection between communities, biodiversity, and traditional knowledge across the African continent. Our network is built upon the understanding that the preservation and sustainable use of biodiversity are fundamental necessities for the well-being of present and future generations.

These and other ABN principles come out of learning experiences in the Colombian Amazon, Kenya, Ethiopia, Botswana, India, and other parts of the world, facilitated by the Gaia Foundation. We are most grateful to them for this. Our exposure to indigenous knowledge systems, traditions, wisdom, and practice during this journey accounts for the formation of organisations like MELCA, ICE, SALT, and AFRICE. We must also show appreciation to our lifelong supporters, including SwedeBio, Bread for the World, Swift Foundation, Tudor Trust, SIDA, and NORAD.

The importance of the ABN's practice and the knowledge shared within this Guide cannot be overstated. May this Barefoot Guide serve as a roadmap for all who seek transformative change in their own contexts, inspiring, informing, and igniting a collective commitment to the conservation of biodiversity and the well-being of all life on this magnificent continent.

DR. SULEMANA ABUDULAI,
Chairperson, African Biodiversity Network Board of Trustees

You are welcome...

Dear valued partners, collaborators, and readers,

A warm welcome to this ABN Barefoot Guide and the story of the African Biodiversity Network's transformative journey, which captures our founding principles and two decades of the evolution of our practice.

This story of origin shows how culture and tradition are inspired by natural phenomena, giving birth to life-sustaining knowledge. This is indigenous knowledge held by elders and custodians of the Earth community and passed down through observation, participation, and practices rather than books. Indeed, storytelling around the fire, dialogue, and nature observation foster inter-generational learning beyond the classroom or book learning.

This Guide highlights the rich, inter-generational knowledge within African communities, emphasising ABN's learning journey and respect for the ancestral wisdom of elders often overlooked in governmental "development planning". It portrays stories from ABN partners across Africa, illustrating the transformative power of collaboration in reviving indigenous roots and reimagining sustainable futures. The ABN effectively addresses challenges by employing proven methods, forging alliances, countering unsuitable development approaches, and proposing resilient and sustainable alternatives.

My hope is that this ABN Barefoot Guide will inspire readers to become more proactive contributors to sustainable livelihoods that embrace all life forms on Earth and promote living in harmony with nature.

Gratitude is expressed to all contributors to this Guide, including the writers, ABN board members, secretariat staff, Editors and facilitators, for their hard work, creativity and commitment.

FASSIL GEBEYEHU,
General Coordinator, African Biodiversity Network

Introducing your Hosts

Dear readers,

As you explore this Barefoot Guide, you will meet a number of characters or hosts who accompany you through the stories and conversations. They are fictional characters. They have been created to represent the diverse and authentic voices of the many members of the ABN, including the editors. Their conversations and stories are drawn from several writeshops (writing workshops) and meetings over the past few years with ABN members and staff, past and present. Even though the characters are fictional, the history, concepts, philosophy and the stories and descriptions of programme work are all true.

Meet the Characters

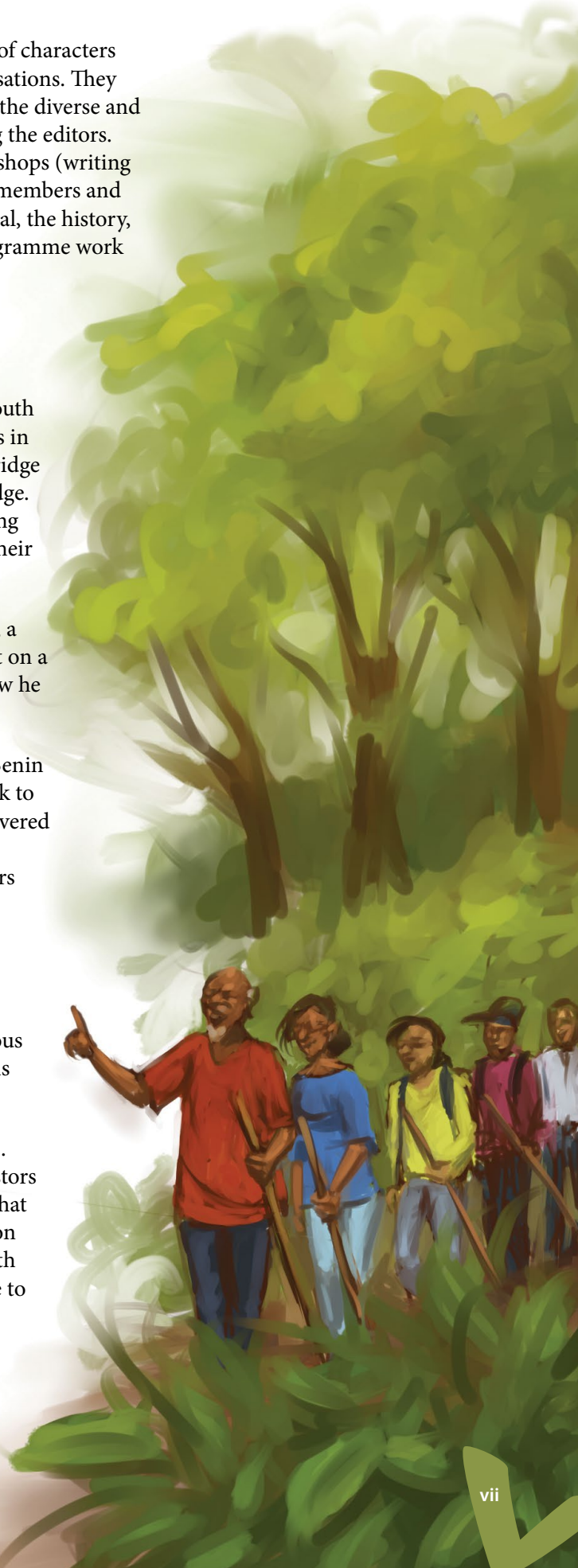
Kerya is a youth leader in Ethiopia with the Institute for Sustainable Development. She has worked on a number of youth initiatives, most recently piloting a programme in the schools in Ethiopia that brings elders, children and youth together to bridge the gaps in the young people's indigenous ecological knowledge. It is becoming part of the schools' curriculum. They are taking children and youth into Nature in a way that connects with their own cultures.

Xoab is a young man from South Africa working with Usiko, a member of the ABN. Not sure what he wanted to do, he went on a wilderness experience with Usiko which changed his life. Now he works as a youth facilitator.

Hounsi is a facilitator in West Africa working with GRABE-Benin and is deeply committed to the ABN and their collective work to reconnect with sacred traditions and nature. When she discovered agroecology and natural farming, she became excited and determined to learn what she could from the elders and others with the same vision.

Murithi is a programme leader from the ABN Secretariat in Kenya. He has worked with the ABN for some years now. His work is to help African communities to reconnect to the wisdom of Africa, bringing together traditional and indigenous knowledge with creative innovations that suit local conditions and needs.

Elder Mathenge lives at the foot of the sacred Mount Kenya. He has stayed close to the traditions and wisdom of his ancestors and the forests and animals of nature. He works to pass on what he has learned to younger generations. Despite the destruction of nature and the dangers of modern culture, he has great faith that Africans can tell and live a different story and restore life to nature and communities across Africa.



CHAPTER ONE

Birthing our Future

YOUTH, CULTURE AND BIODIVERSITY

Xoab stopped and looked behind him at the small group he was leading up a steep and rocky path to one of his favourite waterfalls in the Matroosberg Mountain range in the Western Cape of South Africa. He was young, fit and used to clambering around the wilderness. His stride was effortless as he walked up the path, prodding his walking stick ahead of him. All around them, the exquisite indigenous vegetation called *fynbos* clothed the mountain slopes. Sunbirds darted from bush to bush.

“They felt a sense of quiet joy rising as they experienced the incredible diversity and beauty around them.

To the others the vegetation looked the same from a distance, but then Xoab stopped and waved his arms across the slopes, “My friends, take a closer look at the *fynbos*, this wonderful floral kingdom unique to the Western Cape. Even though it is the smallest of the six floral kingdoms in the world, it is the richest in diversity, with over nine thousand species.”

The friends stood quietly, taking in the scents, colours, and textures. They had never seen such a variety of flowers, shrubs and grasses packed so tightly together. They felt a sense of quiet joy rising as they experienced the incredible diversity and beauty around them.

It was early morning on the first of a three-day learning exchange for a group of twenty ABN partners. A small group had arranged to take an early hike together. Xoab, with his bright, smiling face, was from Usiko, a local partner. Hounsi, an ABN practitioner from GRABE-Benin, strode upright with her walking stick, her bright green headscarf tied tightly around her head. Kerya, a young woman from the Institute for Sustainable Development in Ethiopia, was swinging her arms as she marched forward, her white embroidered scarf hanging loosely over her head. Murithi, from the ABN Secretariat in Kenya, was dressed in his dark blue-patterned shirt, almost too formal for the rugged mountain. As he walked, he scanned the landscape carefully, looking out for a Gymnogene, an African Harrier Hawk that Xoab said lived in the vicinity. Elder Mathenge, a Kikuyu elder from the foot of Mount Kenya, also represented the ABN at the gathering. He walked slowly and carefully, all his senses awake. His love for Nature ran deep. He could almost hear the rocks whispering to him.

The group continued in silence. As the ground became rockier and more uncertain, their steps became smaller and more careful. But with the gentle ascent, the air became fresher and clearer. They smiled as they realised this was a unique start to their gathering. As they climbed, the sound of rushing water grew nearby.

Arriving in Nature

> “Then, someone suggested I go on a wilderness experience with Usiko. That changed my life. All these lights went on inside me.”

Suddenly the path opened up, and Xoab said quietly, “We are here now.” He always found himself talking softly in this sacred place.

The group gasped. In front of them was a surging waterfall that seemed to fall from heaven itself, plunging into the dark waters of a large pool surrounded by boulders and lush vegetation. Quietly they began to remove their shoes as if on hallowed ground.

Before they entered the sparkling water to wash and cool their tired feet, Elder Mathenge spoke out, blessing the moment. “May the fresh, clear water surrounding us fill our hearts and minds with clarity and joy so that we can share our experiences and stories freely and openly over the next few days.”

Murithi pressed his feet down into the clear pool. “I’ve never been here before, yet it feels like home.”

“All the wild places of nature are one place,” smiled Hounsi as she stooped to drink the fresh water, “and we all originate from Nature, so you are home, Murithi. Welcome back!” She laughed joyfully and flung her arms up in praise of the place. Each of them stepped into the waters and absorbed and accepted this gift from Nature.

Soon, they gathered on a flat rock and sat. “Xoab, tell us a bit about yourself,” asked Kerya, “How did you come to be doing work that brings you to a place like this?”

Xoab opens up

“To be honest, I was a bit of a hopeless case as a teenager,” says Xoab, “getting up to no good and experimenting with lots of things, if you know what I mean. Then, someone suggested I go on a wilderness experience with Usiko. That changed my life. All these lights went on inside me. Something opened up and I started looking at Nature in a new way. Actually, I started looking at my life in a new way.

“I realised that I wanted to work here and got motivated to complete my schooling and then to do a diploma in tourism, training as a wilderness guide and facilitator. That first experience with Usiko opened not only my eyes but also so many doors.

“So, I joined the Usiko team to do what I love and give other youth what I had received. But I am still learning about ABN and what it does. Can someone please explain what ABN does with youth? Is it the same as what we do in Usiko?”

You could see that Murithi was impressed with this young man and nodded. “Yes, I can say something about that, Xoab, but let me say how much I admire you and your journey of dedicating yourself to this sacred work.

"You say that Usiko opened doors for you, but I imagine they helped you open up and free something already inside you, wanting to emerge. That is how it works. We must help people to open up and liberate themselves. Is that true for you?"

"Yes, I think that's right! It was a struggle to let go of my bad habits and addictions, but when I did, it was a liberation, and I could finally be myself. The Usiko facilitators walked beside me, and yes, with their friendly support, I did it for myself. It was my struggle."

"Now, about your question," Murithi continued, "In my mind, all the ABN partners do the same kind of work, but they do it in their own way, in their own cultures and contexts. Just as we respect diversity in Nature, so we also respect the beautiful diversity of cultures of the different partners. At the same time, young people experience similar challenges the world over, trying to find out who they are and where they belong. So we can learn much from each other no matter where we come from."

He paused there, waiting to see if Xoab had a question. Sure enough, he did: "Please say more about those challenges. I know that I experience them, but I can't say I always understand them!"

The challenges of youth

Murithi was pleased to answer: "Many people argue that the current generation of youth has lost their resilience due to numerous outside influences. Some say that adopting foreign, modern, western cultures has undermined their confidence in their own indigenous or local knowledge.

"I would say that they have not lost anything, except that they have lost sight of what matters. When they are helped to see who they truly are, they will find their inner resilience. Resilience is about having the vitality and ability to live with change, to be *response-able*.

> "The Usiko facilitators walked beside me, and yes, with their friendly support, I did it for myself. It was my struggle."

"Look at the trees around us. We can learn from them. They are all growing and adapting to these boulders, the stream, and each other. They look like separate plants, yet underneath many of their roots are interacting with each other. They are connected through the microorganisms and the mycelium, feeding and supporting each other constantly. They know each other through their roots. If their roots weaken and die, what will happen to them? In the same way, people connected to their roots are constantly learning from the experience and strengthening each other.

"If we can help youth to reconnect to Nature and their rich cultural heritage with meaningful spiritual activities, they will develop a deep knowledge base that will help keep them grounded and secure. Like these trees, they can become more rooted and resilient. They will be able to stand together firmly and confidently on the ground.

"This is what the Youth, Culture and Biodiversity (YCB) thematic area of ABN aims to deepen people's sense of belonging with one another and the Earth to restore the confidence that has been eroded over the years. Nature and the cultures in Africa have been denigrated and undermined from colonialism to modern times. Our indigenous ecological knowledge and practices have been threatened and lost in many places. Our challenge is to find again and strengthen what has been lost and weakened so that we can restore ourselves. We can be our best selves again."

Murithi turned to Kerya, "Could you please say something about what you've been doing in Ethiopia, Kerya?"

"I would love to, Murithi. These last few months, we have been piloting a programme in the schools in Ethiopia that brings our elders, children and youth together to bridge the gaps in the young people's indigenous ecological knowledge. It is becoming part of the schools' curriculum. We are taking children and youth into Nature in a way that connects with their own cultures. So, it's much like what happened to you, Xoab, but through the schools. It excites me to see bored school children come alive when they enter the forests to experience this kind of beauty and then become entranced by the stories they hear from the elders."

"Our challenge is to find again and strengthen what has been lost and weakened so that we can restore ourselves. We can be our best selves again."

> “Stories can move us deeply and reveal the real difficulties and contradictions of being human in a way that textbooks and lectures simply cannot.”

The Power of Stories

“What is it about stories?” asked Xoab looking at Elder Mathenge. “Why do they work so well to capture our attention?”

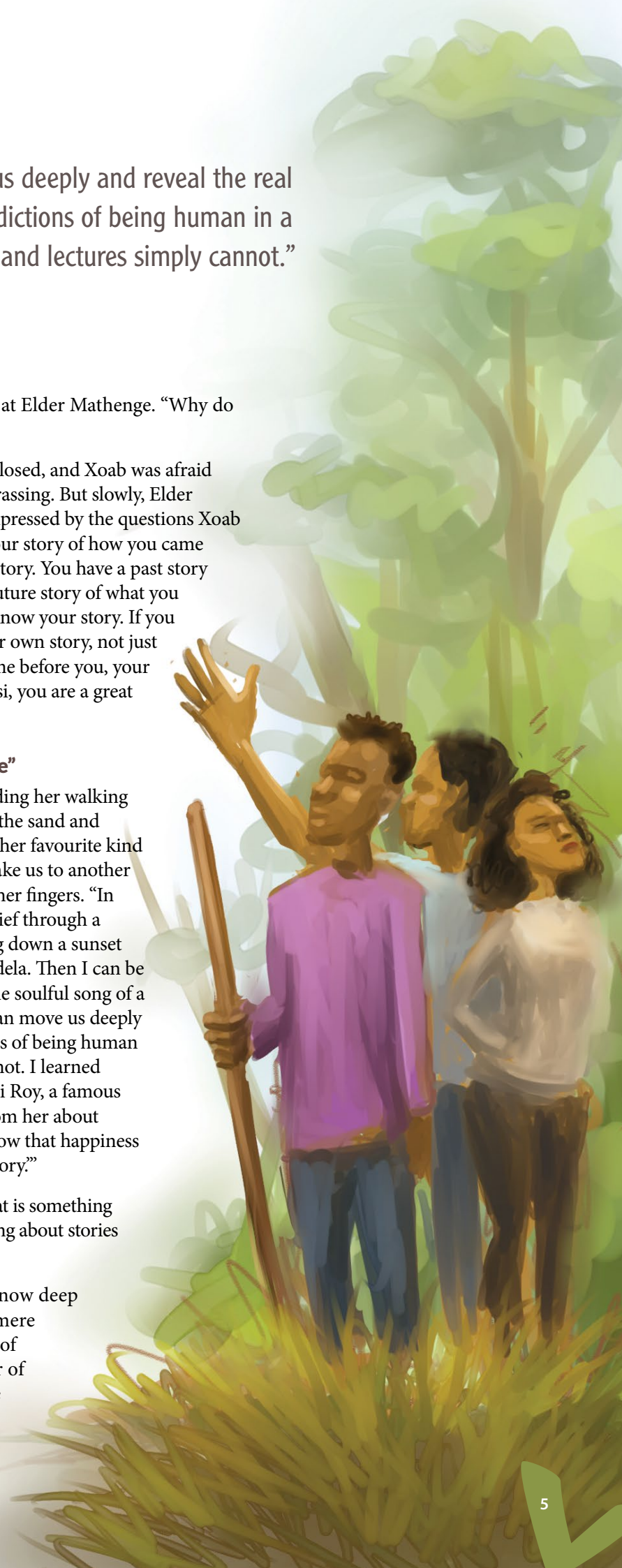
Elder Mathenge was sitting there with his eyes closed, and Xoab was afraid he might be asleep, which might be a bit embarrassing. But slowly, Elder Mathenge lifted his head and smiled. He was impressed by the questions Xoab was asking. “Xoab, earlier, you told us a bit of your story of how you came to be who you are. In many ways, you are your story. You have a past story and a present story of your life now, but also a future story of what you want to become. If I want to know you, I must know your story. If you want to know yourself, you must also know your own story, not just of your own life but the stories of those who came before you, your origins, and the stories of your ancestors. Hounsi, you are a great storyteller. What do you think?”

“Nuggets of sorrow… hidden fish of shame”

Hounsi, who had been quiet until now, was holding her walking stick on the ground. She drew a circle with it in the sand and looked around at the group of friends. This was her favourite kind of question. “We love stories because they can take us to another place in a moment, just like that!” She snapped her fingers. “In the blink of an eye, I can see myself chasing a thief through a marketplace in Accra or imagine myself walking down a sunset beach in Cape Town chatting with Nelson Mandela. Then I can be fighting a fierce lion in Zambia or listening to the soulful song of a man who has lost his love in Zanzibar. Stories can move us deeply and reveal the real difficulties and contradictions of being human in a way that textbooks and lectures simply cannot. I learned this from one of my favourite writers, Arundhati Roy, a famous storyteller from India. One of the lines I love from her about stories is that they can ‘reveal the nugget of sorrow that happiness contains. The hidden fish of shame in a sea of glory.’”

“Whoa!” Xoab exclaimed, rubbing his head. “That is something to remember! But how do they do that? Something about stories grabs me that I wish I could explain.”

“Some things we can understand, things we know deep in our bones, but we cannot explain them in mere words. Just as there is a mystery in the power of all creation, so there is a mystery in the power of stories of life, and we must let that mystery be without too much explanation.



“We always say we learn best from experience. When we listen to good stories of others we re-experience them, by imagining that we are there! Their experience becomes our experience to learn from. A story is a valley we enter together.”

A story is a valley we enter together

“But consider this, Xoab. If you tell me a good story, I will not listen to it as if it was the news on the radio. If you tell me a good story, I enter the story in my imagination, like through a curtain into that other world, as if I am there. Soon, I identify with the main characters, walking alongside them or even in their shoes, experiencing what they experience and feeling what they feel. I become enlivened and animated with the experience that a good story ignites in me. We always say we learn best from experience. When we listen to good stories of others we re-experience them, by imagining that we are there! Their experience becomes our experience to learn from. A story is a valley we enter together.”

The wisdom in stories

“No one likes to be always lectured to, neither children nor adults and so stories are a way to offer knowledge in a very real way, even in an entertaining way. Why should we be bored by lectures when stories are there? Lectures can only touch the head, while stories touch the head, the heart and the feet! Elder Mathenge said earlier that ‘you are your story.’ It makes sense that stories have such power because we are stories.”

Murithi had a thought to share too. “It is important to learn to tell a good story, Xoab. A story can bring knowledge, but a good story brings wisdom you’ll never forget!”

“Oh, I wish I had written all this down,” exclaimed Kerya.

“Yes, me too,” Xoab agreed. “I know I will forget it!”

They all laughed. “Don’t worry, my young friends,” said Murithi with a chuckle, “you won’t lose it because it will go into your forgettery and mingle with all the other things you think you’ve forgotten. One day, when you have absorbed it fully, it will come out of you, naturally, improved even, as your own knowledge.”

Xoab and Kerya looked at each other. A *forgettery*! That’s a new word, like a hidden memory of things you think you have forgotten but haven’t! And they joined the laughter, though it made sense to them in a strange way.

Mystica

The next day, the campfire was already burning, the kettles were boiling, and the food was nearly ready, thanks to Kerya and Xoab who were up early to prepare the breakfast of sweet potato bread, boiled eggs, avocado and rooibos tea.

After breakfast Hounsi invited them to join her in the morning mystica ritual.

> “Mysticas shift us beyond our thinking brain and engage our heart and whole being, reminding us why we do what we do and giving deeper meaning to our work, purpose and shared identity. ”

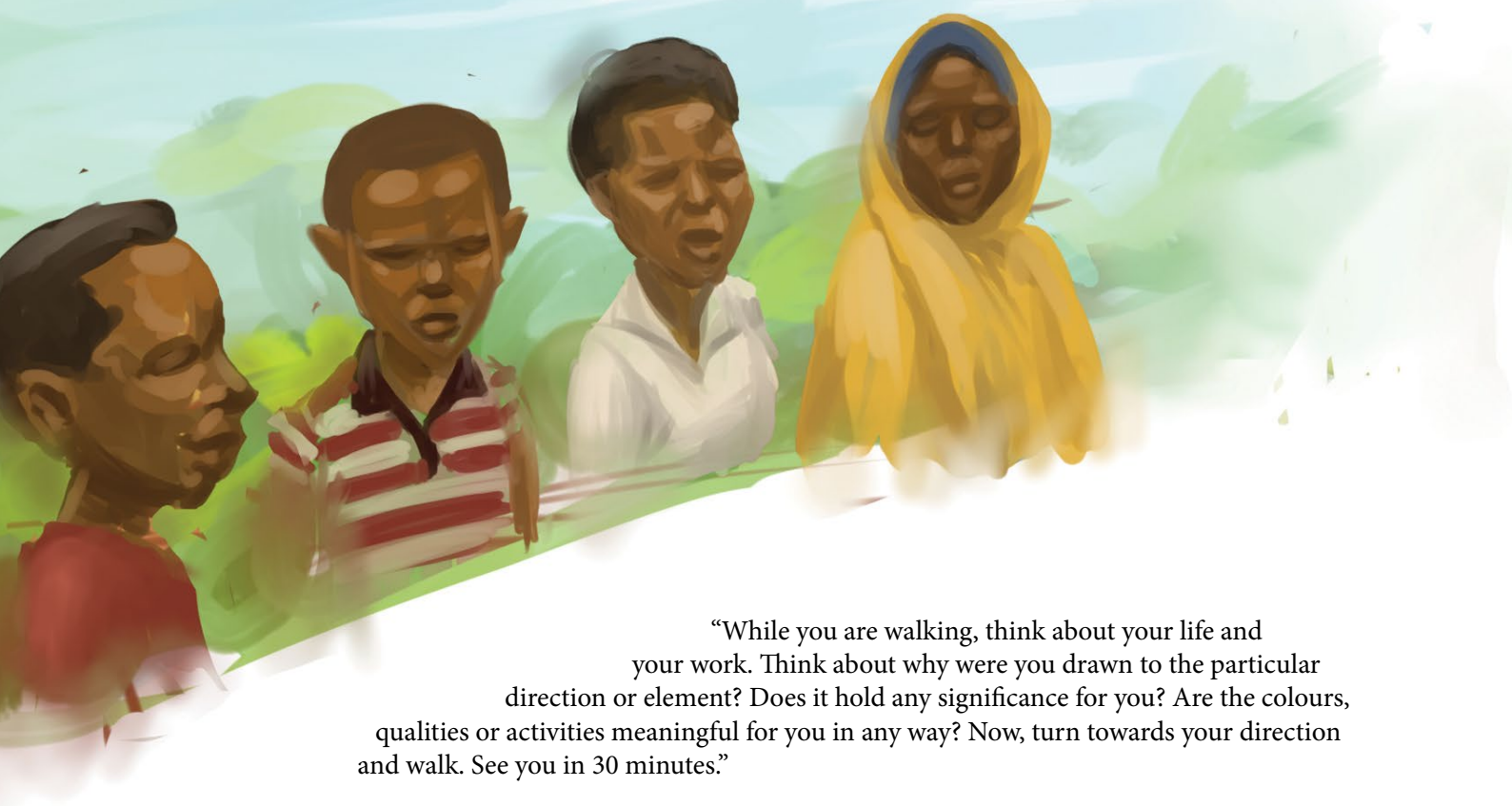
Mystica of the Four Elements and Directions

Hounsi led the group to an open part of the mountainside and asked them to form a circle. She then explained the process.

“Dear friends, as you know, a *mystica* is a short ritual to set the tone for the day or a meeting. Mysticas shift us beyond our thinking brain and engage our heart and whole being, reminding us why we do what we do and giving deeper meaning to our work, purpose and shared identity. This *mystica* is about the Four Elements and their connection to the Four Directions:

- South is warm, energetic and directed. It brings creativity and passion and looks to the future. There is so much work that can be done. Its colour is red. It is related to the element of Fire.
- Opposite is North, solid and grounded. It is quiet, thoughtful and reliable. It hankers after the past and sometimes feels overwhelmed by the future. It is compassionate and wise. Its colour is blue. It is related to the element of Earth.
- East is light, joyful and embracing, with much movement, inspiration and possibility for change. Moments, activities and ideas are ever-changing. Its colour is yellow. It is related to the element of Air/Wind.
- Opposite is West, cool and calming. It goes with the flow, contemplates, and connects. It lives in the present, steadily doing what needs to be done. Its colour is green. It is related to the element of Water.”

“This is what I would like to invite you to do: Now that you understand the Four Elements and Four Directions, I would like you to each turn towards the direction to which you feel most drawn and go on a 30-minute solo walk (15 minutes there and 15 minutes back) in that direction. Don’t think too hard about where to go. Follow your instincts.



"While you are walking, think about your life and your work. Think about why were you drawn to the particular direction or element? Does it hold any significance for you? Are the colours, qualities or activities meaningful for you in any way? Now, turn towards your direction and walk. See you in 30 minutes."

When the group returned to the circle, Hounsi gave each person two minutes to reflect quietly on their own. Then she opened the circle to allow each person to share their reflections and thoughts, why they chose a particular direction or element and how it related to their lives and work. She closed the session with a summary of the discussion and new group insights.

The origin and purpose of *Mystica*

Later in the day, Kerya, Hounsi and Xoab went for a walk together and found a quiet spot to sit and chat.

"I love the *mystica* process," Kerya remarked, "and I'm interested to know how it came about as a practice in ABN. What is the purpose and origin of this process for us and in our work?"

Hounsi took out a folder from her bag. "Let me read a letter from my friend Elfrieda to Brother Paul. I think you will find it interesting and helpful."

"One such practice is mystica, which is a public, expressive, dramatic performance and a way of making contact with a transcendent reality."

Dear Brother Paul

I hope that you are well. When we met in Zambia, you asked me to tell you more about the mystica. *I have encountered it in two places, with La Via Campesina, and then we introduced it at ABN (African Biodiversity Network) meetings. But the origin of the* mystica, *a Portuguese word, is with the MST, the Landless People's Movement in Brazil.*

I found this abstract in a paper about this practice written by John Hammond, which I thought you might find interesting:

> *"The Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) works to create solidarity and collective identity among its members through various practices. One such practice is* mystica, *which is a public, expressive, dramatic performance and a way of making contact with a transcendent reality.* Mystica *draws on Christian theology generally and specifically on the practices of the Christian base communities associated with liberation theology which were vital in the emergence of the MST.*

From the same paper:

> *"A meeting, a ceremony, a festive activity can and should be full of moments that make us more conscious of why we are struggling and the motives that make us comrades [companheiros]. So the beauty around us, the climate of confidence, happiness, music, poetry, arts, symbols, slogans chanted in demonstrations, everything should express the values and certainties that inspire our path."*

Where mystica *experiences are often individual, the* mystica*, as practised by the MST, became collective rather than individual. It is often linked directly to a political struggle, uniting all faiths through this common struggle. La Via Campesina, the global farmers' movement, also incorporated this in their practice. This is where I first encountered it. But the event itself is a festive one, lightening up the struggle.*

For La Via Campesina farmers, the mystica *is a symbolic, non-rational, spiritual, emotional, and creative way to present the work, the challenges and the main issues of smallholder farmers worldwide. It has numerous functions: It can make a group feel more united even though they are culturally diverse, as it illustrates the universality of their struggles and daily lives. Most importantly, it is a way of communicating directly with the heart of a person. It can also have an educational dimension, illuminating the connection between things, including injustices. Often it presents a different worldview.*

During my time with the African Biodiversity Network (ABN), we introduced this practice in our meetings. The work of ABN centres on bringing out the voices of Africans to defend their environment, biodiversity, and communities – and ABN partners are doing this by looking for the answers in the indigenous knowledge and governance systems. With a deep connection with the environment, the cosmos is the bedrock of this approach. It is also the basis of other environmental movements – such as the Deep Ecology Movement and the Earth Jurisprudence approach that the Gaia Foundation helped ABN to pioneer.

"So the beauty around us, the climate of confidence, happiness, music, poetry, arts, symbols, slogans chanted in demonstrations, everything should express the values and certainties that inspire our path."

> We do not have a handbook on *mysticas*; we just design our own - we experiment, as artists do. The format can be a play, a dance, a meditation, a talk, a group exercise, a ritual, a song, or a prayer.

The way it is practised within ABN is more steeped in connection with Nature, culture and community than the political struggle. As I am writing this and reading about its origin, I am wondering if we are not too 'green' and need to be a bit more political in our mysticas. *A bit more radical?*

But then, just challenging the status quo, sharing seeds, and doing our gatherings in a different way, can also be a radical act! Experiential activities such as spending time in Nature, with farmers, and making a space to connect with our spirituality, are what we need to do to change our hearts, but also to sustain us in this challenging work. It is only when we have a change of heart that we find real meaning in what we do that we can be effective, sustain hope and above all, love.

We do not have a handbook on mysticas*; we just design our own - we experiment, as artists do. The format can be a play, a dance, a meditation, a talk, a group exercise, a ritual, a song, or a prayer. It can take many different forms, but a key feature is that it engages the whole group. Usually, people are given turns to design the activity and do it in a pair or small group. We often just think them up.*

Recently I have looked for ideas in a book by Joana Macy, "The Work that Reconnects." It has many exercises and meditations, and the book is aimed at people who despair and often grieve for our planet and humanity. Her website has a few practices and meditations one can adapt and use.

I am delighted to talk more with you on this. It is a beautiful practice, and we can write down particularly good ones to share with each other.

Wishing you all the best,

Elfrieda

Kerya smiled. "That's a lovely letter, and now I know where the *mystica* process comes from and why we use it. Thank you for sharing that with us, Hounsi."

DIFFERENT *MYSTICAS* TO USE

Nature speaking to us

In small groups of about five people, walk around and find something in the Nature around you. For example, it could be an ant, a bird, a tree or even the soil. Imagine this 'nature being' communicating with you. What is it saying to you? What does it want you to know or learn? Does it have any questions for you? Spend thirty minutes on this activity, finding your object and answering these questions. Then come back and share in the bigger group, but in the voice of the Nature being.

The voices we speak with: Intention, Doubt, Wisdom, Future

Sit in groups of four. Spend five minutes in silence, thinking about a vital **Intention** you would like to explore. Then take turns in the group to describe your intention, and then listen while the others comment from a different perspective. These perspectives are the voice of Doubt, the voice of an Ancestor, and the voice of a Future Human. Each of these voices is meant to serve the person holding the Intention. The voice of Doubt helps bring up misgivings and fears that could derail or weaken the intention if they are not faced squarely. The Ancestral voice brings in the wisdom of the past. The Future Human explores what this intention could mean to coming generations. Allow time at the end of each round for the intention holder to reflect on any insights that have arisen. Go clockwise around the circle, ensuring that each person gets an equal amount of time.

Seed and Soil

Each person has been asked to bring seeds and soil from their gardens. The facilitator talks about the soil, the diverse seeds living within all of us, where we come from and our journey forward and the tasks and intentions we hold. Each person can then thank the land and offer someone in the circle their seeds and soil to take home.

Hounsi was happy to have this time with Kerya and Xoab. There was so much she wanted to share.

"Have you heard much about GRABE-Benin and their Graine Future Youth process? I have a brochure here which invites young people to join one of our programmes. I thought that it may be interesting and inspiring for you. Would you like to have a look?"

They both nodded enthusiastically. Hounsi handed each of them a colourful brochure, leaving them to read it.

Kerya and Xoab read the brochure. Yes, there was much to inspire them!

GRABE-Benin
Graine Future Youth Process

Come and Experience the Magic of Wetlands & Sacred Sites with Graine Future

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Graine Future, an environmental education programme which was started in 2006. We hope to cultivate and encourage youth to become environmentally aware and the future protectors of the environment.

THE MAGIC OF WETLANDS AND SACRED SITES

We are inviting young women, men and educators, who will commit to protecting the environment, to become eco-defenders of the Earth, and who will learn to respect and promote a mutual relationship with the natural world.

Join us in the wetlands of southern Benin on a four-day stay in natural environments to see and experience the beauty of fragile habitats, sacred forests, sacred waterways and the lives of the local communities.

We will meet and discuss, exchange and learn from local leaders who still practise their age-old traditions of caring for their environment.

This four-day stay, in real environments, is specially designed for young people aged 15 to 30 years old.

THE THEMES WE WILL COVER OVER THE FOUR DAYS ARE:

- A new approach to biodiversity protection
- Nature & endogenous conservation practices
- Nature, health & indigenous African medicine
- Nature, Eco-mapping, Ecological Calendar & Analogue Forestry
- Nature & documentation: collecting and processing information through photos, video, and stories.
- Nature, Youth, Leadership, Entrepreneurship, Green Jobs & alternative activities
- Nature & practical daily actions: Personal hygiene, Management of water & electrical energy, Alternative energies, Management of natural resources (fauna & flora)
- First Aid

WHAT WILL WE DO?

We will learn from communities' knowledge about indigenous ecology, cultivation techniques, history, culture, know-how, songs, legends, proverbs, tales, dances, clothing, games, culinary art, and indigenous medicine. As a participant, you will document the results of your interactions with the communities through writings, photos, songs, arts and any other creative way that inspires you.

AFTER THE PROCESS

- Each of you will share what you have learnt with other members of your environmental clubs or communities of origin, replicating what you have learnt and combining it with creating a herbarium, cooking recipes etc.
- We ask you to receive between 2 and 10 endangered species plants and to commit to planting and caring for them in your immediate environment.
- After a year, promotions and competitions will be organised to encourage and support your participation in the programme.
- Every year, during the bio-cultural days of the NGO GRABE-BENIN and Nature Tropicale, you will be invited to join other young people to celebrate the results of your work.

We need to make the environment a priority in our homes, our places of worship, our schools and our universities. A world covered in plastic bags, with depleted forests, scarce or overabundant rainfall, animal and plant species under threat, various forms of pollution, etc., are just some of the factors that will contribute to the destruction of humanity.

GRAINE FUTURE asks each of us to look back on yesterday, understand today and prepare for tomorrow by using practices that have proven to be successful in many African contexts so that we can better understand how to manage our environment. Taking care of our resources and the environment is the collective awareness and responsibility of us all. We must act positively today to save the generations to come.

Join us!

How Nature brings healing and resilience

It was 6 o'clock in the morning on the third day of the learning exchange. After hot tea, coffee and sandwiches, a buzz of anticipation filled the air. They would be doing Solo Time later that morning.

Murithi tuned to Xoab. "Brother, I have loved this wilderness experience and I am sure the youth that you bring here must feel the same. Tell me a little about the thinking behind your practice."

Xoab nodded eagerly. "Usiko provides positive rites of passage processes to vulnerable young people at a pivotal point in their lives – transitioning from childhood to adulthood. Most youth we work with come from impoverished backgrounds, lacking economic, social, and emotional support needed to take them into adulthood. They come with low self-esteem or passive-aggressive behaviour from having seen and experienced trauma and abuse. To help them to find a deeper, kinder side, we use our wilderness programme. This takes them out of their comfort zones and away from the things that hold them back. When in Nature, they are challenged on different levels – physically through hiking and camping, psychologically as they face the 'unknown', emotionally by spending time alone in the solitude of Nature, and mentally by being asked to think deeply about their life paths and choices.

"Being in Nature allows profound healing of past traumas; self-belief and self-worth are built through doing things they did not believe they could do..."

"Being in Nature allows profound healing of past traumas; self-belief and self-worth are built through doing things they did not believe they could do; trust is developed, opening up to each other, taking off their masks and being authentic in front of their peers. In the process, they build the skills of teamwork, leadership and resilience."

Elder Mathenge who, like the others, had been listening into Xoab's explanation, rose to speak.

"Thank you Xoab, that was well put." Then, looking around at all who were gathered, he said, "Dear friends, before we head off, Kerya would like to share some aspects of her work and Hounsi has a short story that will inspire you during your Solo Time."

Kerya stepped forward. "I'll share a snippet of a youth club programme created by our NGO Melca. We call the clubs SEGNI. *Segni* in Oromifa, one of the languages of Ethiopia, means *seed* and also stands for Social Empowerment through Group and Nature Interaction. But I won't say much more because I've brought a brochure for everyone. Here, I have a copy for each of you."

SEGNI – a Five-day Forest Experience in Ethiopia

SEGNI works with teenagers from schools. Some are leaders, and others are those who are struggling to adjust. We take them into the forest for five days, in a process facilitated by experienced elders to connect with Nature, with their culture and with themselves. This experience helps many of them to transform their relationship with Nature and to see themselves differently in the world.

Afterwards, the young people are encouraged to create a SEGNI Club and to start projects to educate themselves and others about Nature and culture and to develop their leadership.

THE ROLE OF ELDERS

The elders are the guardians of the cultural stories and have knowledge of plants and animals. Before the forest experience, they orient the young people and reassure the families and schools of the value and safety of the programme. They guide, facilitate and teach, holding a nurturing space in which the young adults can see and let go of influences and behaviours that are not helpful and can explore and consider new ones that help to shape them into more mature adults better connected to nature and their communities.

HOW ARE LEADERS CHOSEN?

SEGNI facilitators explain the SEGNI programme to the young people in the schools, helping them to understand the world from their homes, the community, and the environment, all the way to global issues.

After the talk, the school identifies the leaders. Leaders could be selected for different reasons:

1. They may already be leaders of other clubs at school and can help to shape the thinking and actions of other members of the school.
2. They may be the problematic students who are leaders influencing others in a negative way. Through this programme, they will learn more positive ways of leading.

FOUR ELEMENTS OF THE SEGNI PROGRAMME

The programme is built on the four elements from a book by Steven Covey, First Things First. Covey outlines the elements needed to make a person's life whole again: ***Living, Learning, Loving and Leaving a Legacy.***

LIVING

Food is vital for our well-being, sustaining us and making us feel alive and connected to each other. In indigenous communities across the world, people grow, cook and enjoy a variety of whole, healthy indigenous food. The knowledge of the value of their food is remembered in language, celebrations, and practice. Our food is part of our culture, our identity. Losing our connection to our indigenous food compromises our lives.

LEARNING

Nature is the fundamental basis of all knowledge. We can learn by observing how Nature works, which is how life works. Learning can happen culturally in a natural environment. The stories, proverbs, plays and also agricultural, pastoral and other practices of communities contain the wisdom passed down from generations.

LOVING

Caring for one's family and the wider community is ingrained in most indigenous cultures. People are brought up to be interdependent rather than to live by themselves. Many social activities are related to the cycle of Nature, including seasonal activities or ceremonies, and these ceremonies increase bonds of caring among members of the community.

LEAVING A LEGACY

Every community has a hero or heroine as an inspiration. These people have left a legacy to be remembered. The act of narrating the history of the hero or heroine is cultural to inspire young people to initiate and participate in environmental and societal activities while they are a student or after their schooling. Most get involved in tree planting. Others start their own youth club, organising members to work on sustainability issues.

WHY ARE MORE YOUNG MEN DRAWN TO THIS PROGRAMME?

Our observation is that the impact of the SEGNI programme is more substantial on young men. They often need more challenges. They struggle to conform and many are aggressive with peers, the elderly and their fathers. When they are exposed to Nature and culture, and when helped to face themselves, then things can shift inside. When they are taken into a forest the wonder of Nature is opened to them. While exploring and learning about nature, they are also exploring and learning about themselves. Wild Nature is an image of our subconscious.

SEGNI CLUBS: CULTURE, NATURE AND CELEBRATION

After the forest experience, they start SEGNI clubs at school, developing a cultural centre where they hold meetings and where the art, seed and artefact collections are kept. They put on dramas with songs and poems. This cultivates their organisational and leadership skills.

Celebrations are key components of the SEGNI club activities. Much goes into the preparation of the celebration event. When they prepare, they write stories and dramas about culture and Nature themselves. When they collect materials, visitors will ask them about the cultural significance and the practical significance of the material, so they must know what they are talking about. They must know the diversity of the seed and the diversity of the food. So that preparation is an educational opportunity for them.

They invite the larger community and the decision-makers in the community. The celebrations are annual occasions that are high points on the calendar.

The story of Adjimon Mathieu: a local hero!

Once they had read the brochure and shared their admiration for the work they turned to Hounsi for her promised story. Hounsi knew well how the combination of working with Nature, biodiversity and intergenerational work had a powerful impact on young people. She remembered Adjimon Mathieu from Benin. He had once told her his story, and now, while looking at her friends, she could almost hear his voice.

"My friends, I would like to share a story that was shared with me. It inspired me so much. It was told by Adjimon Mathieu from Benin.

"Adjimon's adventure began with GRABE-Benin in 2001. He was only in the 4th grade then. He always looked up to the older students in the school and often peeped into their classes. One day he saw the biology teacher, Mr Appolinaire Oussou Lio, doing an activity with the class. On the table was a wide variety of plants and seeds. Mr Appolinaire described each plant and seed with much care and detail. His passion and knowledge so inspired Adjimon that he plucked up the courage during the break to ask one of the students about the lesson. It was then that he heard about a youth group called Connaître et Protéger la Nature (CPN) that this teacher had started. He knew that he had to join to learn more.

Adjimon finds his leadership

"His interest and motivation led him to become a member of the CPN club *Les Manguiers de Sèdjè*. Because of his dedication and energy, he was soon asked to be the secretary and then elected coordinator of all the clubs. By 2006, under his leadership, there were about thirty CPN clubs and more than 1,000 young people committed to the conservation of Nature.

"All the activities of the clubs and especially the nature discovery outings and the environmental education training courses guided him in his choice to study Natural Sciences. At university, he continued his environmental work, and together with other friends and former club members, they created the CPN La Jeunesse Club. The implementation of the club's activities within the university facilitated its membership in the Comité d'Action pour le Bien-Etre et l'Environnement (CABEN), a university organisation with the same objectives as the club.

> “From the curiosity of that young boy who peeped into a classroom and was inspired by a teacher, he became instrumental in the creation and development of many clubs.”

“At the same time, he continued his adventure with GRABE-Benin, as a volunteer. He started clubs and activities to preserve the environment and later integrated culture into their activities. From CPN, they became CNC (Nature and Culture Club) in 2017. Because of his determination, and commitment, he was appointed Programme Officer of GRABE-Benin for the planning and monitoring-evaluation of activities in 2015 and Executive Director in 2018.

From the curiosity of that young boy who peeped into a classroom and was inspired by a teacher, he became instrumental in the creation and development of many clubs. These clubs are now called Environmental Classes and are established in most colleges of the Avrankou and surrounding municipalities. The environmental classes always work for the conservation of Nature, the sustainable conservation of forests and sacred sites and the fight against climate change through intergenerational exchanges and community dialogues with the indigenous and local communities.”

Hounsi smiled at everyone and ended. “When I hear stories such as this one, I know that the work I am doing is good, and my dream is to do more.”

Solo Time in the wilderness

It was time to go! Xoab and the team had mapped out the areas in the broader wilderness area to make sure that everybody would be in a safe place for their time of solitude. Once everything was ready, Elder Mathenge walked around the circle of eager delegates and gave them each a mud marking and a blessing. One by one, they set off to settle under a tree or in the shelter of a rock. The mountain went quiet for six hours as each participant went deeply within themselves, equipped with only a bottle of water, a journal and a pen.

In the Journal were three guiding questions:

1. Look around you. What are you noticing in Nature – what feelings are stirred in you, what is awakened in you?
2. How is this connected to your work with ABN?
3. Close your eyes and imagine or dream about your life – are there any shifts or signposts or turns in the road that you need or want to take? Which will you choose?

After six hours, the drum sounded the call to return. Everyone gathered their things and walked quietly back, holding their journals close. Elder Mathenge welcomed them back into the circle with a warm hug. A blessing was spoken. Then lunch was served.

By mid-afternoon, everyone gathered under a tree for the sharing session, where each person spoke about their experience and the insights that came to them during their solo time. No time limit was set for the debriefing, but silence was held between each sharing.

Xoab shares how he discovered his identity

Xoab was the last to speak. "Hello, everyone. I am Xoab, and I'm 28 years old. I briefly told you my story at the waterfall, but I want to tell you more. When I grew up, I always thought that I would become a police officer or a soldier. I wanted to be seen as tough and powerful, but those choices were not entirely up to me. The universe had something else in store for me. As a teenager, I always felt that something was missing, so I searched for meaningful ceremonies and rituals that would make me feel I belonged, but these were lost in my community. I longed to know the culture to which I was connected, but until a few years back, my knowledge of my ancestral heritage was like a mist in my mind.

"What I have learned is that colonisation stripped away all sense of identity and culture from my ancestors, who were forced to become westernised, to forget who they were. Their forgetting left me floundering and faltering through life. Who were my ancestors, and to what tribe or culture did I belong? I struggled with this. I grappled for years with being called a 'coloured' person. The term is so complex and, in a way, derogatory. But now, my thoughts are clearer, and the mist is lifting. As I sat alone today under my solitary tree, a dream arose for me, to embrace my Khoisan (first nation) heritage and become free like the Khoisan. To be part of reviving this culture.

"This feeling of freedom and belonging reminded me of the time I did an ABN visit to Khonta in Ethiopia. There my soul felt truly enriched because I felt at home and part of a living celebration of different cultures. What stood out for me was how young people took part in the festivities, embracing their culture and showing the rest of their country, Africa and the world how to come together as a nation.

"I was also inspired by how people lived in harmony with the land, taking care of it so that in return, the land could care for them.

"Farmers were one with the land, treating it the same way they did hundreds of years ago, using plants to make organic fertilisers and safe sprays to keep pests away. There were no GMO products, poisonous pesticides or chemical fertilisers. Bees were revered and protected. I learned that honey was a delicacy, and I felt like royalty when I was fed bread and honey. This heart-warming hospitality inspired me to look to the indigenous people of our land and become a defender of their rights so that their culture and land will be protected."

"I was also inspired by how people lived in harmony with the land, taking care of it so that in return, the land could care for them."

> “... everyone joined for a celebration around the fire, sharing songs, stories and dances. They had forged new friendships, made deeper commitments, and opened up fresh possibilities for a better tomorrow.

Xoab's story inspired the others sitting listening. They wanted more stories of how the work of ABN changed young people's lives for the better. They knew that if the young people changed, they could change the circumstances around them, and this would be a victory for the environment.

And so, the third day passed, with stories and reflections and coffee by the fireside. The six hours spent in solitude in the mountain, reflecting upon their lives and the work they do across Africa relating to youth, culture and biodiversity, had brought the group together in unexpected ways.

Many of the reflections focused on their personal experiences growing up, their doubts and fears, questions about the future, and their hopes and dreams. They also reflected on global issues like food security and the climate crisis, the role of the youth and the elders, and sang songs and planted trees.

During the afternoon session, they made decisions about their ongoing work and the changes they wanted to bring to their communities. In their small group discussions, they created visions for the future and talked about ways they could continue to build stronger connections with each other.

On the night before the last day of the gathering, everyone joined for a celebration around the fire, sharing songs, stories and dances. They had forged new friendships, made deeper commitments, and opened up fresh possibilities for a better tomorrow.

The gathering draws to a close

The last day of the gathering focused on gratitude and reintegration. Hounsi led the group into another short *mystica* solo of 30 minutes, asking them again to choose to walk in one of the four directions, this time with a focus on gratitude, the role of the elders and the ancestors and how they felt now after this time at the gathering. Would they choose a different direction this time? What element or colour would draw them now? How do they feel different to the first *mystica*?

In the closing circle, the group spoke about the path elders had walked and prepared for them. They realised the impact they were making on the youth and dedicated themselves to continuing their work. There was much gratitude for the walks in Nature, the beauty of the surrounding, and the four days together near Cape Town to get to know each other and reflect on the stories they heard from all corners of the continent.

They decided to do more of these learning exchange gatherings and committed to meeting again in six months' time.

Their final circle was joyous yet reverent. Elder Mathenge held hand-carved walking sticks as a gift for each participant.

"Dear friends, please receive this stick as a symbol of leadership. In the work that you do, may you always feel guided by those who have gone before you and led by your love for the Earth. May Nature continue to bless you with her beauty and goodness, and may you leave here inspired and refreshed. Journey well and travel safely. We will see each other again after six full moons have passed."

CHAPTER TWO

Harvests of Hope

REVIVING INDIGENOUS FOOD AND COMMUNITY SEEDS

The group had promised to meet again after six months, but the world had changed dramatically after their last meeting in South Africa. A global pandemic, COVID-19, had swept through the world, leaving millions dead and millions more destitute. The work of ABN was now needed more than ever.

Two years had passed since the last gathering in South Africa, and everyone was finally free to travel. Hounsi had invited her ABN friends to come to Benin to continue the learning exchange in her village and to meet her colleagues and the young people she was training.

They arrived in Avrankou in the late afternoon. The long flights and minibus journey had been tiring, but they were happy to finally see each other face-to-face after many months of meetings held on Zoom. As they drove towards the GRABE-Benin farm school, they were dazzled by the lush green forest of trees and long grasses along the way. It was so different from the scratchy vegetation of *fynbos* they had experienced in South Africa.

Hounsi, her colleagues, and a group of women dressed in the colourful, traditional garments unique to Benin were waiting for them at the gate. There was much cheering as they climbed out of the minibus. The woman sang as they shook their hands and led them to the communal area. After putting their bags into their rooms and freshening up, they were invited to wash their hands and join in a feast of *aloko* (fried plantain), plates of *fufu* accompanied with peanut soup, *Àkàrà*, a deep-fried ball made from black-eyed peas, roasted yams, wild rice, beans, tomatoes, couscous, and smoked fish. Platters were also filled with mandarin oranges, bananas, kiwifruit, avocados, pineapples, and mangoes. Bowls of peanuts and jugs of chilled *Choukoutou*, a Beninese millet beer, were placed on the tables.

The group felt like royalty, and after the hearty welcomes, introductions, and blessings were complete, they sat down and ate together. They stayed together for a long time, eating and talking and sharing stories about their lives, work, and how things had changed since their last meeting.

> He knew that the elders wanted to share their knowledge and wisdom but also wanted him to understand how important he was to them.

As dusk fell and the moon rose above the treetops, Elder Mathenge looked around, smiled at everyone, and stood up almost ceremoniously. He cleared his throat. "Dear friends, it is good to see you all again, robust and healthy. Much has happened over the past two years. Many of us have suffered losses of family, friends and colleagues. But we are here today. The journey has been tough, but we are all here. This shows how we appreciate this opportunity to connect. As the wise saying goes, "*A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather in the moonlit village ground, it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.*"

Everyone nodded in agreement and praised Elder Mathenge for his beautiful oration.

"And thank you, Xoab, for tending to the fire. We say that when a child knows how to wash his hands well, he eats with the elders. So, continue taking the lead in caring activities. I can see that you honour the elders."

Xoab smiled. He felt welcome in the group even though he was much younger. He knew that the elders wanted to share their knowledge and wisdom but also wanted him to understand how important he was to them. "Thank you, Elder Mathenge. I am so honoured and happy to sit in this circle with you."

How indigenous seeds can take root again

Hounsi was delighted to have her friends in her village, sitting by her fire, surrounded by the trees she loved. She had been thinking about this moment for a while. Much preparation had gone into organising this learning exchange. Now she was tired, but she felt enlivened with everyone around the fire. She wanted to tell them about a meeting with Karangathi, one of ABN's partners, a few months before.

"Friends, it is so good to have you here. I know our formal work will start tomorrow, but when I see how much you all enjoyed our wonderful indigenous and homegrown feast, I feel inspired to share this letter with you that my friend Karangathi sent me. I think you will find it very interesting."

Reschooling our minds

Dear Hounsi,

I hope that you and your family are well. I want to tell you how attending the ABN dialogues has changed my and my family's life. Over the years, these dialogues taught me the value and importance of indigenous foods. I came to understand and appreciate African nightshades, sweet potatoes, amaranth, cassava, arrow roots, and creeping yam in a new way. I was so excited to share this indigenous knowledge with my family. I told my wife about the nutritional benefits of our indigenous food, and the cultural significance too. She said she remembered some foods from her childhood, although she couldn't remember when she had stopped eating them. She was so supportive, and we decided to start a new eating regime in our home. The next day, we talked at the supper table with our four children.

"I told my wife about the nutritional benefits of our indigenous food, and the cultural significance too. She said she remembered some foods from her childhood, although she couldn't remember when she had stopped eating them.

At first, they were reluctant to try as they didn't know much about indigenous food and liked the bread and maize we ate every day. They thought changing our diet to include indigenous food was a bit backward. None of their friends ate that way! The idea seemed strange and senseless to them. I must admit that I didn't know any local farmers who grew indigenous food.

I felt guilty that I had neglected my responsibility as a parent. I thought I had denied my children a fundamental part of their identity, as food is closely connected to a community's culture. I thought about the many households and communities that had not shared their foods and recipes and the cultural attachment with their children. Was the loss of indigenous knowledge due to limited intergenerational knowledge transfer? I wished that my children could understand how important our food culture was. I knew that this was the right time to share the knowledge with them so that they could embrace the food as part of their diets. I knew that by re-introducing the diversity of indigenous food, my family's health would improve.

But for us to succeed, we needed to re-school our minds. I realised that understanding the nutritional value of food was not only the medical profession's responsibility but also mine. We all needed to be involved in food production to inform ourselves about the nutritious value of the crops we eat and grow and the incredible diversity of indigenous African plants that make this possible.

> So, my family and I started to put our ideas into practice. We began by changing our breakfasts. Instead of taking bread, we introduced sweet potato and arrowroots.

We needed the elders' wisdom, to bring our grandmothers' voices back to the table, to remember their stories on the importance of these foods, to develop a love for the different tastes and flavours and to encourage others to do so too.

So, my family and I started to put our ideas into practice. We began by changing our breakfasts. Instead of taking bread, we introduced sweet potato and arrowroots. Since they were not grown locally, we had to buy them from the market.

At first, it wasn't easy. We had to plan and prepare our meals much more carefully. The children missed their bread. But my wife and I persisted, and we kept sharing the value of these foods. We found exciting ways of preparing our meals, and soon we were all looking forward to our breakfast. Our children started to ask about different varieties of indigenous foods, so we began to introduce other foods. This encouraged us to start growing some in our kitchen garden.

We planted a variety of indigenous vegetables like African nightshade, vine spinach, spider plant, pumpkin leaves, Amaranth, and fig leaf gourd. We learnt how to store our seeds so that we could plant them again and have a good supply of vegetables throughout the year. As our kitchen garden grew, we learnt more about the nutritious and helpful herbs we could add, so we planted rosemary, mint, chives, lion's ear, blackjack, gooseberries (used as both fruit and herb), and sow thistle. Our collection of herbs was growing.

Others noticed as our garden flourished, and my family grew strong and healthy. When family and friends visited our home, they were so impressed by our kitchen garden that they wanted to learn how to plant theirs. Many started growing their own food and sharing the idea with their neighbours.

In my work with the community, I shared the story of how I introduced the eating of indigenous foods at home and received much interest among farmers. They soon started to grow indigenous foods at their respective farms. But to promote and spread the growing of indigenous food, you need indigenous seeds, seed saving and sharing, including the knowledge of how to grow.

My organisation then collaborated with like-minded organisations that engaged in the promotion of indigenous foods and seeds. The knowledge I gained over the years gave me the skills and confidence to help community projects and initiatives to promote the growing and use of indigenous foods. Now, I interact with farmers at different forums, field days and exhibitions where I share my experience. I also learn a lot from them. My knowledge of indigenous foods, seed saving and multiplication, and recipes has increased, and I have much more to share with my family and community.

Looking back, I am happy that I had the chance to educate my children on indigenous foods and cultivate their interest in the wide variety available. Starting with my family allowed me to share my personal experience with others.

The perception of indigenous food has changed. Many people in the community have taken an interest in learning more about indigenous food from elders and have embraced growing and using them. Sharing seeds and knowledge on indigenous food is now common. People are feeling more connected to their food, and they are healthier.

All this has happened because I attended the ABN dialogues. I am so grateful for the change it brought to my life and the lives of others.

Warm regards to you and your family, and may you continue to be blessed.

Your good friend,

Karangathi

“Sharing seeds and knowledge on indigenous food is now common. People are feeling more connected to their food, and they are healthier.

Xoab leaned forward and poked at the fire with a stick. The embers shot up into the sky like flaming stars. “I still have so much to learn about indigenous food, but I like how Karangathi started with himself, his family, and his community and the farmers. He gained knowledge, and like the seeds he shared with his community and friends, he also shared his knowledge. Seeds of knowledge and seeds of plants are all important to produce food for the mind, soul and body.”

> "We know too, that in ABN there are debates about indigenous seeds and how they are used and shared. Many of us believe that seed is sacred, that it is life, and life is not for sale."

Elder Mathenge chuckled. "You all know the saying, '*It is from the small seed that the giant Iroko tree has its origin.*' Xoab, our young friend, you're becoming quite the philosopher – but you are right. Partners of ABN have agreed as one of its principles – no matter the small beginnings – it needs to 'start with each of us' – we need to be at the centre of the actions, supporting individuals to share and deepen their conviction, determination and commitment to ABN's philosophy and practice as a basis of all our work."

Elder Mathenge turned his face to the fire and spoke in a whisper, "'*They say a wise man fills his brain before emptying his mouth.*' Only when individuals build their conviction about a cause can they work and support others to come on board."

Kerya nodded with a smile. "Yes, as another saying goes – '*With a little seed of imagination, you can grow a field of hope.*' Through our work, we can bring hope. We know too, that in ABN there are debates about indigenous seeds and how they are used and shared. Many of us believe that seed is sacred, that it is life, and life is not for sale."

"Yes," added Hounsi, "Indigenous seeds are not sold in many African communities. Farmers exchange seeds like our grandmothers and grandfathers did before them."

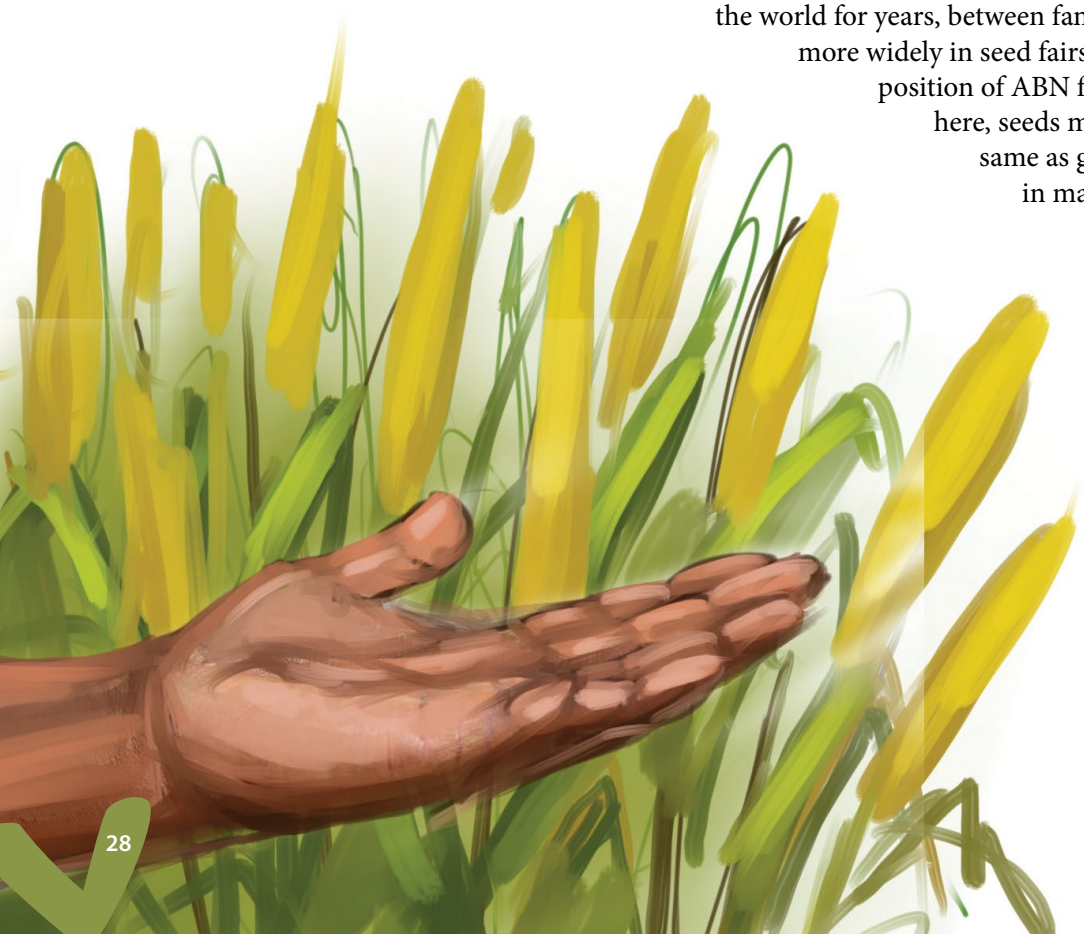
A difficult question is raised

Xoab was sitting on the edge of his seat. Suddenly he burst out, "But don't you think the fact that people are not making money from indigenous seeds in this modern day is partly why people prefer hybrid seeds?"

Elder Mathenge sipped his beer and smiled. "'*All work is as seed sown; it grows and spreads and sows itself anew.*' Kerya, what do you say about Xoab's question?"

Kerya thought about it for a while. "Isn't this the position of most people and organisations in ABN? I remember these discussions in ABN dialogues. Indigenous seeds cannot be sold though they can be traded or swapped, as has happened all over the world for years, between families and neighbours and more widely in seed fairs. I guess that that is the position of ABN for now. And let's be clear here, seeds meant for planting are not the same as grains from harvest available in markets for consumption.

"But let me show you something I found the other day – in an article by Rachel Wynberg, a good ally in the struggle for agroecology.



ARTICLE

Seeds under siege: it's time to support indigenous Farmer Seed Systems

By Rachel Wynberg

Seeds are the very essence of life. From those growing a variety of grains, legumes and vegetables to others struggling to produce enough to feed their families, seeds provide the mainstay for Africa's 500 million small-scale farmers. Seeds are also at the heart of rich and varied cultures. They accompany brides on their nuptial journeys and deliver ancestral blessings for good fortune.

But seeds are also under siege as they increasingly become commodified. Since 2000, the growth of the commercial seed market has almost tripled. Six corporations own more than 63% of the world's commercial seed. New proposed mergers will reduce this to just three.

These concentrations of political and economic power reduce farmers' choices and signal profound changes for Africa.

Hybrid and genetically modified seeds, touted by these giants, are proposed as key drivers in the transformation of African smallholder agriculture. Despite an increasing body of evidence, this points to problems associated with their high cost and the resulting debt that farmers incur.

Hybrid seeds cannot be replanted from year to year like indigenous seeds because they lose their vigour. Contracts or "technology agreements" between farmers and seed companies dictate how farmers should grow their crops and force them to buy new genetically modified seeds yearly.

These genetically modified seeds also require expensive and environmentally damaging chemical inputs to be effective. Herbicide-tolerant crops, for example, are genetically engineered to be resistant to Roundup Ready – the brand name for the controversial weedkiller known as glyphosate. This means the herbicide will kill the weeds but not the engineered crop. The seed is only effective if used with Roundup.

There are other concerns. Genetically modified crops can contaminate indigenous seeds and damage generations of on-farm breeding.

For these reasons, many people question whether seed bred for large-scale industrial agriculture is appropriate for African smallholders. To date, most of Africa's farmers still rely on indigenous seeds. The adoption of hybrid and genetically modified seed has been low.

Recent research conducted in KwaZulu-Natal, a province on South Africa's east coast, revealed that small-scale farmers prefer indigenous seeds for the following reasons:

- They produce hardy and good yields;
- They have high nutritional value;
- They save money as the seed is saved and replanted;
- They reduce the need for costly inputs such as pesticides and fertilisers because they are often produced in closed-loop agroecological farming systems;
- They are considered more resistant and resilient to drought and extreme climate;
- They are essential for cultural and historical reasons. Seed selection, saving and exchange cement social bonds in farming communities; and
- They serve as a form of "insurance" in bad years. And, because they can be traded, they are household assets.

The seed solution

Farmer Seed Systems are vulnerable for other reasons too. Modernisation and increased urbanisation are altering food consumption patterns. Planting seasons have changed.

There are also challenges with multiplying and saving seeds. Indigenous farmer seed preservation methods such as ash or cow dung are still prevalent. But knowledge about these techniques is dying out – particularly given that more young people are migrating to urban centres.

There are some solutions.

- Governments need to recognise the importance of farmer-led seed systems for food security. They should act to prevent inappropriate interventions.
- Extension services need to provide independent advice relevant to farmers' needs rather than relying on seed and agri-chemical companies.
- Gene banks need to be reimagined to serve the needs of smallholder farmers.
- Both science and indigenous knowledge need to be used to find solutions.
- Careers based on agroecology need to be created so young people become excited to get involved.

These actions would contribute to returning seed production and knowledge to the hands of local communities, inspiring a shift towards ecologically sustainable and just agricultural futures.

Elder Mathenge clapped his hands and laughed when he heard this, "I love to hear such clear writing as this, which expresses many of the things that our ancestors and we have known all along. Seed is sacred to us, and when we let it become commercialised, when it becomes someone's exclusive property, then that sacredness is corrupted. If we are not vigilant we will wake up one day to find that our heritage has been stolen from us while we are asleep!

"But enough for the moment about the dangers of commercialism. Xoab, tell us a story from your home. What have you been up to since COVID-19 disrupted and threatened our lives? I heard from Arnold that some good things have been happening."

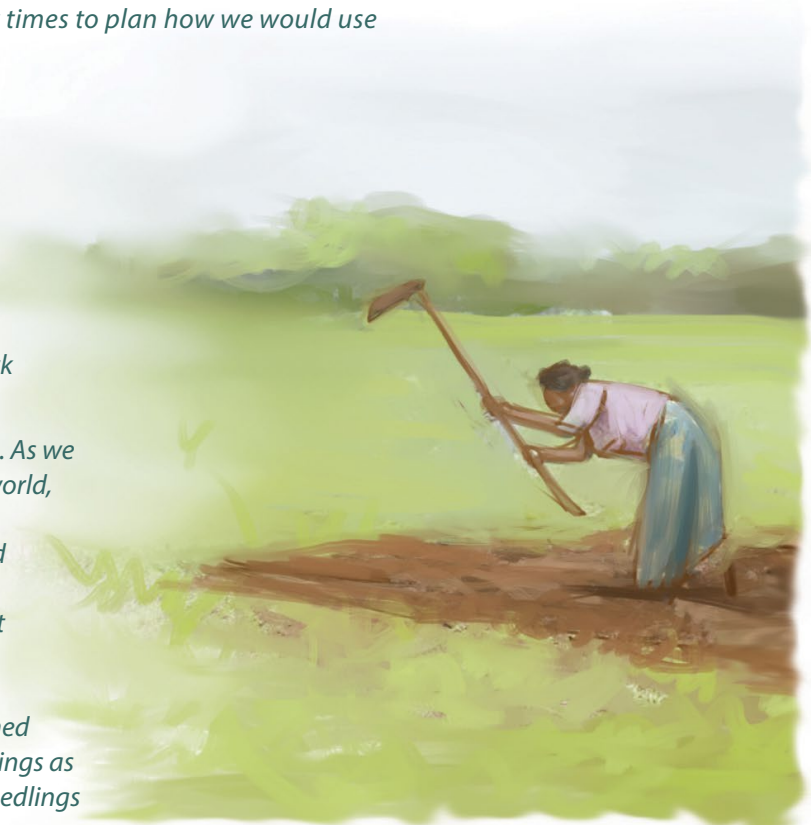
Xoab looked a little surprised at the question because he was still deep in thought about those little things called seeds that suddenly felt so much bigger than he had realised.

"I can tell you how we in Usiko turned COVID-19 into an opportunity to support our community!"

> "If we are not vigilant we will wake up one day to find that our heritage has been stolen from us while we are asleep!

The People's Farm and classroom

A few years ago, a resident offered her piece of land to our organisation Usiko as a learning farm through which we could educate the young people we work with in schools and the community. However, the timing was not right, and we lacked the resources to get the farm going. We tried many times to plan how we would use the land, what we would plant and how we would use it to teach the young people. Many people crossed our paths and promised they could help but left again without even starting. Some of our staff members had been to Kenya as part of our ABN partnership. They always returned filled with inspiration, more knowledge, and a greater sense of urgency, which we wanted to use to get our farm going. But there were always other more pressing work and issues.



Then the COVID-19 pandemic reached us in 2020. As we watched what was happening in the rest of the world, we realised very quickly that a full lockdown was inevitable for our country too. We knew we would need a food garden to support families. My colleagues and I spoke with the landowner, and it was agreed that we could start clearing the land for planting. We gathered a group of community volunteers, and the first section was quickly cleaned and ready. We took the initiative to prepare seedlings as the weather was still warm and sunny, and the seedlings would grow quickly.

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We realised that we could integrate life skills and the cycle of the plants, do practical gardening and learn about diversity, and give the young learners the opportunity to feel the connection of the earth and learn valuable life skills.

We generated much interest from the community and other local farmers who gave advice, tools, and seeds. Our staff, some volunteers and even Board members got involved in preparing the farm for its first plant. It was a big day. We called it “The People’s Farm”. We recorded every step of the progress, taking photos as we went along and posting them on social media. A visiting student intern helped to coordinate the running of the farm, and we organised permits which allowed us to travel to work on the farm throughout lockdown.

Even though Usiko became a leader in organising and preparing food parcels for people in distress during the lockdown period, our primary goal for the farm was always to produce food for the community. We were thrilled when our first three harvests went straight to the chefs who prepared the soup daily for the local soup kitchens. We felt so proud of what we had achieved.

We were surrounded by a community which had once been passionate about farming healthy, organic vegetables. But over the years, the skills and interest in farming had dwindled. It had almost disappeared. During COVID-19, and through our consistent work on The People’s Farm, people’s interest in farming their land to produce healthy, locally grown food has been awakened.

When we looked back on all our trips to Kenya, we realised that we always had our meetings under a tree or outdoors, even if there were plenty of other conference spaces available. Everyone preferred sitting under a tree. During lockdown, we truly understood the value of learning and working outdoors for the first time. Because we were forced to shut down all operations and schools had strict protocols about NGOs working in schools; we had to find creative ways of working. So, we created our outdoor classroom on the farm. We realised that we could integrate life skills and the cycle of the plants, do practical gardening and learn about diversity, and give the young learners the opportunity to feel the connection of the earth and learn valuable life skills.

ABN taught us so much as an organisation. Now we want to use that experience and our growing knowledge of communities to build our programme into a wholesome model of how we can care for ourselves and the earth.

Kerya grinned when the story ended. "I love how you created an outdoor classroom where some real education took place. I hope it stays there even after COVID-19 has passed. COVID-19 is a good example of how a crisis can awaken our creativity and collaboration. I hope the climate crisis starts to wake up the world in the same way!"

Elder Mathenge smiled. "Yes, the world needs to wake up quickly. But since it is getting late, it is time to sleep. See, the fire has gone. Let us leave all this for tomorrow when we will have more to share. Wishing you all a good night."

"But Hounsi insisted. "How can you feel the earth beneath your feet through the soles of your shoes?"

The secret to life, in the palm of your hand

It was 7 o'clock. The participants had been asked to meet early for the *mystica* before the meeting began. Slowly everyone trickled out from their rooms, gathering outside next to the big tree. The grass was still wet from a long night of rain, and the air was sweet and clear.

Once the group had gathered, Hounsi began, "Finally, we are together. Today we will be exploring the secret to life. But let's start by taking off our shoes."

Elder Mathenge was the first to take off his shoes. However, Xoab was tentative as he looked at his big mountain boots. There was visible discomfort, a bit of laughter to hide the anxiety. Murithi hesitated. Take off his shoes - now? And get his feet cold and wet?

But Hounsi insisted. "How can you feel the earth beneath your feet through the soles of your shoes?"

Real laughter followed as socks and shoes were thrown to the side. And then they were all standing together in a circle, their feet feeling the ground they stood on. They were starting to connect with it and understand it. And through the *mystica* that Hounsi gently guided, they were called on to really arrive, to connect with nature, the elements, and each other. They could imagine how some of their colleagues at home may have experienced conflict between this and their religion. Others would have giggled and found it silly, even a waste of time. But in this moment, this small group were able to sink into the experience and arrive. Change means doing things differently.

Then Hounsi took them through a visualisation process.

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He thought again of his mother and knew that the knowledge of women was key to the revival and rebuilding of resilience in African communities to enhance seed and food diversity.

Imagine that you are a seed

“Close your eyes. Imagine that you are a seed hidden in the ground, waiting for the rain, waiting for the sun. Imagine yourself small and powerful. Curl up as small as you can; inside you there lives a great tree or a stalk of millet or rice or amaranth or black bean…. Imagine the cycles of the moon passing over you. Then feel the cool wetness of the first rains, soaking into the earth, soaking you to the core. The life within you pushes out. Feel yourself reaching out from the darkness that was your home, stretching out to find the sun, the light. Slowly grow your hands and arms like a young shoot reaching for the sky. Wriggle your fingers – they are your shoots. Suddenly you hear women talking, singing, laughing. You feel their hands, rough but gentle, touching your first leaves. You hear the voices of children chanting… “it’s coming, it’s coming…!” You feel a sense of joy.

You move upward even more. Now you are standing upright. Open your eyes and look around. Look at the people standing next to you in the circle. These people have protected you and kept you safe, and now you can bring them the secret that lies deep inside you…

Let’s have a moment of silence. Imagine yourself as the SEED. How do you FEEL as the seed? Think of ONE word to describe that feeling.

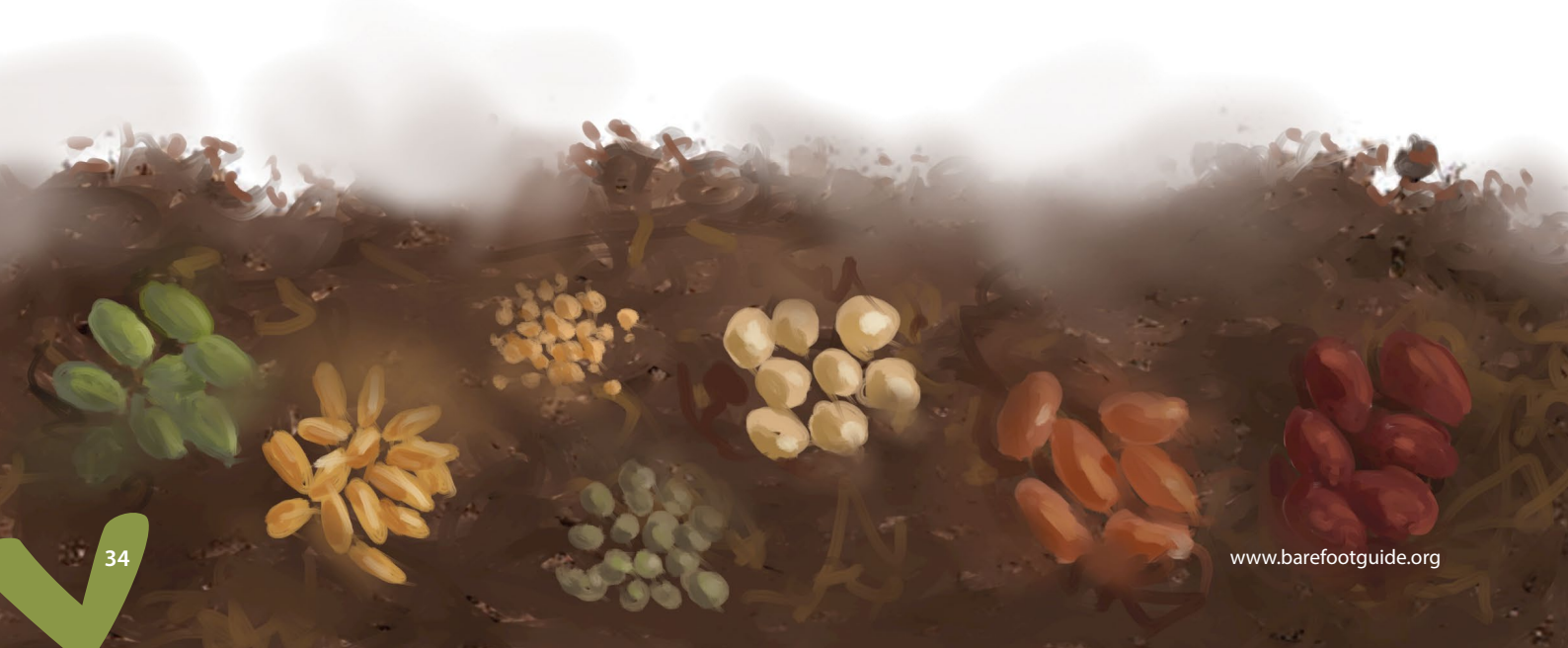
Let’s go around the circle and just speak your word….

(The words in the circle were – gratitude, safe, life, growth, protection, love...*)*

Now think of the woman/women in your family or your community who save and protect seeds. See her/their faces in your mind. Now quietly – on your own – without speaking – thank her/them. Now thank the women all over the world who – day after day, year after year save the SEEDS.”

As the group left the circle to prepare for the next session, they could still feel the seed within them pushing through.

Xoab walked thoughtfully to the meeting room. He was thinking of the visualisation process Hounsi had taken them through and the process of gratitude they went through as a group. It was powerful, moving. He now knew that the work of ABN was not only to revive seeds, but also to revive and acknowledge the role of women in the protection and preservation of seeds. He thought again of his mother and knew that the knowledge of women was key to the revival and rebuilding of resilience in African communities to enhance seed and food diversity.



A remarkable woman seed-saver

At lunchtime Xoab sat down next to Hounsi. There was something he wanted to talk to her about. As they ate their meal of *atassi* (rice with beans), fried fish, pounded yam and peanut sauce and fried bush meat, he thanked her for the *mystica* process and quietly told her what he had been thinking about women and the rebuilding of resilience.

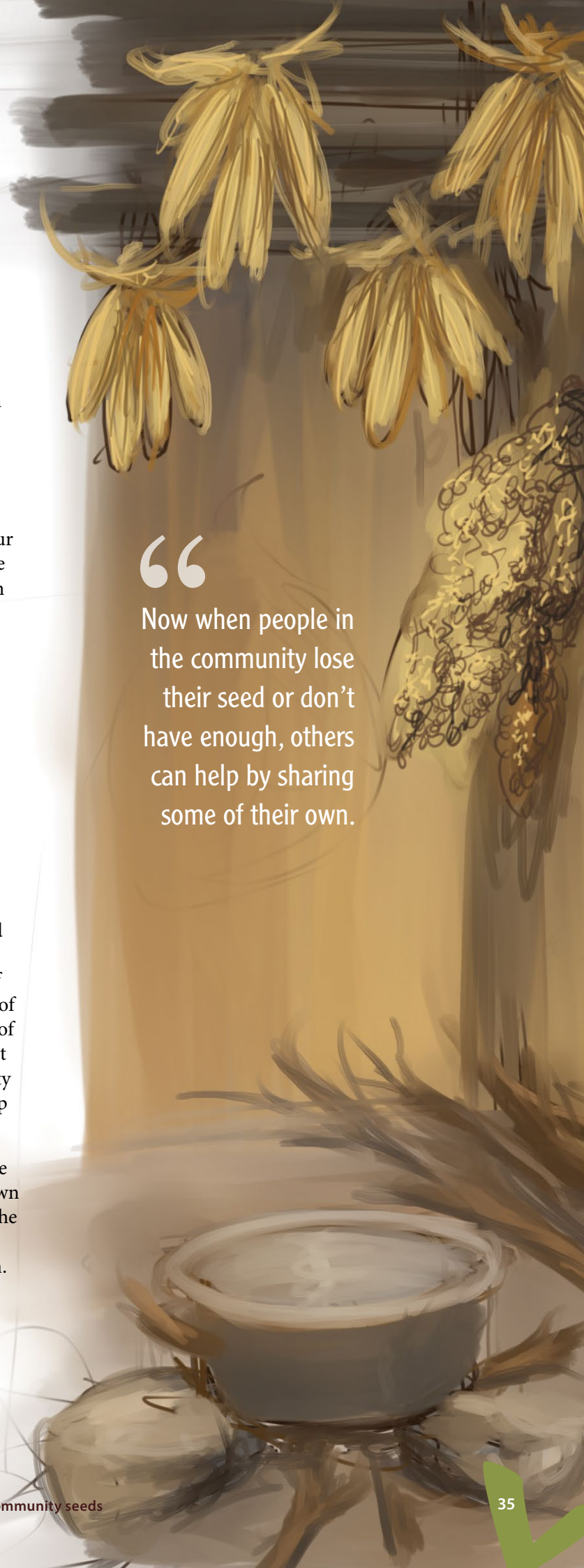
She smiled at him. "Yes, our struggle for food sovereignty in Africa will only be as successful as our success in reviving the leadership of women and the youth in seed selection, preservation, multiplication and exchange processes. Then as the youth increase in their confidence in our indigenous knowledge, the potential for achieving food sovereignty becomes higher. We are looking towards young people like you and Kerya, Xoab. In ABN, we want to restore confidence in indigenous knowledge and practices which have been eroded over the years in communities, especially among the youth.

"Bridging the gap between elders and youth is paramount to us, but so is the work with women."

"When did you realise all of this, Hounsi?"

"I first woke up to this when I visited a friend called Salifu Kande several years ago. She is a crop farmer in the Langa community in the Northern Region of Ghana. She has been strengthening her knowledge of indigenous seeds and farming practices in her way of life. She has helped the people in her community set up a seed bank. Now when people in the community lose their seed or don't have enough, others can help by sharing some of their own.

"I have a strong memory of arriving at Salifu's house just as planting season was approaching. We sat down and sipped on our *lamugin*, a chilled ginger drink she had made the week before. Salifu was quite relaxed. She already had the seeds she needed for the season. Rather than purchasing them, she saved them from the seed selected from the previous harvest season. She took me around her kitchen.



> "Now when people in the community lose their seed or don't have enough, others can help by sharing some of their own.

> "I prefer the idea of *Climate Wise*, Xoab! The word *smart* is more about how something looks on the outside not its real value. This is true of corporate-led *Climate Smart Agriculture* – flashy and impressive on the outside but dangerous inside."

"Her Bambara beans were in a bag hanging on a wall; her maize had dried and was strung from the ceiling in the kitchen; her yam was in a pit packed with yam vines and roots.

"She said proudly, 'When it is time to plant, instead of buying seeds, I can use my own that I have stored. I use what I need, then share or exchange the rest for seeds I don't have.'"

Hounsi sighed. "Unfortunately, with the advent of seed promoted by the 'formal seed system', this knowledge and these practices are getting lost in many communities in Ghana. Even though the new seed varieties introduced are promoted as producing higher yields, they are reliant upon chemical fertilisers and are not adaptable to the changing climate. Salifu has also noticed that using indigenous seeds is a way of adapting to these changes and that the indigenous seed varieties are early maturing and, when supported with good ecological practices, will guarantee high yields."

The Wisdom of Indigenous Science

By now, the others had joined the lunch table. Xoab asked, "Would it be right to say that using indigenous seeds in food production can be considered a *Climate Smart* practice - to use contemporary jargon?"

Murithi chuckled. "I prefer the idea of *Climate Wise*, Xoab! The word *smart* is more about how something looks on the outside not its real value. This is true of corporate-led *Climate Smart Agriculture* – flashy and impressive on the outside but dangerous inside. African indigenous communities have extensive knowledge about changing environmental conditions. This knowledge predates climate change as a terminology. For instance, for many communities, the migration or appearance of certain wild birds and animals indicates the beginning or end of a season. Also, the appearance of certain wild fruits or plant species has been used to tell whether a good or bad harvest is expected. So, all this knowledge and these beliefs are at the forefront of community resilience."

Kerya responded enthusiastically. "You know that at the centre of arguments against our work in seed revival is that it is 'backward' and unscientific. I am so happy you have shown us how indigenous ecological knowledge and wisdom is good science."

Xoab returned to the dining room to fetch a bowl of *atassi*. He loved this mix of rice and beans. The smell was irresistible, but it reminded him of the food back home in South Africa. He was still hungry. "Anyone for a bite of this delicious dish?" he asked. No one was hungry, so he set the bowl in front of himself.

A voyage down the Black River

A story of flourishing nature and traditional life

After lunch, Hounsi and her team took the group on an extraordinary four-hour voyage on the Black River. She wanted them to discover the natural richness surrounding the river and to enjoy the calm and tranquillity of the meandering river's journey. After about an hour on the river, they steered the boats to shore to walk about a little village and meet the communities that lived alongside the river. They saw various indigenous cultural practices of farming, cooking, and handcrafts, passed down over generations and lived so strongly amongst the people. They went to a local indigenous distillery and spent an hour talking with the villagers.

Hounsi then took them to visit the market of Adjara, the region's economic hub, where various artisans sold and displayed their works of art. They saw the process of making baskets and wickerwork and watched two young men making a tam-tam drum as they enjoyed the music of a local percussion band.

When they arrived back at the meeting centre, they sat around the communal fire for tea and snacks. It was still too early for supper. The journey down the river had been a highlight. There was so much to talk about.

Kerya was the first to speak." I loved the Adjara market. There was so much diversity in the art, woven cloths, basketwork, and especially the food. I have never seen so many kinds of beans and peas, corn, yams, rice, fruit and vegetables. I remember seeing at least ten different cowpeas and even more pigeon peas! It reminded me of the seed fair I had been to in Zimbabwe and the ones at home in Ethiopia." Then she turned to Hounsi. "Hounsi, could you tell us a bit about your seed fairs? Are they popular here?"

Seed fairs – celebrating and sharing life

Hounsi smiled, "Yes, they are. As you know, ABN and its partners have been mobilising communities through seed fairs across Africa. These events have provided a platform for our local farmers to showcase, meet and discuss their seeds, talk about local practices and share knowledge connected to specific seed varieties. Several varieties of local seeds are displayed. In some Seed Fairs, there are also platforms for advocacy and conversations surrounding the legislation around seeds and farming practices.

"It's essential that small-scale farmers can share their voices, opinions, and concerns. Often, there are talks about certain seeds, and then there's also food tasting, and recipes are shared. At the fair, there's always much drumming, dancing, and feasting. I look forward to these events."

"ABN and its partners have been mobilising communities through seed fairs across Africa. These events have provided a platform for our local farmers to showcase, meet and discuss their seeds, talk about local practices and share knowledge connected to specific seed varieties.

STRENGTHENING FARMER'S RIGHTS TO SEED DIVERSITY THROUGH COMMUNITY SEED FAIRS

Community seed fairs promote an increased awareness of farmers as well as farmers' right to crop genetic resources. Farmers emphasise the relevance of indigenous seeds within the context of sociocultural and spiritual values. Farmers acknowledge that the continued disappearance or loss of crop genetic resources, especially the local crop varieties, can disadvantage indigenous communities and people. In effect, they recognise the importance of the seed fair and how it can strengthen their capacity to become aware and participate in decisions that affect local knowledge, indigenous seed and storage systems. The event similarly promotes access to local varieties of seed through seed exchanges.

Farmers and community people, including chiefs/elders of communities, have a renewed sense of effort to work together towards reviving indigenous knowledge and practices associated with seed storage systems and food production. Indigenous seeds carry a great deal of social and cultural importance in rural communities, as spiritual, cultural, and medicinal knowledge about the use of various seeds has been passed down for generations. Some of these practices include adding millet flour to the diet of a new mother shortly after delivery to keep mother and baby healthy; or the practice of giving yams as a sign of gratitude. These practices are unique and vital to the communities where they originate and help to foster a sense of cohesion and shared culture.

Kerya's eyes were bright with excitement. "I am beginning to see that the ABN processes are transforming people to appreciate the wholesome connection with Nature and valuing the role that women play in preserving seeds and keeping the indigenous food alive."

Seeds of spirituality

Murithi added. "It has been our position from the start of the seed work in Gaia Foundation and ABN that the seed is linked to biodiversity. Many communities have a special place for their seeds in their cultural and spiritual life cycles. For instance, these communities will often perform rituals before planting and harvesting. For many indigenous communities, their seeds are the connections between them and their spirituality. Don't you agree, Kerya?"

Kerya took out her cell phone and scrolled to a favourite article she had bookmarked from the Gaia Foundation. She read slowly. "*Seed is a symbol of renewal, rebirth and life cycles. The huge potential of life is encoded in the tiny seed as it waits for the right conditions to unfold. Across the planet, indigenous communities have understood seed as sacred because of its profound symbolic nature.*

"In many traditions, seed is used as a symbol of renewal at each stage in a person's life, from childbirth to initiation, from marriage to death. It is used in celebrations and ceremonies to mark the transition between seasons. And it is used in rituals and offerings at sacred natural sites, shrines and other spiritual places and moments. In these traditions, seed is a part of a woman's identity, knowledge and power."

Kerya turned to Hounsi. "This is what I have always heard you say, Hounsi," as she read the next paragraph. *"Seed and knowledge are one – a woman's knowledge about her seeds enables her to select them for different reasons, to store them and decide which to plant when. Seed is a source of pride, authority, autonomy and joy. No woman should ever be without seed - ready to plant when the rains come. As such, women who are seed breeders and custodians tend to be highly respected and play a vital role as spiritual leaders in ceremonies and customary governance systems, as well as being responsible for nurturing the family and the community with nutritious foods."*

Murithi nodded enthusiastically. "Thank you, Kerya, for choosing to read this article from my organisation. Yes, the evolution of our work around the seed resonates with this piece."

Elder Mathenge had been listening intently to the conversation. Then he said quietly. "For thousands of years, from generation to generation, farmers and local communities have creatively cultivated different varieties of crops to respond to the challenges they faced with changes in climate and crop diseases. This is how they gained deep knowledge of seed selection, multiplication and the saving of seeds. So, part of our work in ABN over the years has been to strengthen and diversify community livelihood options based on good bio-cultural diversity and seed governance. We are working with the partners and communities of ABN to revive the indigenous ecological knowledge systems around seed because we believe that Seed is Sacred."

Just then, the sign was given that supper was ready.

"For thousands of years, from generation to generation, farmers and local communities have creatively cultivated different varieties of crops to respond to the challenges they faced with changes in climate and crop diseases.

An ancient tradition opens the way to the future

After supper, the group was happy to return to the fireside again. The full moon cast a bright silver circle of light in the clearing, creating giant shadows of each person as they sat together facing the fire. The glow flickered on their faces as they warmed their hands. As the moonlight became brighter, they became more visible, and they all quietly felt a deep connection to each other, even though no one said it.

Then Xoab spoke. "Murithi, can you tell us that story again about what happened at the foot of Mt. Kenya in 2020?"

Murithi smiled and began the story.

Blessing the harvest

On 22nd February 2020, a unique gathering took place in the forest on the foot of Mt. Kenya. Kikuyu men and women from various parts of Kenya converged at Kiambuthia forest shrine to present the first harvest from their farms to Ngai as a sign of thanksgiving and praying for a good harvest in the next season.

Since ancient times, the Agikuyu community has considered Mt. Kenya to be a sacred mountain intricately woven into their origin story. They believe their ancestral parents, Gikuyu and Mumbi, were created by Ngai (Agikuyu reference for God) and placed on the vast fertile farmlands below the mountain at a place called Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga. When God wanted to commune with Gikuyu, he would come down to the top of the mountain and call Gikuyu to climb the mountain.

For centuries, the Agikuyu people held thanksgiving and blessing rituals at the mountain's foot. But with colonisation, the traditions and spiritual practices were lost. It is said that the last time such a ritual was done was between 1943 and 1944, after the famine related to termites (ng'aragu ya muthua). In this trying period, the elders conducted fervent prayers to Ngai to give them rains and save the community from the effects of the famine. Heavy rains came down, and the region had a bumper harvest. Then people in Rware - the Nyeri region, Metumi - the Murang'a region and Kabete – the Kiambu region, congregated together and conducted the thanksgiving ritual. The elders of today who talked about it were young men at the time. They said they could not remember any other time such a ritual was done since colonisation began.

Even though colonisation forced the Agikuyu community to abandon their culture and embrace the coloniser's way of life, Gikuyu members still face Mt. Kenya when they commune with Ngai. Cultural practices of the Agikuyu community continued to disappear after independence.

But things are shifting. The community has undergone a tremendous cultural revival in recent years. They are now rediscovering their relationship with the mountain, with different rituals led by Agongoni (Earth spiritualists) conducted on the mountain each year.

Agongoni from different places around Mt. Kenya met several times to discuss the creation and re-enactment of the Thanksgiving ritual. They agreed that women, for the first time, would also be able to visit the shrine and hold their Thanksgiving ritual. After much deliberation, they chose the 22nd day of February 2020 as the day to conduct the ceremony. It would be the first public ritual after the consecration of the Kiambuthia shrine, which was constructed after the historic meeting between the Kenya Forest Service and local earth spiritualists. An agreement allowed the spiritual leaders and Kikuyu community to use one hundred hectares of the forest for their eco-cultural practices, including eco-cultural conservation.

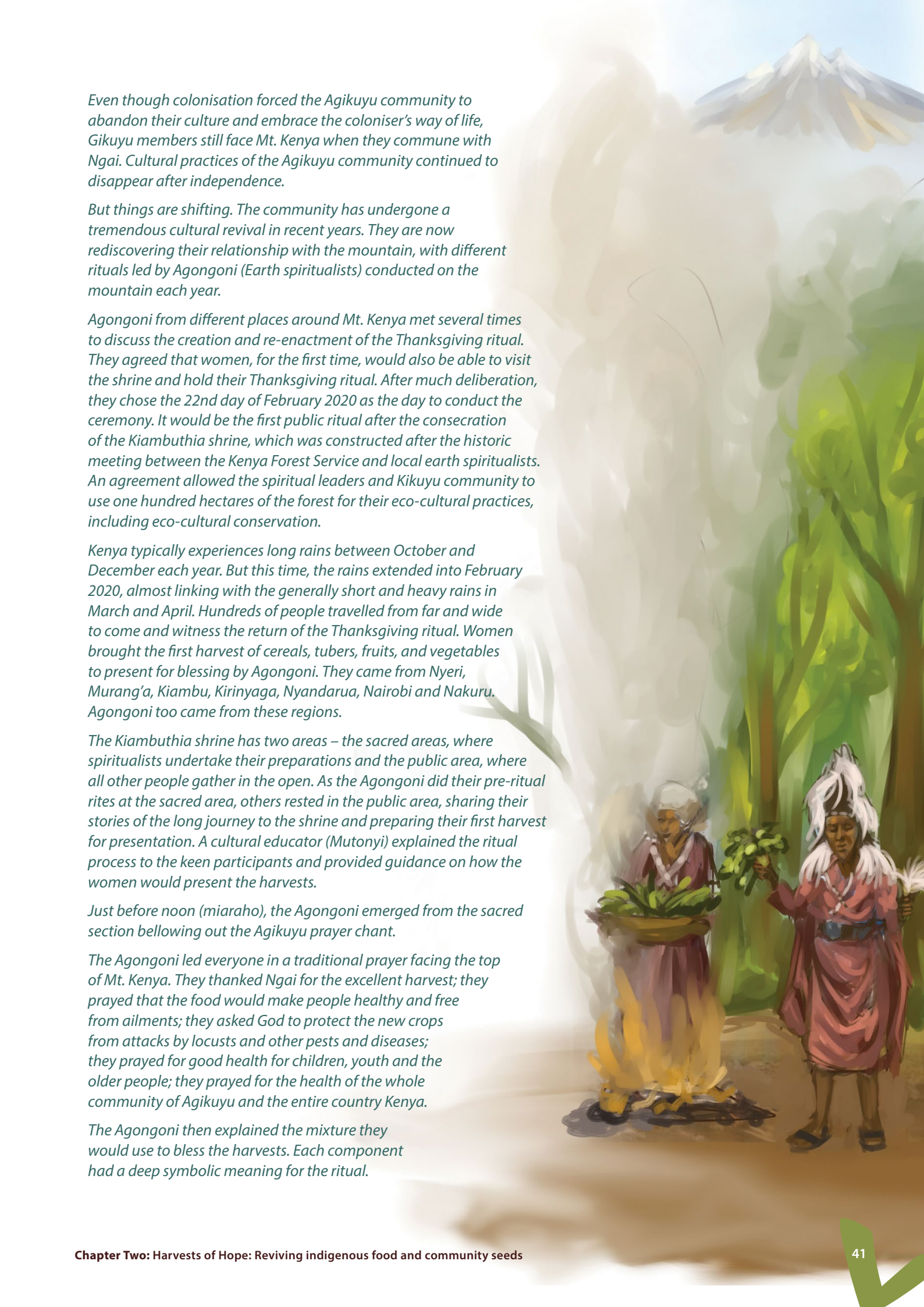
Kenya typically experiences long rains between October and December each year. But this time, the rains extended into February 2020, almost linking with the generally short and heavy rains in March and April. Hundreds of people travelled from far and wide to come and witness the return of the Thanksgiving ritual. Women brought the first harvest of cereals, tubers, fruits, and vegetables to present for blessing by Agongoni. They came from Nyeri, Murang'a, Kiambu, Kirinyaga, Nyandarua, Nairobi and Nakuru. Agongoni too came from these regions.

The Kiambuthia shrine has two areas – the sacred areas, where spiritualists undertake their preparations and the public area, where all other people gather in the open. As the Agongoni did their pre-ritual rites at the sacred area, others rested in the public area, sharing their stories of the long journey to the shrine and preparing their first harvest for presentation. A cultural educator (Mutonyi) explained the ritual process to the keen participants and provided guidance on how the women would present the harvests.

Just before noon (miaraho), the Agongoni emerged from the sacred section bellowing out the Agikuyu prayer chant.

The Agongoni led everyone in a traditional prayer facing the top of Mt. Kenya. They thanked Ngai for the excellent harvest; they prayed that the food would make people healthy and free from ailments; they asked God to protect the new crops from attacks by locusts and other pests and diseases; they prayed for good health for children, youth and the older people; they prayed for the health of the whole community of Agikuyu and the entire country Kenya.

The Agongoni then explained the mixture they would use to bless the harvests. Each component had a deep symbolic meaning for the ritual.



A MIXTURE FOR THE BLESSING

The mixture contained *Ira* (white substance), *thiriga* (red ochre) and *taatha* (bowel contents).

Ira, the white substance is for cleaning and clearing spaces. It is representative of the majestic snow on top of Mt. Kenya. The Agikuyu have used it in cleansing rituals since time immemorial. People yearn for clarity in their lives, especially in farming activities. They also pray that the food is clean and good for their health.

Thiriga, the red ochre, is for reconnecting people and the earth. Agikuyu are farmers and therefore believe they have a sacred relationship with the earth. Red ochre is used to restore this relationship with the people with the expectation that the next season will give an even better crop.

Taatha, the bowel contents, cleans people of all transgressions against taboos and clarifies their paths. Agikuyu believe farming is a sacred process; therefore, they cleanse themselves before engaging in the farming activity so that any transgressions against the earth may not affect farm productivity. Bowel contents also clear any blockages that could inhibit the collaboration between elements and relationships that create necessary conditions for a good harvest.

After they were through with the explanations, they began receiving the harvests from women. One after the other, they presented the harvests, which were blessed and placed in the restricted section of the shrine area. Women of different age groups came forth and received their blessings. Some were clad in traditional dresses.

After blessing the harvests, these were taken to the secluded space of the restricted area, where they were placed and offered to Ngai. The offerings are left at the site believing Ngai will consume them.

Ordinarily, this is the most potent aspect of the ritual as it is the basis of the belief and practice. After placing the harvests in the secluded space, the ritual ended.

There was great happiness as people celebrated the return of the thanksgiving ritual. The Agongoni announced that such practices would in future happen every year and in every region of Agikuyu land. These rituals would revive the soils, the seeds and the social aspects around seed and food management – reviving the social-ecological system of the farming community. After joyful goodbyes, the people packed their belongings and made their long journeys back home.

Xoab is amazed

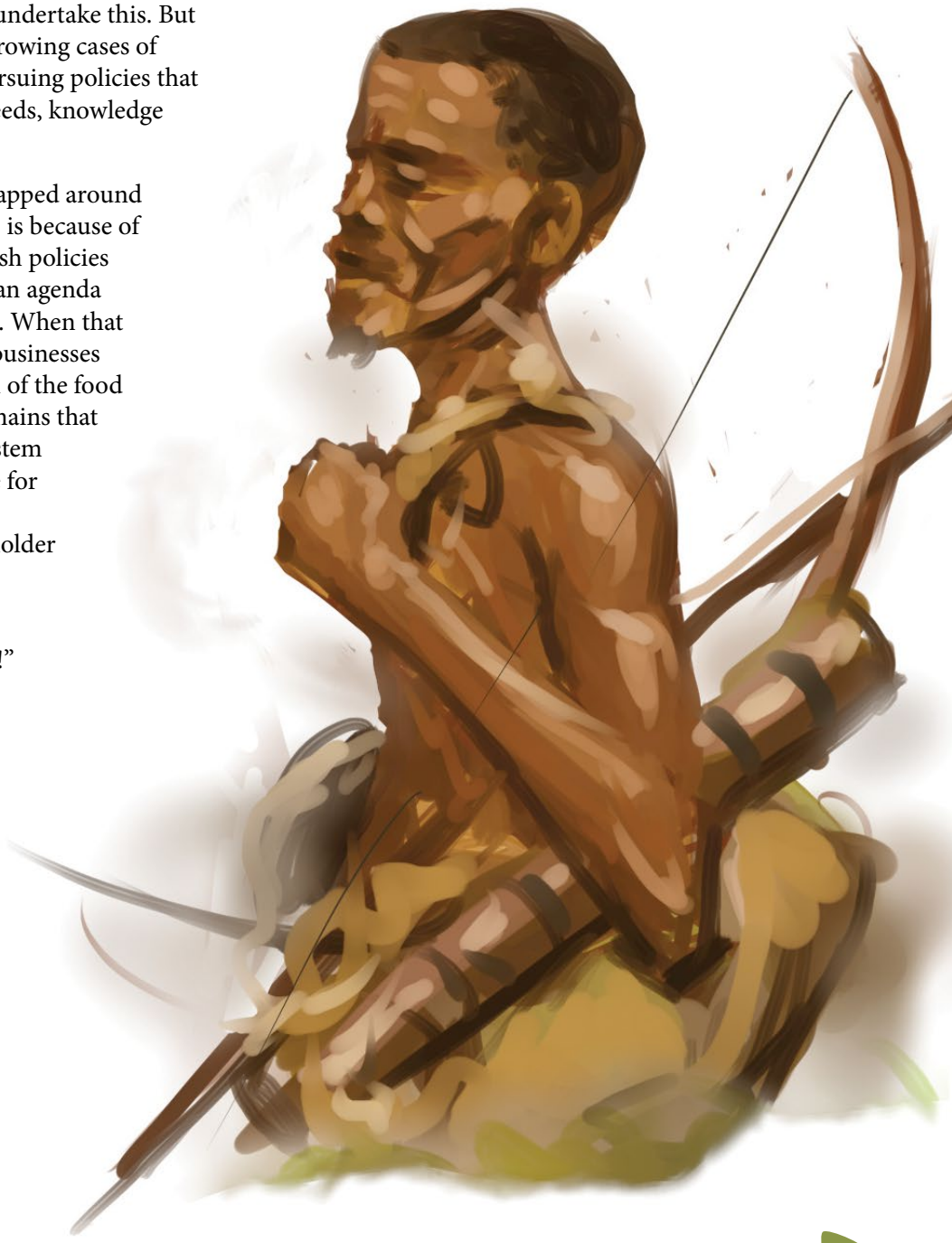
Everyone was quiet for a long time, each one imagining the Thanksgiving ritual and the happy celebrations. Elder Mathenge broke the silence. "'*What the elders see while sitting, the young ones standing on their toes won't see.*' Xoab, my friend, our stories and rituals are important to us. We want young people like you to know them, experience these rituals, and help preserve them."

The story had moved Xoab. He felt a slight lump in his throat, but his voice was steady when he spoke. "I see from the different stories that reviving our rituals and seed diversity is equally reviving community knowledge that accompanies them. Communities' identity and ecology will always improve when they pursue actions to protect nature and increase their seed varieties. I can see that we all have the moral responsibility to undertake this. But why is it the case that there are growing cases of many Governments in Africa pursuing policies that seek to undermine indigenous seeds, knowledge and our food systems?"

Murithi, who had his blanket wrapped around him, suddenly sat up. "Xoab, this is because of the aggressive way corporates push policies favourable to them. There's now an agenda to harmonise seed laws in Africa. When that happens, a small number of big businesses will greatly increase their control of the food system in Africa. But the fact remains that the indigenous seed and food system remains resilient and responsible for about 80% of the seeds and food produced in Africa led by smallholder farmers."

Xoab gasped in amazement.
"What! Murithi, that is shocking!"

> "Communities' identity and ecology will always improve when they pursue actions to protect nature and increase their seed varieties.



> Some noticed the birds singing high in the trees, echoing their joyful feeling.

But before Xoab could continue, Elder Mathenge interrupted him. "… gentle people, we have almost used up all the firewood, and the fire is growing dim. The moon is not far from giving way to sunrise. I think we must head off to bed to be ready for the *mystica* in the morning."

The following day everyone woke up eager to participate in the *mystica*. A night without rain meant that the grass was dry and warm. Everyone gathered and spontaneously formed a circle. The trees around them stood tall and seemed almost curious to see this group of barefoot people standing solemnly together. The stream running past them gurgled and babbled as the early rays of the sun broke through the clouds. At the end of the mystica process, the group stepped out of the circle. Some noticed the birds singing high in the trees, echoing their joyful feeling.

Xoab was still holding his shoes in his hands when he caught up with Elder Mathenge. "Thank you for the prayers at the start of our *mystica*. It was powerful for me."

SMALL SEED

The beginning of all life
A tiny, negligible element
Carrier of ancient wisdom, stories and culture

The beginning of all life
The seed evolves
Carrier of ancient wisdom, stories and culture
The seed grows, protects life

The seed evolves
Source of life
The seed grows, protects life
Grass, shrubs, trees and lianas

Source of life
A tiny, negligible element
Grass, shrubs, trees and lianas
Small Seed

By OUSSOU LIO Appolinaire, Benin

CHAPTER THREE

Restoring our Future

COMMUNITY ECOLOGICAL GOVERNANCE

It was a cool evening in the foothills of Mount Kenya. Even though it was close to summer, the nights were still cold. Xoab, Elder Mathenge, Murithi and Hounsi were sitting by the fire, deep in conversation and glad of its warmth. They were at an ABN member's gathering at the Bantu Mountain Lodge. They had just returned from a silent walk in the forest where they had marvelled at the abundant forest life including the sycamore fig, the sacred tree of the Kikuyus and the sad, wise-looking black and white Colobus monkeys. When they dipped their feet in the waters of a river winding through the forest, they felt as if they had been touched and strengthened by the healing powers of nature.

They were all here to attend a Youth-Elder workshop. About thirty participants had gathered from all over Africa. It was the first big event since COVID-19, and the group was excited to meet old and new friends. The first day went well, with lots of time for each person to introduce themselves and share stories from their organisations and country. Elder Mathenge had noticed many new faces and felt happy that many young people were present.

As they sipped their hot masala tea and munched on peanuts and crispy samosas, Kerya and Gathii, a young man from Thika in Kenya, joined them.

Gathii was new to the group. As he warmed his hands over the fire, he thought about the discussions which had started at the Youth-Elder workshop earlier that day. He had not spoken much. But now, as he sat by the fire, his faded denim jeans getting marked by the sparks flying about, he felt confused. He couldn't understand why these elders loved talking about the past and things that happened so long ago. Why were they hankering after the 'good old days' when so much had changed since then? He didn't mind a bit of history, but he felt they needed to see the progress of modern times and not get stuck on what happened long ago.

He spoke tentatively as he looked at the elders, "Why is it that you long so much for the old days when modern life offers so much more?"

Elder Mathenge was looking at him earnestly.

Elder Mathenge speaks about modern life

"Gathii," he said slowly, cracking the shells off the roasted peanuts. "I understand why you see the appeal of modern life, so full of technological marvels. Cars, the internet, factories, antibiotics, GMOs, air travel and nuclear power, for example, are all incredible products of our human ingenuity.

We are not against all modern technologies, only those that harm nature.

"Those that work with nature, like solar and wind power technology, are good. The internet and cell phones can also be beneficial in connecting us, helping us to share knowledge and communicate, but these also have a harmful side to deal with. Technology can be a helpful tool, but it is not the solution. Has modern living made people happy? Is life improving in Africa?

Gathii bit his lip. "Umm, well, maybe if we give it a chance, give it time. People in Europe seem happy, and look how much we've benefitted from all these inventions and developments!"

Elder Mathenge didn't want to dampen the mood around the fire, but he felt that some things needed to be said. Gathii seemed unaware of his own history. "Do you know where the wealth of Europe came from? Was it not from slavery and colonialism in Africa. Who are we going to colonise and enslave to become like them?"

"Gathii, did you grow up playing in the forests and swimming in the rivers with your friends? Do you want this for your children? If you do, then we need to restore our connection to nature."

False dreams and dead ends

Murithi, deep in thought till now, leaned forward and spoke quietly, almost in a whisper. "I have often asked myself if I want to become westernised and modern. But the answer I always come to is that these are false dreams, and even for Europe, modernism is becoming a dead end."

Hounsi shifted on the log she was sitting, the earthy block printed colours and geometric shapes on her dress dipping and curving as she turned towards Gathii but spoke to everyone. "Did you hear about the floods and the fires across the Northern countries these past years? And the droughts and cyclones across Africa? Gathii, where do you think that comes from?"

Gathii swallowed, "I suppose that is climate change. Yes, okay. I know that cars and factories are the cause, but what does that have to do with returning to the past?"

Hounsi's face lit up. "That's a good question, Gathii. In Africa, the Americas and across Asia, colonialism and modernism tried to destroy our ancient cultures. These cultures were deeply connected to nature, seeing people as a part of nature, not above it.

The ancient connection to nature still lives

"The colonialists and modernists almost succeeded, and you can see where the world is heading. That ancient connection to nature still lives hidden amongst us, in the sacred forests, in the stories and knowledge held by the grandmothers and grandfathers, even inside you, in what you feel when you enter nature and enjoy its life-giving spirit. I'm afraid that western modernism will not help us; it is taking us in the opposite direction."

Murithi looked at Gathii as he added another log to the fire. "Gathii, did you grow up playing in the forests and swimming in the rivers with your friends? Do you want this for your children? If you do, then we need to restore our connection to nature. And you are vital to this work, as the youth, because it is your future we are talking about, and you have the energy that nature has gifted you to make it happen."

Can we restore Nature to what it was?

Xoab had returned to the kitchen to get six glasses of fresh baobab juice. He walked around the circle of friends, handing each one a glass.

As Murithi sipped slowly on the cool, sweet drink, he spoke about the importance of learning from knowledgeable elders like Mathenge and how critical it is to change our whole relationship with nature and the elders. "Nature herself can remind us how to do so, and we need to change urgently if we want to build a better world for our children and our children's children!"

As Gathii listened, a flicker of his future and the possible children he would have flashed through his mind. He had a sinking feeling now. "But it's no use if just a few people do this. How can it happen across Africa and even across the world?"

"It has already begun, Gathii," Hounsi said warmly. "On every continent, people like us are reconnecting to nature and our rich heritage. ABN has over 40 partners from many African countries: Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Central Africa Republic, Cameroon, Gabon, Morocco and Egypt."

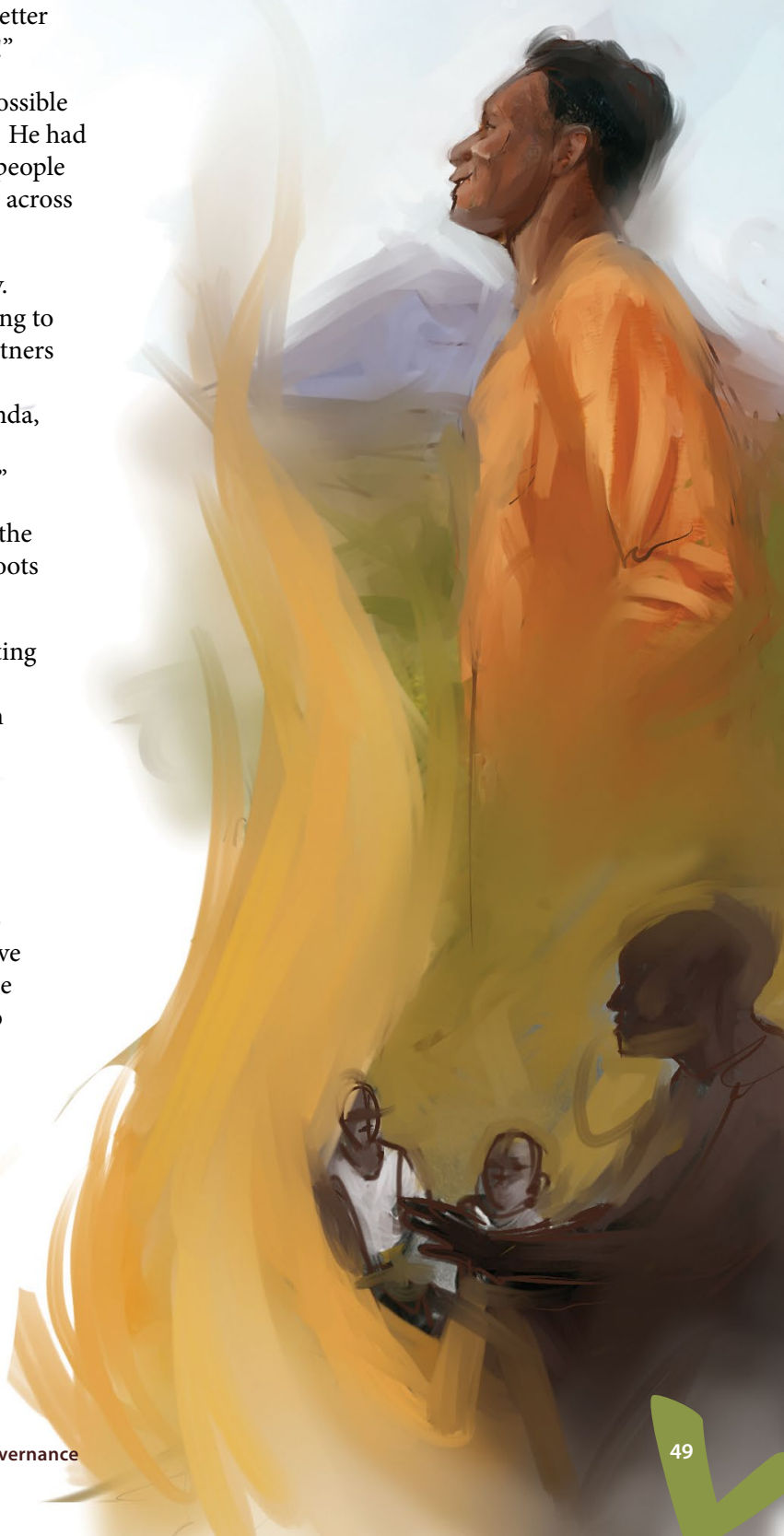
Murithi added, "We have a monumental task, but the key is to build a global movement from the grassroots to restore our relationship with nature."

"But the work is too big!" blurted Gathii, interrupting him. "How can we restore nature to what it was in those days you speak of? There has been too much destruction. It feels impossible! How? Maybe only modernism has the answer!"

Gathii's question echoed around them as they all looked into the fire. Murithi responded gently.

"You are right, Gathii; we cannot restore Nature to what it was. But Nature can do this herself if we give her our support. Nature can heal herself. This is the miracle of life, and nature is a gift to be released so that it can multiply and bring healing. But to do this, we must restore ourselves, the knowledge and spirit of our humanity that has been taken and hidden from us.

"...we cannot restore Nature to what it was. But Nature can do this herself if we give her our support. Nature can heal herself."



"Much of it still lives in the elders who have become silent, and much lies hidden in each of us under layers of modern ideas and values. If we can listen to the elders and release our humanity, we can work with Nature to restore herself.

"Nature is not a weak victim to protect but a powerful force of life to be liberated. Indeed, Nature can help us to find our humanity because we are of Nature. This is why we need to return to the forests and the wetlands and breathe in the spirit that lives there. This is what we do in our rituals and ceremonies, in the *mysticas* and the times that we go alone into Nature to be there, to return not just to Nature but to ourselves."

These softly spoken words seemed to hang in the air, offering wisdom and hope to the gathering. *Nature is a powerful force that can heal herself. We just have to give her support.*

"Nature is not a weak victim to protect but a powerful force of life to be liberated. Indeed, Nature can help us to find our humanity because we are of Nature."

The Value of Rituals

Kerya had been listening intently. She spoke. "What I have learned recently is that one of the key approaches to healing ourselves and giving support happens through Community Ecological Governance and some of the key practices happen through rituals. These draw on the wisdom gathered over time about the land, nature and people already within the communities, though they are often hidden because they are not regarded as modern, or there is resistance from the churches. But they embody a revival of indigenous philosophy, of ancient wisdom that has diminished over time."

Xoab added enthusiastically, "I've heard that communities often have their own names for this. For example, one of the words used in Bikita in Zimbabwe is *Kupira*. *Kupira* means to offer and is an understanding of how we offer ourselves as people to the land and our ancestors, how we honour that relationship. There are various ways of doing it, of offering. There is a ritual called "the biting of the first fruits. Listen to this article I brought."

RITUAL OF THE BITING OF THE FIRST FRUITS IN ZIMBABWE

There are different rituals at various times, like offering first fruits or asking for rain. The word *Kupira* in Shona means 'to offer' or 'offering'. It is the word that we use for 'ritual'. Jira is the Shona word for sacred and sacred site. Jira is one, while Jeera means many. Kupirajira, 'offering to the sacred sites', is the literal translation of it. So *Kupirajira* is the offering or ritual done at a sacred site, like the first fruits or biting ritual. Similar rituals are called *Marampo*, a ritual to ask for rain, or Mapa, another rain ritual.

The biting ritual is known in other circles as the ritual of first fruits, performed with the ripening of the first fresh produce of the season. This is the period around late February to mid-March when the community gathers to bring together the first fruit and vegetables of the season, like tomato, sweet cane, maize, sorghum, millet, and groundnuts. All these are brought, fresh, uncooked, to one place. The elders then choose a representative sample of all the things that have been brought, and then they carry them up the mountains to do the ritual of the ancestors and the soil.

When they return, those who have brought their offerings start eating the food in its raw form. From this moment, everyone can start eating the first produce. This ritual is like an official opening to say, "We have offered the first fruits to the ancestors and to soil and thanked them, and now we can also eat the first fruits of this season!" Whatever is not eaten is left behind for the animals and birds. Everyone has an opportunity to eat, people, wild animals and birds.

The Yam Festival in Benin

"That reminds me of the Yam Festival in Benin," exclaimed Hounsi. Let me tell you about that!

"In August each year, there are many Yam Festivals in Benin. This festival marks the harvest period when the whole community celebrates the first fruits, particularly the yams. It is a day when everyone comes back home to the community where they were born, to the main family house, to be together with all people from the community. This ritual of the yams has been performed for hundreds of years, and no one remembers when it started. At this ritual, the first fruit from a yam is given to the ancestors before anyone else can eat it.

“Modern western culture are cynical of ancient rituals because they cannot be smartly packaged to be bought or sold and they defy so-called scientific proof about what is true. But our indigenous cultures go deeper and can embrace the mystery of what it is to be human.”

“During the ritual, farmers and families bring their new yams, red oil and sometimes beans to the Mikaze, the elders. The elders then prepare the water, yams, red oil, and beans as an offering to ancestors to give thanks for the harvest. When the prayers and blessings have been said, each person comes to pick and eat the food. After that, alcohol is offered to the ancestors.

“During the ritual, the community asks for blessings on their yams for the coming year. The ritual of giving back the first fruit to the ancestors is about showing gratitude. It is believed that only the ancestors take care of the growth and prosperity of the community. It is the same in your life; when you go and come back, you have to take one moment in the year to show gratitude to the ancestors. And we do that during the yam ritual, the first fruit of yams. Each person has to be a part of that process.”

Hounsi stirred the last of the embers. She could see that Gathii was struggling still and looked at him. “Modern western culture are cynical of ancient rituals because they cannot be smartly packaged to be bought or sold and they defy so-called scientific proof about what is true. But our indigenous cultures go deeper and can embrace the mystery of what it is to be human. These festivals and rituals are essential, and we must find ways of sustaining them to keep our connection with our history and identities. Gathii, It is good that you are not rushing to believe. Neither should you rush to disbelieve.Take your time and stay open to the experience and think with your heart and soul as well as your mind.”

After the fire died down, the group gathered their blankets and glasses and went to bed, each with their own thoughts swirling around in their heads. Gathii was feeling thankful that the others had taken his questions seriously. He would take his time, but stay open as Hounsi had advised. He looked forward to the second day of the Youth-Elder workshop. He was beginning to enjoy all these stories.

A Walking Workshop: learning together in a dynamic way

Hounsi was excited that the Walking Workshop had begun, remembering how effective it had been in Ethiopia a few years ago. Today the workshop would focus their walk on building bridges between youth and elders. They were divided into three groups. Hounsi found herself in a group with Gathii, Mohammed from Ethiopia, Sara and Method from Zimbabwe and Xoab. Elder Mathenge would be leading their group.

As Elder Mathenge led them through the outskirts of the community, he described the landscape, naming the trees and fruits and showing them the different seeds of each tree. “This is the water pear tree. Look at its lovely pink-red berries. It produces fruits and leaves, both of which are edible; the pulp and the fruit skin are sucked and the seed discarded.”

Xoab smiled. He loved these trees. In South Africa, they were called *waterbessie* or water berry because they loved to grow near water. He remembered many days picking these berries on his way to school and munching away at their sweet-sour crispness. Sometimes he gathered a lot so that his mother could make jam.

Elder Mathenge pointed to another tree, "See the beautiful Moringa tree, the miracle tree. It can strengthen us and cure-all. Ah, here is a Red Stinkwood. When I was a boy, my mother used the leaves for fevers and malaria to dress our wounds and relieve any stomach pain. We loved fetching these leaves for her."

Elder Mathenge becomes nostalgic

The group came to a dry riverbed, and Elder Mathenge stopped. "This was once a spring and a river that flowed all year," he said slowly. "Many years ago, when my father was a strong, young man, travelling merchants used to camp by the side of the river, seeking water for their pack animals."

Then Elder Mathenge's eyes misted up, and he spoke softly.

"When I was a boy, my father told me how the merchants who camped here with their pack animals used to disturb the community because their animals used to wander off into farmlands and destroy the community's harvest. The farmers got fed up with this and decided to clog the spring to stop the problem. Soon the water stopped flowing, and the merchants had to find another place to camp. But the water never came back; the water source had been lost. My father cried when he told me this story. He said the community spent weeks digging for the spring to revive it. They dug deep in the same spot, but there was nothing. That day, I realised that nature is strong, complex and does not want to be disturbed. We may think we are creating a temporary solution, but it can lead to permanent, irreversible damage."

The group listened quietly, their hearts sad. Elder Mathenge had shared not only a personal story but also a universal truth. Gathii realised that this kind of learning was not pre-designed like modern education; it was dynamic. It had touched his heart and his mind.

A time for reflection

After lunch, each participant went off on their own to write about their experience on the walk. They were given four questions to guide them:

1. **What did you see that inspired you?**
2. **What did you hear that motivated you?**
3. **What did you feel strengthened you?**
4. **What will you do to improve things?**

After supper, each group gathered together to continue their discussions and develop their feedback presentation for the next day. Hounsi's group came up with the following:

ON THE WALK

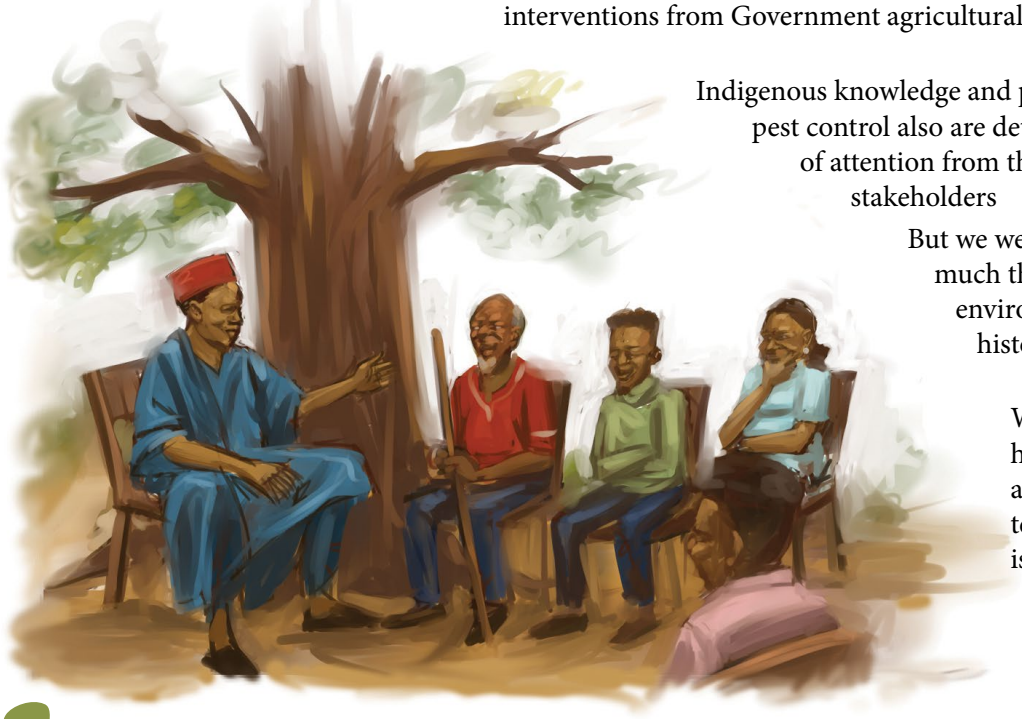
1. **We saw the following that inspired us:**
   Trees that give us fruit and seeds and shade.
   Farmers restoring knowledge from the past.
   Beautiful trees of many kinds and many uses.
2. **We heard the following that motivated us:**
   Birds of many kinds singing.
   The sound of fresh running water.
3. **We felt strengthened by:**
   Joy at the diversity of nature and how the community was respecting it.
4. **We will do the following to improve things:**
   Dig more swales near the borehole.
   Rehabilitate the one slope that is degrading.

Findings and experiences from the Walking Workshop

Nature is complex. Be careful about interfering with natural cycles and processes.

Indigenous practices that were important in the community, such as communal labour, caring for elders and needy members of the society, are slowly fading away.

Farmers' rich experience in agroecology, such as knowledge of seed planting, soil and water conservation, use of natural fertiliser, use of crop residue, knowledge of cropping calendar, and farm intensification, are decreasing due to interventions from Government agricultural extension work.



Indigenous knowledge and practices of diseases and pest control also are deteriorating due to a lack of attention from the government and other stakeholders

But we were impressed with how much the elders knew about environmental, social-cultural, historical, and economic issues.

We were impressed with how much the youth knew about environmental, technological and economic issues.

Benin – a land of sacred forests

Benin has approximately 2940 sacred forests. Different types of Sacred Forests can be grouped according to their religious function into:

Sacred hunting forest reserves. In this type of forest, the local populations have the right to hunt, to extract the honey and cut certain tree species for timber. Some ceremonies are performed at the beginning of each hunting season.

Forests of the ancestors. These forests are said to house the spirits of the ancestors. It is usually where the first occupant of the village is buried. Some of these forests have become cemeteries for village dignitaries. These are forests where the rituals are performed to benefit the community.

Forests of the dead. These forests serve as burial sites for people who die in a bizarre or violent event (following a road accident, in a fire, during childbirth, struck by lightning or drowned). For fear of suffering the same fate as the dead, they are buried in special forest and groves.

Forests of the gods and spirits. They are most numerous and can accommodate several deities or forest spirits in one site. Common vodoun deities include: Danzoun Dan (forest of snake god), Nyiglinvé (rainbow god), Xèbiossozoun Xèbiosso (God of lightning), Sakpatazoun Sakpata (God of the earth) and Lissazoun (symbolised by the chameleon). There are also forests that local people call "principal sacred forest" whose deities are consulted only in case of serious problems and when the sacred forests called "secondary" are unable to find solutions to their problems (deadly epidemic, persistent drought, etc.).

Forests of secret societies. They serve as places of secret society initiations. They include the Orozoun or forests of Oro, the Kouvitozoun Kouvito forests and the Zangbétozoun or forest of Zangbeto (these vodoun deity embody the dead and the ghosts).

[Kokou and Sokpon, 2006. https://satoyama-initiative.org/case_studies/benins-experience-in-the-management-of-sacred-forests-for-biodiversity-conservation/]

Stories of Sacred Forests

Murithi had invited his friend, Chief Coudjou Cyrille, from Benin, to join the group for lunch. Everyone at the table looked up when Coudjou walked towards them, looking cool and fresh in his brightly patterned tunic and Igbo hat. Murithi beamed with joy to see his friend again. "Welcome, my friend. You are just in time to join us for lunch and tell us about the Oro Forest! You already know Hounsi. Now meet Elder Mathenge, one of our elders, and this is Xoab, a young man of much promise from South Africa, Kerya from Ethiopia and Gathii from Kenya."

Chief Coudjou Cyrille smiled brightly at the group and extended a hand to greet everyone. "I am honoured to meet you all. Murithi told me about the wonderful stories you shared around the fire last night. I told him that I would like to share my story too."

The Sacred Forest of Oro

By Chief Coudjou Cyrille

I am the village chief from Katé in the district of Sado in Oumé, Benin. We have a sacred forest called Kotan-Ségbé that covers three villages. It is our ancestral forest, belonging to the divinity Oro. Many rituals and meetings have taken place in this forest in the past, and we continue to do so now.

As a sacred forest, cutting trees and taking wood from the forest are forbidden. There are some places only for men and some places only for women. No fire is permitted in this forest. To protect our forest and ensure that we can continue our rituals, we must be well organised. So, we have different chiefs and leaders. We have a forest chief, the women leaders, a chief for the young people and a chief for some sacred places. As the chief of this village, I supervise all these separate groups.

Before, it was easy to go to the forest to cut trees, but now, because of our work, they cannot. We have medicinal plants, our knowledge, our rituals. This sacred site is for the new generation. If we can protect it now, we can have it for the future.

In the past the people gave land for the sacred sites – and it is this ancestral land that some villagers now want to take and use. But GRABE-Benin has worked with us to revive this land. We understand what is at risk now and we hope, if we have help, to have a boundary to protect the borders, and to continue to increase the size of our sacred site, because we need more space for the future.

Over the years, many indigenous plants have disappeared in the forests, but through the dialogues, we talk about what was there. As we all describe the tree or plant that we remember, we begin to name it. Then we go out and look for it, to bring it back and replant it again in the forest. With the community dialogues, our work with ABN and the work we are doing in the communities, we see a greater diversity of plants and more medicinal plants in the forest. When we have dialogues with the community, the knowledge that they bring awakens memories within all of us. We now remember and know so much more about medicinal plants.

We have also seen the animals that we thought had disappeared from our forests coming back, because no one can enter the forest to hunt or to kill animals. We have come to realise that as humans we must continue to preserve our forests.

Elder Muthenge thanked the Chief for his inspiring story. "Let me share another about the Sacred Forest of Giitune not far from here, sent to me by John Wilson."

Restoring the Sacred Forest of Giitune

By John Wilson

In 2005 many representatives from the Council of Elders, the Njuri Ncheke, came to Giitune to conduct the cleansing ritual for the first time in 12 years. The Giitune sacred forest straddles the equator and it's a highland forest falling within the larger Mt. Kenya Forest ecosystem.

From the day of the cleansing ritual onwards no-one has gone into the forest to cut down trees. The ritual resonated with the community because this is their belief system. The colobus monkeys, and other bounties of the forest, have returned.

This shows that African indigenous rituals can still be used because they resonate with the people. The power of lineage, of the ancestors, comes through. This process, including the ritual, has brought more peace within the community because people are now proud of their pristine forest.

Prior to the Njuri Ncheke coming in to hold the ritual sacrifice, people continued to invade, plunder and desecrate what remained of the Giitune forest. In 2003 the Government gazetted the 21-acre remnants of the forest as a protected area, but this made no difference to people's attitude. It was only after the cleansing ritual in 2005 that everything changed.

Since the ritual, the Giitune Environmental Conservation (GEC) group, made up of Giitune elders, has had no problems in ensuring the revitalisation of the forest. They have the community's support.

Eight years ago, the ground beneath the magnificent forest trees was bare. When I visited in June 2012, I found thick undergrowth throughout this last pocket of montane forest in the area. The integrity of the forest is returning. Its sacred nature is being restored. Previously dry springs have sprung again.

For three hours I sat in a small clearing in the forest with the Giitune elders, both men and women, along with a representative for the youth. The magnificent trees reached to the sky, a living cathedral for the people of Giitune. The Elders told me the history of the forest, going back a long way and intricately tied to the clans who had moved into the area. They told me how they couldn't sit back and watch the forest being destroyed. It was part of their history, part of their identity.

They told me how Porini, a partner of the African Biodiversity Network, helped facilitate the return of the Njuri Ncheke to Giitune. Porini helped the GEC to map and demarcate the area and gave them the confidence to believe again in the strength of their indigenous practices. Also, it was through Porini that elders from Giitune attended a gathering in Tanzania, coming back from that with greater authority in the Giitune community. They told me too of how representatives from Porini shared stories of what they had seen indigenous groups in Colombia doing to protect their forests and indigenous ways. The elders in Giitune found this very inspiring and it greatly helped their resolve.

The Giitune elders also shared with me how they have been able to overcome resistance from Christians to the return of traditional, indigenous practices. They are all in fact themselves practicing Christians and it was one of them who remarked to me; "the knowledge of God didn't come with Christianity".

The identity and cohesion of the Giitune community has always been tied to their forest and the practices they have used to respect this forest. It is symbolic of their relationship with Nature. Modern forces have undermined much of this, though it still lies strongly in people's psyche. Porini, with the attitude and approach learnt via ABN, has been able to come in and subtly catalyse a restoration of their belief in their own traditional practices. With this has come a renewed sense of identity and an alternative way forward to that of blindly following the imported western approach.

COMMUNITY DIALOGUES: A CORE PRACTICE OF COMMUNITY ECOLOGICAL GOVERNANCE

One of the ABN's key practices is the use of community dialogues, which are participatory and inclusive discussions among community members.

The community dialogues are designed to bring together different members of the community, including women, youth, elders, and marginalised groups, to discuss issues related to biodiversity conservation, traditional knowledge, and sustainable livelihoods. The dialogues are often facilitated by trained community members, who help to guide the discussion and ensure that everyone has a chance to speak.

The community dialogues are guided by the principle of "Ubuntu," which is a traditional African philosophy that emphasises the interconnectedness of all things and the importance of community. Through community dialogues, community members are encouraged to share their knowledge and experiences, listen to each other, and work together to identify solutions to the challenges they face.

The outcomes of the community dialogues are documented and shared with other community members, as well as with policymakers and other stakeholders. The dialogues help to inform policy and decision-making processes, ensuring that the voices of local communities are heard and their perspectives are taken into account.

Reconciling different cosmologies and religions

Murithi pushed his empty plate aside and wiped his mouth. "This lunch was delicious. Thank you for that story. Yes, this disconnect with modern religions has really caused conflict within this work that should not be there. I was talking with a colleague about this. He told me that the misunderstandings usually come from our respective individual histories, and our different perceptions of spirituality."

Elder Mathenge nodded. "Yes, my friend. You see, African countries have been exposed to Islamic colonisation and then Western Christian colonisation. Each of those colonisations brought their own stories of origin which denied and demonised the ancestral cosmologies of African communities. Many Africans took on the new cosmologies or religions. Now they have difficulty accepting what anybody says about the role of ancestors in community ecological governance. They have been unable to see that different cosmologies can co-exist. The consequences have been devastating. As a result of disrespecting and demonising African cosmologies, our sacred forests have been disrespected and destroyed, so many valuable plants and animals lost, rivers dried up. People thrown into poverty and and are now dependent on handouts that come from the descendants of the very people who colonised us in the first place!"

"As a result of disrespecting and demonising African cosmologies, our sacred forests have been disrespected and destroyed, so many valuable plants and animals lost, rivers dried up. People thrown into poverty and and are now dependent on handouts that come from the descendants of the very people who colonised us in the first place!"

Hounsi added. "I always look at the connection with ancestors as the very basis of defining who you are as a group. History is what legitimises us, and, for some, it draws powerful lessons on what it means to have responsibility for other members in the Earth Community. I don't see a conflict in the honouring of ancestors and the religions that came with colonialism."

Murithi passed around another jug of baobab juice. "There are other interesting connections to the animal world. I see many other countries where animals have totemic significance only because of that link to their ancestors. Some communities say the lion is their totemic figure; for others it is a Python, Baobab tree, river, or fish. Fish in Shona is *hove*, and the clan of the same name do not eat fish. All these things reflect values, principles and norms that are developed to respect other members of the Earth Community. They also ensure that we have a harmonious relationship with one another. Even in the Bible we hear about the lion and the lamb and of course we find in there a strong order to care for the earth."

“In its true form community ecological governance spans the whole spectrum of seed, food, land, ecosystems, ecology and community. At the very centre there must be a deep connection which enables communities to care for the earth and to defend it when they need to.”

Murithi continued. “Community ecological governance, in the way we describe it, involves managing the land physically and spiritually. But there are some elements that bring discomfort to others, particularly the spirituality part. With the land part it is easier because we work with things like agroecology and soil. We work with our hands, making compost, digging, planting, finding and protecting our indigenous seeds and so on. That’s easy. But when we look for deeper connections, and we strive for a spiritual understanding of nature, it becomes complicated. We find that we may create rituals and ceremonies that others may find strange or uncomfortable. But I think we must let nature guide us.”

Hounsi nodded. “In its true form community ecological governance spans the whole spectrum of seed, food, land, ecosystems, ecology and community. At the very centre there must be a deep connection which enables communities to care for the earth and to defend it when they need to.”

Elder Mathenge took his stick and planted it into the ground in front of him. His grey beard was shining under a broad smile. “Do not forget that we are talking about people having a love of life and a respect for the earth from which all life springs. Earth is our home. This is true no matter who you believe made the earth, no matter which God you believe in. All religions teach us to practise deep respect for the land and for the life it gives birth to, in all its forms. This is about our community with all of creation. So we may disagree on many things but this universal truth that we are part of the land, part of God-given nature must unite us.”

The friends were all deep in thought, absorbing this wisdom that they already knew but needed to know again. Hounsi spoke. “Thank you Elder Mathenge. This reminds me of an article written by my good friend Mashudu. You mentioned deep respect and for me this shows what it means to practise deep respect.”

Back to my roots by Mashudu Takalani

In July 2016, I went back to my father’s community, Thononda, in a small village called Mazwimba in the mountains in Venda. It was the first time in many years that I would be back there. This time I had a very special mission. I desperately wanted to see my sister and my cousin again. They had both lived in the community for many years and were well-known and respected. We had many stories to share, but I was also meeting with them so that they could re-introduce me to the elders of the community as a daughter of the village and not as a stranger.

During that visit, I met four women elders, Lufuno Ratshitaka, Thathaisa Violet, Alidzuli Ramadi and Ramuedi Flora. After the introductions we sat down under a big thorn tree, where we started speaking about the mountain, trees and seeds. They were surprised that, as a young person from the urban areas, I was talking about the local seeds that they were losing each day.

At first one of the women elders was suspicious of me and asked me if I had come to do a project. They were used to people coming to take things from them or impose ideas. I knew that it would take time to build trust, even if I was from the community. I gently told them about my work and my interest in indigenous foods and seed saving.

"But our children do not want to eat local chickens and they are not interested in our indigenous foods. Things are breaking down because people are no longer doing phasas *(traditional prayers) to ask for protection and guidance from their ancestors."*

Violet sighed. "People do whatever they want and no longer follow the tradition. It is as if they are possessed by a spirit that is always looking for something else.

"Now I feel a little hope because some young people, like you, are coming back to their roots."

Ramadi smiled.

When I left, I felt exhilarated. I had met kindred souls. I decided to come back to the village to have more dialogues with the elders, to meet more people, and to explore the area. I heard about the crops that were grown by the community, how seeds were saved and how they were reviving their indigenous seeds. I asked about organisations doing similar work in the area and met more inspiring and hardworking people.

On my next visit I brought some seeds that I had been given in Zimbabwe – pearl millet, five finger millet varieties and sorghum – to share with those I met. One of the men elders said that he knew the millet, which was a woman's crop, and that men traditionally would support the women by doing the harder work in the fields. He told me to talk to the women to find out more.

I met with the women elders again and showed them the seeds. I spoke about millet and how nutritious and healthy it is and that it is an important crop to grow as it is strong and hardy and provides food security during severe droughts when many other food crops cannot survive.

Lufuno rolled the seeds between her fingers. "My mother used to grow lots of millet for rituals and to make the traditional beer used at ceremonies. I would like to grow it, but I don't know how. When I was old enough to learn, everyone stopped using it and my mother didn't show me."

"Violet sighed. "People do whatever they want and no longer follow the tradition. It is as if they are possessed by a spirit that is always looking for something else."

Flora was very happy to see the millet. "People only know how to grow maize, peanuts, pumpkins and gourds, as millet was linked with ancestral ceremonies which the church demonised. But I will grow the millet and share the seeds with others. Be sure to come back and see millet growing in my fields!"

This journey back to my roots has given me a new purpose. In sharing my knowledge and experience, I have become more confident to encourage the elders to revive their knowledge and practices and to teach us, as the younger generation, to appreciate, respect and hold on to our culture and traditions. I have seen this happen in other communities in Zimbabwe and Mpumalanga in South Africa where I work with EarthLore. The elders are pained by the breakdown they see and that only a few of the younger generation are interested in their traditions. They are happy when they see young people showing interest and wanting to learn.

As many elders have said to me, "I thought I would die with the knowledge and seed from our ancestors because young people are not interested. Now I feel there is hope because some young people, like you, are coming back to their roots."

THE COLONISATION OF INDIGENOUS FOOD IN AFRICA

Very little knowledge has been transferred by parents and elders about indigenous foods and farming practices. Children have become ignorant of the value of these foods. For many years, from colonial through to modern times, conventional farming emphasised the growing of 'so-called improved' crops and livestock. This created a lack of variety as only a few types of crops were grown and promoted, reducing the diversity of food available to families and therefore reducing the nutritious value of people's diets. Some of the major food crops promoted under colonialism and modernism have been maize, wheat, Irish potato and rice. These formed the staple food for most households. The vegetables promoted were cabbage, kale and spinach. This limited diversity of food and vegetables has contributed to increased numbers of people affected by non-communicable diseases like diabetes and hypertension.

An Origin Story of Community Ecological Governance

Murithi smiled. "That was an inspiring story, Hounsi. Now let me tell you about the revival of the ancient tradition of Community Ecological Governance in the forest of the Colombian Amazon. This tradition has existed in most indigenous communities around the world since time immemorial."

Community Ecological Governance in Colombian Amazon

Back in the 1980s, the Gaia Foundation began to work closely with partners in the Amazon, accompanying indigenous communities to strengthen their cultural identity and knowledge systems, and to protect their traditional territories and governance systems. In the Colombian Amazon, the results of this long-term process are now evident, with indigenous people governing their own territories of more than 20 million hectares of Amazon Forest, and developing their own programmes for education and health, based on their own priorities.

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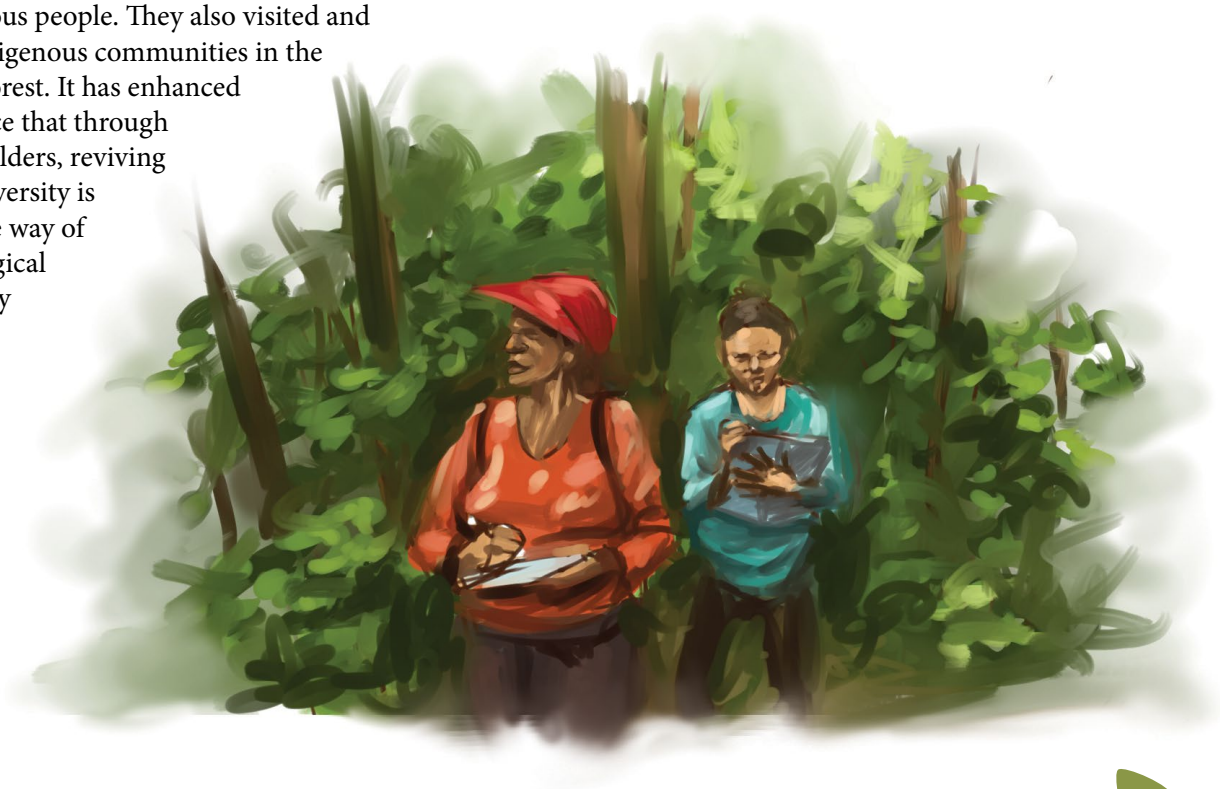
Elders and indigenous knowledge-holders in the communities have guided this process. They have initiated many activities for the continued sharing of knowledge and wisdom from the elders to the younger generations. Gaia Amazonas and other NGOs are facilitating, accompanying, and providing access to legal support as.

The success of the Amazon experience led Gaia to work in Africa with partners in the ABN. They facilitated learning exchanges by African NGOs and community leaders to the Colombian Amazon, to witness what is possible. The experience has been an enormous boost for many ABN partners.

African participants have had the opportunity to attend negotiations between the Government and the traditional authorities on the decentralisation of education, health and other services into the hands of the indigenous people. They also visited and spoke with indigenous communities in the Amazon rainforest. It has enhanced their confidence that through working with elders, reviving bio-cultural diversity is the most viable way of building ecological and community resilience.



The power of learning exchanges

> “Before colonialism we did not have classrooms and teachers, but we had powerful learning practices between different generations and between people of the same generation. Our ancestors were extremely knowledgeable. And tell me, did they live in poverty like today?”

Hounsi spoke. “Thanks for sharing that story, Murithi. I appreciate how local leaders were supported by Gaia and other NGOs. So often NGOs and governments come from above with their funded projects and arrogance and try to control the whole process of what they call development.”

Murithi responded, “Yes! That is key to Community Ecological Governance. What I really appreciate is the power of learning exchanges. These really can strengthen local leadership, resilience and solidarity between communities.”

Gathii’s eyes narrowed in doubt. “What do you mean, Murithi? Surely a learning exchange is just a simple thing. How can it be that powerful?”

Murithi chuckled, “Gathii, one of the other things that we got from colonialism and modernism is being endlessly lectured to by so-called experts, whether they are lawyers, doctors, professors or extension officers. Colonial education undermined our faith in our own local and indigenous knowledge. Before colonialism we did not have classrooms and teachers, but we had powerful learning practices between different generations and between people of the same generation. Our ancestors were extremely knowledgeable. And tell me, did they live in poverty like today? So how did knowledge spread if there were no schools and universities? Through neighbours sharing their knowledge and experience with neighbours, and elders with young people. Traders also brought knowledge from place to place, freely given along with the goods they sold. People shared innovations with a generosity of spirit that was based on the idea that knowledge is sacred and should not be bought and sold.

When our communities visit other communities to share experience, innovations and knowledge then something very special often happens. They learn much from each other because they understand each other’s situation. So, knowledge transfer can be extremely efficient. Secondly, there’s always a sharing of culture at the same time, not just a technical process. This leads to a deeper kind of learning about each other. From this human-to-human sharing grows a joyful solidarity and the will for people to work together. This enables different communities to undertake larger change initiatives together, even to approach the government with more confidence, not as one community but as many communities. Many social movements have such exchanges at the heart of their practice. For me, it is not just a technique for learning, but a sacred practice of cultivating community and society.”

What is sacred?

“Oh, that’s something to think about,” Gathii replied. “But what do you mean by sacred?”

Elder Mathenge pulled his jacket tightly around his shoulders. It was starting to get a bit chilly, but Gathii’s questions and the conversation and stories that flowed were warm and inspiring.

“Community ecological governance of our own land is inextricably connected to areas or sites that we hold sacred. These are critical for the way we work together as a community. When our own local customary laws are broken, and when healing is required, our sacred natural sites are where we can reconnect ourselves with what is natural and good, to undo any harm and to find a way forward.”

Gathii felt puzzled and a bit sceptical. "What you are saying makes sense to me, but I can hear my friends saying this is all mysterious mumbo jumbo. What should I say to them?"

"Good. Tell them this. Firstly, these sacred sites need to be protected because they hold the richest biodiversity of any landscape, a diversity which is important for our survival on this earth. Including water. If we don't protect these sources, we risk everything. Even modern science is now recognising the importance of Mother Trees, which are often associated with sacred sites.

"Secondly, there's a lot in this world that is unexplained. Even with all the science and modern theories, there's much that is mysterious about how life really works. But when we use the word "sacred" this is not mysterious to us, indeed it is the opposite of that. We KNOW what is sacred because when we go to a sacred site we go back to our home, our origins. If you stand in the middle of a city, or stand in the middle of a forest, where do you feel sacredness?"

Murithi nodded his head in agreement. "It's not just because of the importance of these sites for speaking to our ancestors. These sites hold so much more. Our work is demonstrating that even community cohesion itself is based on these areas. I know, some people feel uncomfortable when we talk about these sites because they feel that they go against their modern religions. But even the Bible begins in the Garden of Eden."

"But when we use the word "sacred" this is not mysterious to us, indeed it is the opposite of that. We KNOW what is sacred because when we go to a sacred site we go back to our home, our origins."

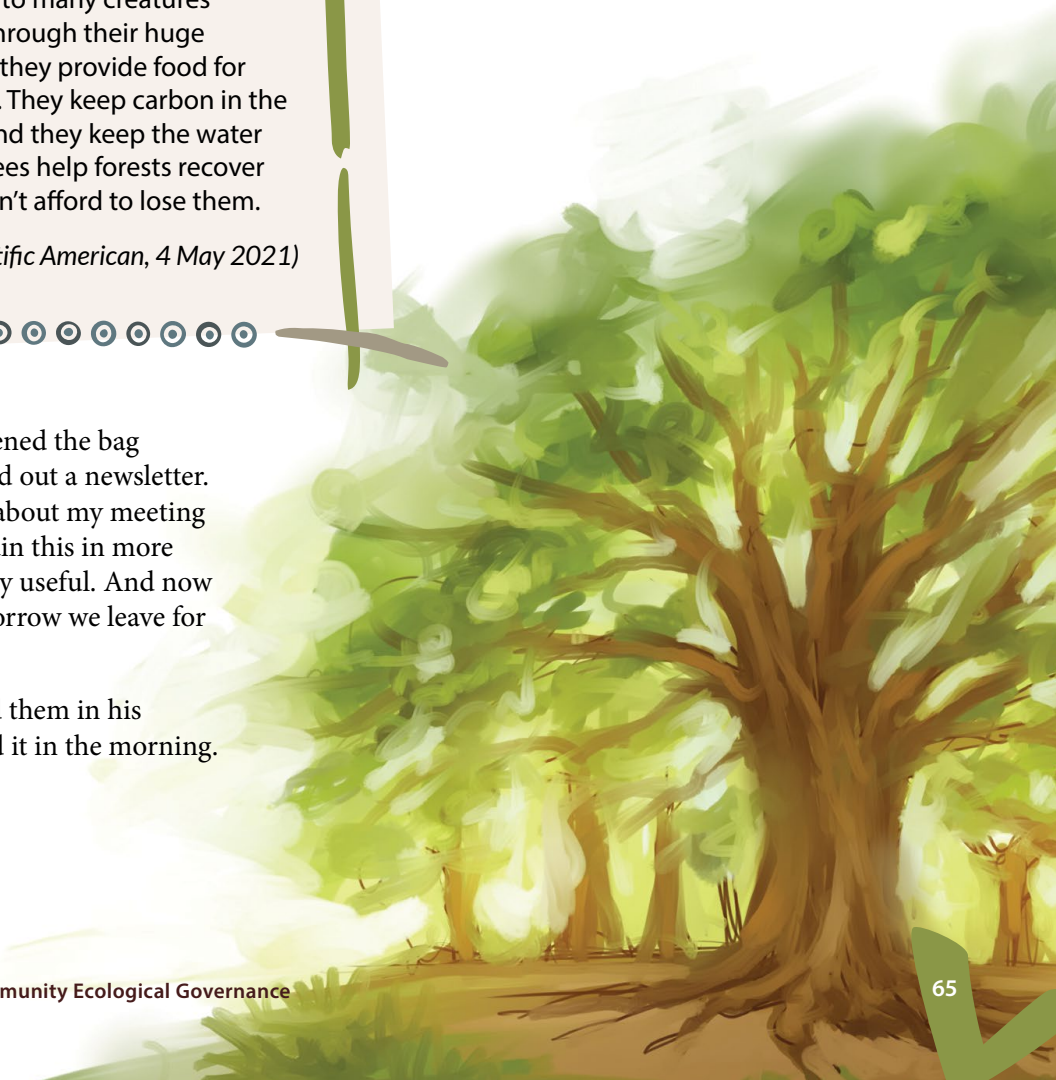
MOTHER TREES

Mother trees are the biggest, oldest trees in the forest. They are the glue that holds the forest together. They have the genes from previous climates; they are homes to many creatures and much biodiversity. Through their huge photosynthetic capacity, they provide food for the whole soil web of life. They keep carbon in the soil and above ground, and they keep the water flowing. These ancient trees help forests recover from disturbances. We can't afford to lose them.

(Scientific American, 4 May 2021)

Murithi then bent down and opened the bag nestled next to his feet and pulled out a newsletter. "Here, Gathii, I wrote an article about my meeting with Mzee Kivivia that can explain this in more detail. I think you will find it very useful. And now it is time for us to sleep, for tomorrow we leave for our homes!"

Gathii took the pages and placed them in his pocket. He would be sure to read it in the morning.



Kivaa Hill

a Story of Community Ecological Governance

Munguti Kivivia and Kivaa Hill are intricately bound together.

He had been waiting for us patiently at the foot of Kivaa Hill since 3pm and it was now 4pm. After a brief greeting, Mzee Kivivia strode off up the hill. We struggled to keep up despite being a good 35 years or more younger than his 88 years. Halfway up the hill Mzee Kivivia chose a spot with some rocks to sit on. He selected plants for us to hold as a sign of peace and welcome and then said he was ready to answer any questions. He told us we were not far from the Ithembo, the sacred site on Kivaa Hill. I asked Mzee Kivivia to tell us his story of Kivaa Hill. He began by saying that before 1949 there was virtually no-one living in the Kivaa area. There was abundant wildlife and hunters would pass through from time to time. In 1949 Mzee Kivivia's father brought his family to settle here. They were the first settlers.

In the early 60s, many more people settled in the area, some of them seeking jobs at the construction of Kamburu Dam in Kivaa, one of many hydro-electric dams being constructed at that time along the Tana, Kenya's biggest river. Elders who moved to Kivaa brought their Kamba traditions with them. They earmarked Kivaa Hill as a Sacred site and carried out the first sacrificial ritual there in 1964 to cleanse the hill for further ceremonies.

It turned out later that those who established the sacred site made a mistake by not keeping the smaller sacred sites going in the area. They were then advised by diviners to go back to the original sacred site in Nthambani. They did this and offered a goat to the elders there. The Elders gave them a branch to signify that Kivaa Hill sacred site was a 'branch' of the Nthambani site. Elders in Kivaa carried out more rituals in the years up to 1975.

The ritual on Kivaa Hill is done every 4-5 years, not every year, and takes place on the prompting of a diviner from the nearby Kitui region. After 1975, things slipped culturally in Kivaa and the Elders no longer carried out the rituals on Kivaa Hill, though they did some rituals at the smaller sacred sites of Kasolu, Kithoni, Gazeni, and Twamakaa. During this time Mzee Kivivia felt very much alone as custodian of Kivaa Hill sacred site.

The destruction on the hill and the formation of Akamba Customs

People from the community who lived near the hill went freely onto the hill to chop wood, most of which they turned into charcoal for sale. Cattle grazed uncontrolled on the hill. Degradation set in. In 1992 there was a bad drought and the diviner in Kitui dreamt that the problem of the drought originated from what was happening on Kivaa hill. Things got worse and a serious gully developed on the hill during the El Niño rains of 1997.

In 2000, a group of Elders who were concerned about what was happening on Kivaa Hill and about the loss of culture in the area formed a group called Akamba Customs. They began to investigate re-establishing the sacred site on the hill. However, it was not straightforward. They needed to re-establish the relationship with the Nthambani sacred site. At this stage there was someone illegally living on the hill.

A partnership with ICE and ABN forms

Around 2008 a local Kenyan NGO called Institute for Culture and Ecology (ICE), a core partner of the ABN, heard about the destruction on Kivaa Hill in a workshop they and representatives from Kivaa attended in Nairobi. This led to a visit to Kivaa by ICE. Soon afterwards they began to hold dialogues with concerned people in the Kivaa community. The first suggestion they heard was the need to plant trees on the hill and protect it. They didn't rush into anything. They kept listening and learning about the situation in Kivaa and they learnt about the sacred site on Kivaa Hill and how there had been no ritual since 1975.

The Akamba Customs group, led by Mzee Kivivia, knew what they needed to do, but seemed to lack the confidence. Attitudes towards the use of traditional practices had hardened amongst Christians.

ICE then catalysed a series of meetings around the Hill, bringing in the local Government-appointed chief as well. The Elders began doing rituals at the smaller sites. This built confidence. ICE also helped by providing some goats as a one-off gesture. The community will in future use the goats as a breeding herd to provide goats for future ceremonies.

The impact of the cleansing ritual on Kivaa Hill

For the main cleansing ritual on Kivaa Hill, the community needed a sheep and a bull. They asked for and received contributions for this from members of the community. ICE also chipped in with some support. Gathuru Mburu, then of ICE, describes what happened: "They invited us to participate in the ritual. Immediately afterwards it became very clear to everyone that you shouldn't go into the forest on the hill because it had been cleansed. Cutting of trees and hunting of animals and grazing of animals in the forest stopped immediately."

Since the Elders carried out the ritual in 2009 there has only once been an infringement, when someone took his cattle to graze there. They took the case to the Chief who handed it back to the Elders to deal with and the culprit ended up paying a fine of livestock to the Elders and was forgiven. This was the only infringement, which has meant that the forest has been allowed to grow undisturbed since then, something you can now see from kilometres away.

The Chief always makes this point to visitors: "We protect the environment through traditional beliefs". Mary Kithisya, who along with Mzee Kivivia attended a meeting in April 2012, convened by the ABN for custodians of sacred sites from five countries in Africa, put it like this: "When people don't respect cultural traditions, they destroy their environment."

"Immediately afterwards it became very clear to everyone that you shouldn't go into the forest on the hill because it had been cleansed. Cutting of trees and hunting of animals and grazing of animals in the forest stopped immediately."

Christian reaction to re-introduction of sacrificial rituals

In many places across sub-Saharan Africa there is resistance by some Christians to traditional rituals. This no doubt links to the demonisation of such practices all over Africa by early missionaries. Kivaa was no exception but, gradually things have changed. The local Councillor, who was himself a pastor before becoming a Councillor (and will no doubt return to this once his term of duty is over), described sacred sites as "our indigenous churches".

Everyone I spoke to during my short stay in Kivaa is a practicing Christian, apart from Mzee Kivivia, and all of them now fully accept the practice of the traditional rituals on Kivaa Hill. In fact, they are very clear that without this Kivaa Hill would be continuing to degrade.

Mzee Kivivia: "Whenever we are going to do a ritual, we announce it to everyone, and the Christian churches support us because they understand the need to restore our cultural traditions." He goes on to describe a Sunday in his household. He has three wives and on Sunday morning he goes to the Kivaa Hill sacred site to pray. His first wife goes to the Roman Catholic Church, his second wife to the African Inland Church and his third wife stays at home because she will have been at church the day before. She is a 7th Day Adventist. On Sunday evening they share what they have been doing during the weekend and there is no friction at all over the issue of faith. There is a respect for each other's faith. As Mzee Kivivia says: "People are diverse like trees are diverse, yet they all feed from the same soil."

Nevertheless, there are those who still resist and ICE plans to work with the Vamweki group in Kivaa to organise inter-faith meetings. This will keep the discussion alive and continue building bridges between Christianity and traditional practices.

The Hill as a constant reminder and inspiration

The land in Kivaa is largely flat with odd hills dotting the landscape. Kivaa Hill stands out for many miles. Anyone looking up from sowing seeds or tilling the land or selling fruits in the market is likely to look upon Kivaa Hill. It is a constant reminder of people's relationship with the land. For several years people watched the hill becoming increasingly scarred. Now they are watching a hill that is recovering its green blanket. while the other hills in the landscape continue to degrade.

What is happening on the hill is inspiring a general shift towards indigenous and ecologically regenerating practices. On the back of reviving traditional rituals on Kivaa Hill, ICE has been re-introducing seeds of indigenous crops that many people in Kivaa had abandoned in favour of monocrop maize, like pearl and finger millet, sorghum, cowpeas and green grams, amaranths.

I visited Agnes Mutiso's farm where she showed me how her stands of millet and sorghum were withstanding a recent dry spell, while maize was suffering. Kivaa is a marginal maize growing area With the greater unpredictability of the climate these days it is a gamble to grow maize.

Agnes has to spend time chasing away birds that are eating her sorghum and millet, but she is happy to do this in the knowledge that she is much more likely to be food secure, whatever the vagaries of the weather.

I found the same story when I visited Grace Kasina on her farm. Both Grace and Agnes belong to self-help groups that are part of the local Vamweki network. Akamba Customs are at the heart of Vamweki too.

> They are learning to add value to the indigenous foods they are growing and are participating in local food fairs to spread this practice.

As well as bringing indigenous seeds back into production and circulation, farmers are taking up ecological agricultural practices, weaning themselves off a dependency on chemical inputs. They are learning to add value to the indigenous foods they are growing and are participating in local food fairs to spread this practice. Many are also growing and distributing tree seedlings.

In February 2012 community representatives undertook a comprehensive eco-mapping exercise, facilitated by ICE. With the elders at the forefront because of their knowledge, the group developed an in-depth sketch map that illustrated the Kivaa area 50 years ago. They then drew a map of the situation today and one for the future they would like to see. The cultural revival taking place in Kivaa is not about going backwards. It's about the Kivaa people taking control of their own development according to what they want rather than going on the back of others' cultural assumptions. Through the eco-mapping exercise, they are now looking at their whole landscape and the driving force in many ways remains Kivaa Hill.

Voices of Intention, Doubt, Wisdom and the Future

The Closing *mystica*

The end of the workshop came. For the final *mystica*, they were asked to sit silently in groups of four and find an important intention to take back with them. They would then share their intention in the small group and receive some feedback from different perspectives; *doubt, wisdom* and *future*.

Gathii decided he needed to find a way to speak to his friends and colleagues about what he had learned that week, about this new, or ancient, way of seeing the world. He shared this with the group and then received feedback from his friends, each from a different perspective: Xoab from the voice of Doubt, Hounsi from the voice of the Ancestor and Murithi from the Voice of the Future Human. Xoab began:

"Gathii, you have a strong and healthy voice of doubt. This is a gift because it helps you to understand others who are doubtful and to anticipate their questions. If you try to preach to them, especially while you are grappling with your own doubts then you may strengthen their doubts. So go carefully and do not try to convince people too urgently."

Hounsi spoke next. "Gathii, I am so pleased that you have this intention. Deep inside you too there lies the voice of the Ancestor. Listen for that voice and go to it when it calls. In the forests the voice is most clear, and it may be that your friends will be more open to what you have to say if you take them there to speak about things that matter."

"Gathii, it has been a joy to hear your earnest questions," Murithi spoke quietly. "Speaking from the voice of the Future Human I would invite you to imagine the world that your great-grandchildren will inherit. Is the picture one of the same shopping malls, fast foods, industrial farms and large corporations dominating the towns and cities? Or is there a different vision of what we can be, that looks forward to a world that has restored its great forests, rivers and streams, where natural diversity abounds and where people once again live close to nature in ways that they choose, working well, eating well and living in peace? Instead of telling your friends what to think, rather ask them because they too have the voice of the Ancestor to listen to."

"He was beginning to feel a peacefulness and a strength coming from a new sense of hope that, despite the huge problems the world faced, he had no choice but to join with others to restore what had been lost.

And so, the *mystica* went on, each person in all the groups sharing their intentions, and each receiving supportive and challenging feedback from their fellow participants to help them to take their intentions out to the world. As the bus trundled down the hill Gathii looked through the window into the deep, sacred forest they were passing through. He was beginning to feel a peacefulness and a strength coming from a new sense of hope that, despite the huge problems the world faced, he had no choice but to join with others to restore what had been lost.

Cleaning the Sacred Lands - communities reconcile with Mother Earth

By Valerie Pfupajena, Earthlore

> The elders cry out to the god of water for just a sip to quench the dry soil. Their cries are in vain for none of them remember the rituals their fathers used to perform.

This is not my story, but the story told by the dry cracked sandy soil, sun-baked from many dry seasons. It is the story of the tree that stands in the barren land, not tall nor proud but withering, its leaves brown and its life scorched by the heat. It is the story told by the ancient ones in the shadow of the Bikita mountains which lie to the North, to the East, and to the South of the five communities of Bikita, a district in the Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe.

As the soil narrates its story of how the earth was once rich and fertile, the land it looks upon is bare. There are no four-legged creatures or insects that crawl, and no birds can be seen. The tree stump tells the story of what was once a forest, it points to the bareness which exposes the vulnerable, hungry human, who looks for comfort but finds none. Only the baobab tree stands big and plump on the Northeastern land of Chiroorwe, pretending that maybe life can be found here again.

Fields of despair

The field cries out across all the communities along Chivaka River as the alien hybrid maize seeds are scattered on its furrowed land. Fertilisers melt away the field like a toxic poison, drying off all moisture. In this field, lamenting has become a deafening silence. The humans have no yield, the elders sit with their heads bent in despair and the children wail from hunger. In the fields that bear no more food, the wild animals have vanished, and the birds have flown away. It is in these fields that only the names of the communities remain but the harmony and love and the lore of the earth cannot be felt in the heat. The elders cry out to the god of water for just a sip to quench the dry soil. Their cries are in vain for none of them remember the rituals their fathers used to perform. The hope is lost along with the traditions no one is willing to remember.

At one time, the Chivaka River flowed in the West. In the Northwest live the human communities of Gangare, Masasire, and Umane, and spread in the North East, is the Chiroorwe community. To the South East Mutsinzwa , Muchakazika, Mazvimba and Mamutse settled there.

Now all these communities, who once found their rest along the Chivaka River, lament as the river is dry and the forest of trees that once served as an oasis is only a memory. The sacred trees have been cut down and the birds that came each season to savour the wild fruit are all but a memory. It is here that the old women and old men sit and cry as they watch their beloved earth diminish. Their sorrow creates a broken circle for the young men and women who seek alien methods to conquer hunger. But not even the radio nor the technology of the present day can deafen the heavily burdened silence of the wounded environment.

“Their sorrow creates a broken circle for the young men and women who seek alien methods to conquer hunger.

Memories of rivers, forests and millet fields.

It is here that the story of the young man Method Gundidza begins, grown in years, but ‘young’ in the eyes of the elders. Even though the young man had seen the wetlands and had swum in the rivers and had eaten small birds and animals they hunted, he could not come into their presence to talk about the dry land. Yet, he came and asked to sit by their fire. Then he told them the story of people and places unknown to them and yet it felt like it was their story. They listened as he spoke slowly and humbly, telling them of the Venda and the Amazon and how they had brought change to their villages, their communities. He spoke of how their elders had safeguarded families and described the rivers and forests. Slowly he awakened something in them. They saw again the images of a time gone by. They remembered the rivers, forests and millet fields.

Many years passed, and in 2021, the community gathered to celebrate its milestones. As they gathered in a circle under a big tree, Mai Gaiko began the story of their garden.

“I remember the day in 2008 when our community was approached by an International organisation, CARE, with the plan to have a community garden. Mr. Ziwacha called out to the village heads, and Zephania volunteered land to have the garden in his village. It was a big day when seventy-two people came to clear the land. But we faced water problems and other members formed other gardens. But soon two wells they had in the garden no longer had water. The group shrunk to thirty-one people.”

“It was then that we went for learning exchange visits in Gutu and the exploration of the indigenous seeds inside traditional healers’ homes”

A new story is told

Farmer Ngezi stood up in song and danced with tears streaming down her face. As if to affirm Mai Gaiko’s statement and so as not to disturb the flow, the song ended and Mai Gaiko continued. “Yes, things were hard. But in 2014, we went to a local businessman for help. He supported our call. But it was in 2015 that things changed. It was while visiting his uncle, that Method Gundidza noticed the farmers working in their fields. He approached them and asked to accompany them on their walks across their fields. He talked to the farmers about restoring the lost seeds and how the elders could revive their indigenous, traditional rituals. He sat by their fire and told them stories of lands far away.”

Mai Gaiko smiled and then broke into song. The drummers joined in as they sang in praise and gratitude for the work EarthLore introduced. Breathless she went on. “It was then that we went for learning exchange visits in Gutu and the exploration of the indigenous seeds inside traditional healers’ homes. The community dialogues began to take place around indigenous seeds and traditional rituals. The more we talked with Method and the Zimsoff team about farming with indigenous seeds, the more the farmers became interested in the idea of farming with small grains.”

The excitement was contagious. Mai Makazinge from Gangare added, “We learned of our indigenous seeds that were once lost. The likes of ‘svoboda’ small grain like finger millet. But with care and determination, we revived our seeds, and our families could eat again. Our children now eat millet porridge and are healthier!”

While Mai Gaiko was speaking, the elders were looking up and whispering to each other. The knowledge brought by Method had opened the dialogue they had longed to have and they began to look at the landscape with hope and the willingness to reconcile with Mother Earth. They sipped their maheu, nodding and cheering at how indeed their plates were full of indigenous food. They remembered the day they gathered at the Headman’s court deliberating on their sacred lands, the bare mountain slopes, and the gullies in their fields. They knew that something needed to change. It was then that the landscape work had begun.

The landscaping begins

Mai Gaiko described the day the farmers gathered, dancing and singing as they dug their first contour on the mountain slope. The elders began to clean the sacred lands that had for too long been abandoned. The work had begun…

This is where my story begins. I was there at the celebration on the 23rd of September 2021 at Dende garden as Mai Gaiko and the others told the story of their journey. I was there when the Elders came and joined the songs, and the atmosphere was light and joyful. The garden was filled with vegetables and the trees danced to the drums.

At that moment I knew the journey would be long and hard and yet with each small step, the soil would be less cracked and dry. The farmers would have to commit to caring for the earth every day, but in working in harmony with the land, their families would be nourished, and the work would go on.

Who are indigenous peoples?

There are more than 370 million indigenous people spread across 70 countries worldwide, practicing unique traditions. They retain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. They are the descendants - according to a common definition - of those who inhabited a country or a geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived. The new arrivals later became dominant through conquest, occupation, settlement or other means.

Understanding the term "indigenous"

Our understanding of the term "indigenous" is based on the following:

- Self- identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member.
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources
- Distinct social, economic or political systems
- Distinct language, culture and beliefs
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce their distinctive ancestral environments and systems.
- In some countries, there may be preference for other terms including tribes, first peoples/ nations, aboriginals, ethnic groups, adivasi, janajati. Occupational and geographical terms like hunter-gatherers, nomads, peasants, hill people, etc., also exist and can be used interchangeably with "indigenous peoples".

Culture and Knowledge

Indigenous peoples are the holders of unique languages, knowledge systems and beliefs and possess invaluable knowledge of practices for the sustainable management of natural resources. They have a special relation to their traditional land. Their ancestral land fundamental to their collective physical and cultural survival as peoples.

Political participation

Indigenous peoples often have much in common with other neglected segments of societies, i.e., lack of political representation and participation, economic marginalisation and poverty, lack of access to social services and discrimination. Despite their cultural differences, the diverse indigenous peoples share common problems also related to the protection of their rights. They strive for recognition of their identities, their ways of life and their right to traditional lands, territories and natural resources.

Adapted from a factsheet from UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

CHAPTER FOUR

Surfacing Life and Resilience

ABN'S KEY APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGIES

Elder Mathenge, Murithi, Kerya, Xoab and Hounsi were huddled together around the fire deep in conversation. They were participating in a partner meeting at Earthlore in Bikita, Zimbabwe.

Murithi was thinking back to the Conference on Community Rights 2002 in KwaZulu Natal, organised by ABN partner, The Valley Trust. He had been a younger man then. It was there that he had made his commitment to work with local communities to help them nurture, manage, and improve the biodiversity on which their livelihoods were based. He knew that this was the basis of community rights, which could not be made subservient to any other right or responsibility. He knew that he would always fight for the right to life, food, land, water, a healthy environment and a decent livelihood.

As his mind wandered back, Murithi smiled. Everyone knew that a story was coming.

"Let me tell you about a conference that changed my life! It was held in the 'Valley of a 1000 Hills', in KwaZulu Natal, in South Africa," he said slowly. "I remember the clear blue of the sky and the rolling hills which created the majestic valley. Groups of mud huts were dotted on the crests of the hills and the lush greens of grass and trees sparkled in the morning sun. The views were spectacular, and you could almost smell the sea."

Kerya was curious. "I wish I could have seen that, but I was just a young child then. But tell us, are there really 1000 hills?"

Murithi laughed. "Well, I don't think that anyone has counted the hills, but it is named valley of 1000 hills after the thousands of hills that tumble down to the mighty Umgeni River, which flows from the distant Drakensberg Mountains to the warm Indian Ocean. The locals just called it 'The Valley'."

Hounsi nodded. "Yes, the valley has been home to the Zulu people for centuries, with many continuing to practice and live out their traditional lifestyle."

Murithi became thoughtful. "Well, this is not really my story. It is the story of ABN and how it really started."

Kerya asked quickly, "Murithi, so what is the story of the ABN? Why was it formed when there were so many organisations already teaching people about agriculture?"

> "Yes, it's the philosophy of the ABN, to be a regional network of individuals and organisations which seeks African solutions to the ecological and socio-economic challenges that face the continent."

Murithi cleared his throat. "Well, there are many songs written and sung by legends, but, we still have new songs being released every day. These songs pass on a message, to inform and entertain various music lovers. The same thing applies to the ABN. There are many other organisations out there teaching people about agriculture. But food insecurity is a perennial song on the African continent and the lack of rain is a familiar lament. This wasn't the case more than three decades ago. A great gap appeared in our knowledge and levels of response and needed to be filled."

Kerya nodded. "Do, you mean the ABN was the organisation to address this continental gap?"

Murithi smiled, "Yes, it's the philosophy of the ABN, to be a regional network of individuals and organisations which seeks African solutions to the ecological and socio-economic challenges that face the continent."

"This is a broad task!" Elder Mathenge added.

Murithi agreed. "Yes, indeed. The idea of starting the ABN was conceived in 1996 in response to growing concern in the region over threats to biodiversity in Africa. The need to develop strong African positions and legal instruments at the national, regional and international level was also crucial as a lack of African voice on matters affecting Africa lacked in the global policy framework for Africa."

A long silence ensued and Xoab pulled his stool closer to Murithi. "You mean ABN was started as an advocacy organisation?"

Murithi cleared his throat, "Yes, ABN advocates for sustainable approaches, restoration of bio-cultural diversity and of ecosystem services while also promoting harmonious living among all life on earth."

Hounsi added, "This is a broad philosophy, but ABN is unique and is able to achieve this mandate through its wide network."

Murithi agreed. "ABN was formed when the 21st century had seen a rapid spread of global values that focused on economic growth, consumption and individualism. These values were often at odds with the common good and values rooted in traditional cultures that encourage all people to live in harmony with their ecosystems. I have a brochure here written by Zachary Makanya, the First Chairman of the ABN Board of Trustees and now CEO, RIDEP, Tharaka Kenya."

THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE AFRICAN BIODIVERSITY NETWORK

By Zachary Makanya, CEO, RIDEP, Tharaka, Kenya and First Chair of the ABN Board of Trustees

"Human beings are an integral part of the community of life on Earth. Human well-being is derived from and depends on the health of this community." The Valley of 1000 Hills Declaration, Conference on Community Rights held at Valley Trust, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa on March 1-8, 2002.

It was at this momentous meeting that the idea of forming an African civil society network came together and the African Biodiversity Network was born out of the need to represent African voices on critical issues concerning biodiversity.

The pioneers had known one another through conservation work in Africa as well as internationally. They believed that local communities were essential for the survival of the human species and other life forms, and were humanity's best managers of land, water and biodiversity. The Conference agreed on the urgency to bring Africans together, to create awareness of the dangers facing the African continent and to mobilise and organise them for action.

Four Action Groups were formed: the Genetic Engineering/Intellectual Property rights (GE/IPR) coordinated by Mr Zachary Makanya from Kenya, The Youth Cultural Diversity (YCB) coordinated by Mr Million Belay from Ethiopia, Seed Sovereignty led by Fulvio Grandin from South Africa and Community and Ecological Resilience led by Gathuru Mburu from Kenya and Liz Hosken from South Africa.

The Gaia Foundation played a key role in the initial coordination and resource mobilisation, continuing to support the ABN Secretariat once established in Thika, Kenya. PELUM-Kenya supported the establishment of the financial systems and ICE-Kenya hosted the ABN Network Administrator, Simon Mitambo. They were critical in mid-wifing the birth of the ABN Secretariat in 2007.

The African continent is endowed with a formidable force of strong Africans who combine their efforts to fight forces of profiteering and neglect that are bent on destroying the biodiversity in Africa. They are building the capacity of Africans and organisations to face the present and future challenges, connecting with networks, promoting networking.

THE VALLEY OF 1000 HILLS DECLARATION

Conference on Community Rights

The Valley Trust, 1000 Hills, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

We, the participants of the Conference on Community Rights held at The Valley Trust, 1000 Hills, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, between 1 - 8 March 2002, who came from Africa, Asia, Latin America, North America and Europe, discussed the rights of local communities, and make the following declarations:

1. Human beings are an integral part of the community of life on Earth. Human well-being is derived from and depends on the health of this community. Accordingly, we must ensure that human actions do not destroy the web of mutually enhancing relationships that create the earth community.
2. The human species is social and the individual cannot live a solitary existence. We, therefore, believe that the local community is essential for the survival of the human species, and local communities create and use knowledge in partnership with other life forms to meet society's basic needs of food, health, clothing and shelter.
3. The Industrial system has alienated us from the rest of the earth community and is increasingly privatising biological, land and water resources. This privatisation is destroying rural local communities and their natural resource base.
4. Many local communities have maintained an intimate relationship with the ecosystems on which they depend and have shared timeless connectedness with all life. It is, therefore, fitting that the local community is humanity's best manager of land, water and biodiversity. Privatisation and so-called free trade destroy this connectedness. By allowing the destruction of our local communities, we condemn other living organisms to accelerating extinction and further impoverish local communities.
5. The most potent instrument in this destruction is the patenting of living organisms. The Convention on Biological Diversity recognises the rights of local communities and their role in generating agricultural biodiversity out of wildland biodiversity. Yet corporations are patenting living things and increasingly controlling agricultural production systems. We condemn this act as violence both to humans and to other living things.
6. The rights of Local Communities are being threatened by genetic engineering of crops – a dangerous technology that comes with corporate control, dependence on external inputs, and the undermining of regenerative systems of agriculture and sustainable use of biodiversity. We oppose the introduction of genetically modified organisms in agriculture and the increasing corporate control over Africa's agriculture and biodiversity.
7. The world adopted the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and the precautionary principle. Because of genetic engineering's negative effects we are concerned about the pollution of food and agriculture through genetic engineering and the way the biotechnology industry inevitably pursues its interests at the expense of the public good.

This has led to the disastrous adventurism in Mexico, where the immensely valuable diversity of maize, developed by local communities over thousands of years, has been polluted with unintended genes from genetically engineered maize, some of which have not even been approved for human consumption. The food-base of the world's communities must be protected from such adventurism. We call upon all governments to provide this protection.

8. Local communities have the inalienable right and responsibility to nurture, manage, exchange and further improve the biodiversity on which their livelihoods are based - for the benefit of themselves, ecosystems and of future generations. This is the basis of community rights, which cannot be made subservient to any other right or responsibility, and includes the right to life, food, land, water, healthy environment and a decent livelihood.

9. Community rights over biodiversity and indigenous knowledge are collective in nature, and therefore cannot be privatised or individualised. Current systems of intellectual property rights applied to biodiversity and traditional knowledge are private and monopolistic in nature and therefore incompatible with community rights.

10. In that context, the initiative of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) to develop systems for the protection of traditional knowledge is highly inappropriate. WIPO should work to stop biopiracy that occurs because of biodiversity patents, and not to define the rights of communities which should be done by the communities themselves.

11. Access to water is a natural and fundamental right. It is not to be treated as a commodity traded for profit. People should have the right to freedom from thirst and should have adequate access to safe water for their needs.

12. We call on the global community to urge governments to acknowledge the community rights to land, water and biodiversity, protect them globally and initiate internationally legally binding frameworks for such protection.

13. Communities over millennia evolved equitable and sustainable ways of gathering, producing and sharing food based on cooperation and partnership, to meet their food needs. The present thrust towards corporatisation of food production and distribution systems threatens the co-operative nature of communities, jeopardises their ability to meet their food needs through culturally appropriate and equitable ways and thus destroys their sovereign right to food security.

14. The African Model Law for the Protection of the Rights of Local Communities, Farmers and Breeders, and for the Regulation of Access to Biological Resources has been endorsed by the OAU Summit of Heads of State and Government in May 1998 in Ouagadougou and re-endorsed in July 2001 in Lusaka. It represents the African position on the protection of local community rights, farmers and breeders' rights and the regulation of access to biological resources. We support this position and strongly urge all African governments to take steps to implement it at the national level.

15. We, therefore, urge the global community to support the implementation of the African Model Law for the Protection of the Rights of Local Communities, Farmers and Breeders, and for the Regulation of Access to Biological Resources and desist from any activities or policies that directly or indirectly undermine its adoption and operation by African countries.

ABN's philosophy and the promotion of ecosystem-centred development

Murithi paused as he placed the brochure back in his leather bag. He smiled as he thought back. "What a privilege it was to have been there. Out of the conference came this **Valley of 1000 Hills Declaration**. We knew that we had to stand up again, to reclaim our heritage, protect our land and defend our rights. It was time to reveal the power in African communities!"

Xoab was interested in hearing more about the history of ABN and the people behind it. "So, who were some of the other champions behind the formation, and can you say more about the thinking they brought to ABN's philosophy?"

Murithi responded quickly, "Well, the founding of ABN was preceded by long discussions and many consultations between these tough and passionate environmental warriors. They understood and realised that our human actions posed imminent dangers to the web of mutually enhancing relationships that create a sustainable earth community and ecosystem."

Hounsi nodded. "Yes, they believed that people should promote ecosystem-centred development and not human-centred development and that we should have African voices on critical issues concerning biodiversity."

"Wow! These are heroes and heroines. I'm curious to know more about them." Kerya said excitedly.

Murithi smiled. "Well, these pioneers were colleagues, who later became great friends. I remember their names clearly. From South Africa, there were Ms Liz Hosken, Elfrieda Pschorn-Strauss, Carol and Irwin Friedman, and Cormac Cullinan. Henk Hobbelink came from Spain and Dr Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher from Ethiopia. The late Dr Sue Burnell Edwards was from Ethiopia and Nico Bermudez from Colombia. Larry J. Goodwin from the USA, Fiona Wilton from Colombia and the late Prof Wangari Mathai from Kenya."

> "We knew that we had to stand up again, to reclaim our heritage, protect our land and defend our rights. It was time to reveal the power in African communities!"

"What were the core beliefs that brought them together?" Kerya asked.

Murithi paused to consider this deep question. "Well, I think it was that they believed the industrial system had alienated human beings from the earth community, from our own humanity. The privatising of resources was destroying rural communities and their natural resource base. They knew that many local communities still maintained an intimate and vital relationship with the ecosystems they depended on for their livelihoods and identities, but that so-called free trade was destroying this connectedness."

"So you are saying that the conference brought all these thoughts and discussions together to create awareness of the dangers facing the African continent? Is this where the foundation was laid for people to mobilise and organise for action?" Kerya asked.

Murithi smiled, "Yes, exactly. These visionaries had solutions to what was destroying mother nature. But what we needed was a movement, a mobilisation to put these solutions into action. When I think back and can almost again hear the passionate speakers. I remember Gichinga Ndirangu from Kenya, as well as Dr Jack Githae, Dr Tewolde and many others. Some farmers and academics emerged as relentless African activists, like Million Belay and Gathuru Mburu and Zachary Makanya."

"They didn't work in isolation. They built the capacity of those who participated in such meetings. The number of environmental activists grew by the day."

Formation of thematic areas of focus of ABN, coalitions and networks

Kerya was really enjoying the story of ABN. She had taken out her notebook to jot down some responses. She asked, "Murithi, how did these visionaries plan the ABN philosophy and execution?"

Murithi smiled. "You saw the four Action Groups mentioned by Mr. Zachary Makanya in the brochure: Genetic Engineering/ Intellectual Property rights (GE/IPR), Youth Cultural Diversity (YCB), Seed Sovereignty and Community and Ecological Resilience.

"With the passage of time, the focus of ABN became much clearer. The network now focuses on three thematic areas: Community Seeds and Knowledge (CSK); Community Ecological Governance (CEG) and Youth and Cultural Biodiversity (YCB)."

Kerya wanted to know more. "What became of these visionaries and how did they ignite a fire in other people's minds in Africa?"

Murithi nodded. "They didn't work in isolation. They built the capacity of those who participated in such meetings. The number of environmental activists grew by the day. Today, these activists are pillars and leaders spearheading the conservation of bio-cultural diversity and leading the resistance against GMOs in Africa."

Xoab, had been quietly following the conversation. Now he leaned forward. "What other impactful strides has ABN made?"

> “We were guided by the saying “think globally and act locally”, and mobilised and organised Africans in their respective countries, leading to the formation of many networks.”

Murithi turned to look at him. “We were guided by the saying “think globally and act locally”, and mobilised and organised Africans in their respective countries, leading to the formation of many networks. For example, these ABN visionaries from Kenya formed Kenya GMOs Concern (KeGCo); later, it changed to Kenya Biodiversity Coalition (KBioC), registered as the Biodiversity and Biosafety Association of Kenya (BIBA Kenya).

“The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) was formed as a network of like-minded networks and individuals, through a longstanding partnership with other networks such as COPAGEN from Francophone Africa, Friends of the Earth Africa, IPACC, PELUM etc. AFSA is a membership broad alliance of different civil society actors that are part of the struggle for food sovereignty and agroecology in Africa. These include African farmers’ organisations, African NGO networks, specialist African NGOs, consumer movements in Africa, international organisations which support the stance of AFSA, and individuals. Its members represent smallholder farmers, pastoralists, hunter/gatherers, indigenous peoples; faith-based institutions and environmentalists from across Africa. It is a network of networks and currently has 30 active members.

Sparks and ripples of new life

The ‘sparks’ and the ripple effect of this workshop led to the revival and breathing of new life into the existing networks and organisations. These include the Green Belt Movement, SACDEP Kenya, RODI Kenya, Kenya Institute of Organic Farming (KIOF), PELUM Association, INADES Formation, etc. It also led to the formation of completely new networks like KOAN, KESSFF, etc.

“There was also a proliferation of tens of NGOs and CBOs in many African countries. These include the Institute of Culture and Ecology (Kenya), Rural Initiatives Development Programme (Kenya), Movement for Ecological Learning and Community Action (Ethiopia), Maendeleo Endelevu Action Programme (Kenya), etc. All these networks and organisations took a frontline position to promote agroecology as the solution for food sovereignty and harmonious living besides conserving biocultural diversity globally.

“With time, this growing movement of biodiversity conservationists was joined and linked by like-minded tough and fearless activists like Dr. Fassil Gebeyehu (GC, ABN), Ms. Anne Maina (CEO, BIBA Kenya), Dr Peter Mokaya (CEO Organics Consumers Alliance), Dr Josephat Ngonyo (Animal Welfare of Kenya), Dr Daniel Maingi (Growth Partners); Dr David Amudavi (ED, Biovision Africa Trust), Mr Simon Mitambo (CEO SALT) among others.”

Kerya nodded, “But all these activities require finances. How did ABN fund these mega-activities and what support was given internationally?”

Murithi answered smiling, “The GAIA Foundation (UK) and GRAIN International (Spain) took the lead in providing seed funds to these emerging NGOs and CBOs in many African countries that conventional donors were not used to. These two organisations and their respective CEOs, Liz Hosken and Henk Hobbelink, even went further to link the networks and organisations with more donors from Europe. They advised, mentored, and helped us grow.”

“What has ABN achieved, Murithi?” asked Kerya.

What ABN has achieved

Murithi responded, "Oh, yes! I want to add to the notable achievements of ABN, as I previously mentioned. Over the two decades, ABN made remarkable achievements, such as pioneering an approach for reconnecting people with culture and nature for better care of the planet. In collaboration with Gaia Foundation, ABN successfully lobbied for the passing of Resolution ACHPR/Res.372 (LX) 2017 by the African Commission. ABN won the Global Lush Spring Prize in 2018 and received recognition of an Outstanding Prize in Agroecology in 2019. In 2020, ABN was granted an observer status at the African Union."

Elder Mathenge clapped his hands. "Long live all the great visionaries whose noble contribution continues the classic song of living the philosophy!"

Murithi laughed. "So, from where I sit, I look back with a lot of pride on what we were able to do after this conference. It is at this conference in the Valley of 1000 Hills that I was given an opportunity to Chair some of its sessions. It was the first time that I chaired a conference of such magnitude.

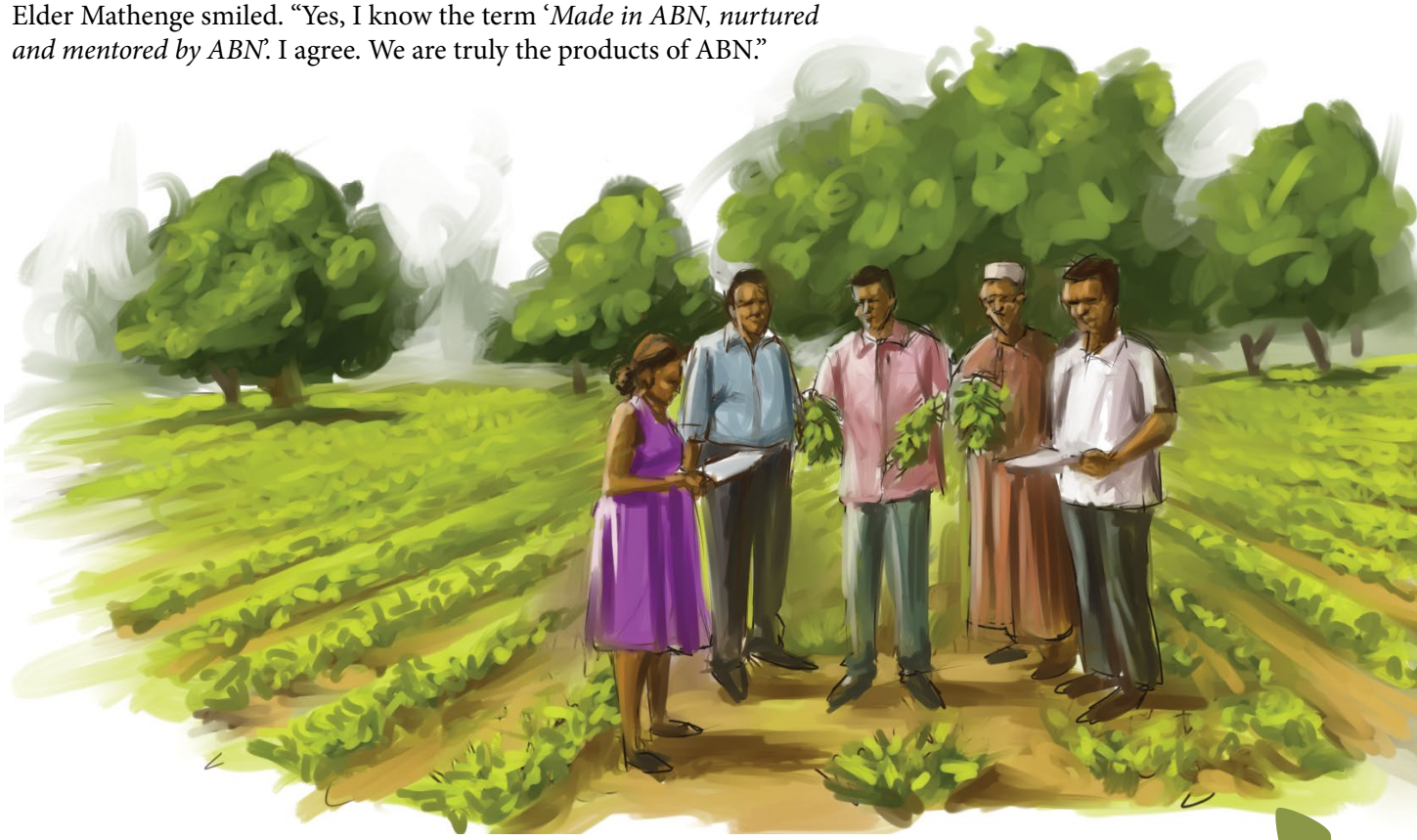
"If I made many mistakes, nobody criticised me but rather asked me helpful questions to think about how to improve. These leaders were real mentors and facilitators."

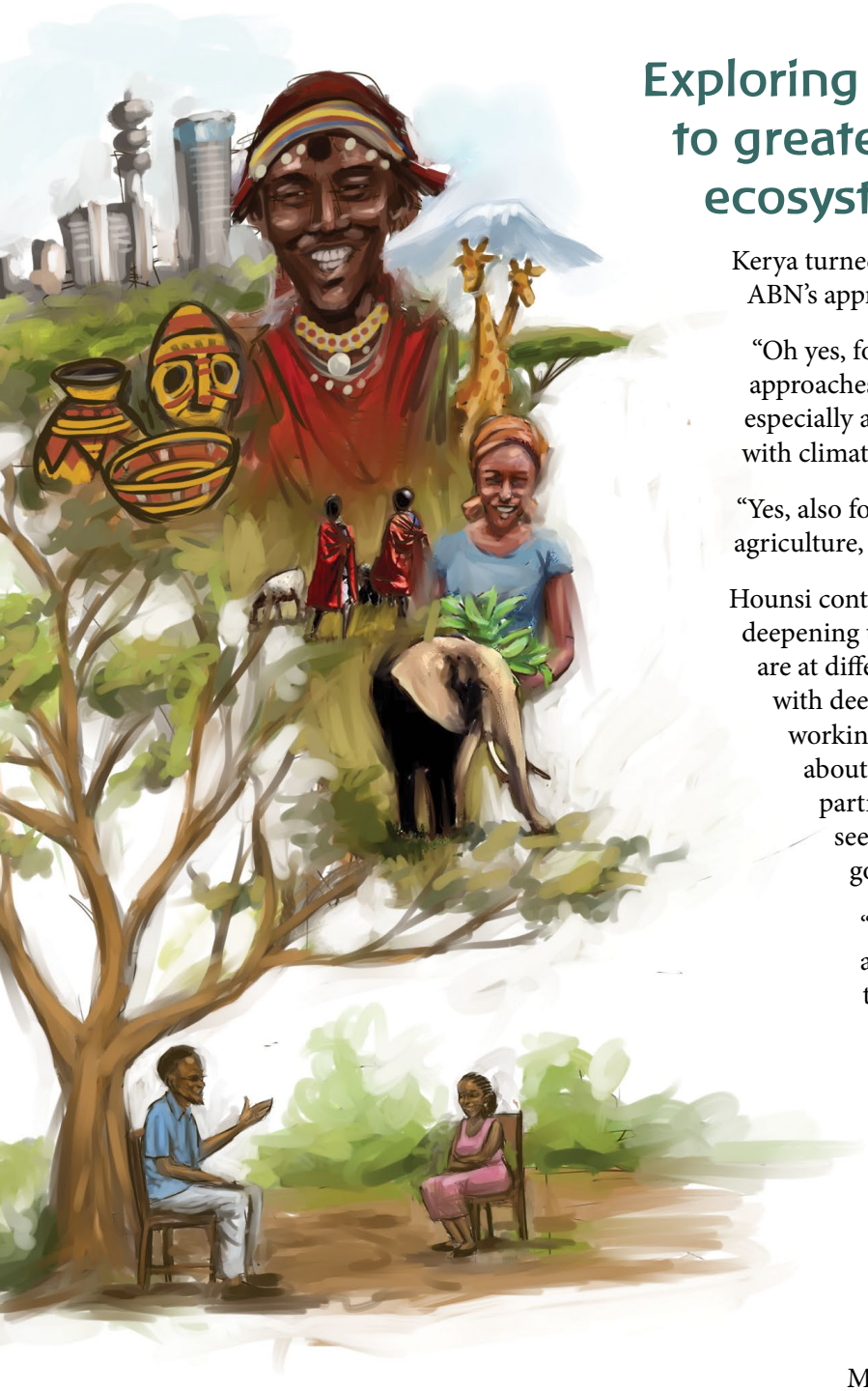
"I learnt some useful skills in handling debates like, *that is what he is telling us, what do others say?* or *thank you for your opinion, what is the opinion of others?* And to a very hard question which I could not answer, I learnt to ask; *Who can respond to her/him?* On the way forward I can ask: "*What can we do about it? What is our next step?"* or *What actions can we develop from this or who can summarise what we have agreed?*"

Xoab was impressed. "These are very useful questions indeed. I'm taking mental notes!"

Murithi laughed. "It's here I started learning the secret of sequencing participants in giving their reactions in a big meeting: *Let us hear from her, next from him, lastly from her.* If I made many mistakes, nobody criticised me but rather asked me helpful questions to think about how to improve. These leaders were real mentors and facilitators. Their prodding, encouragement, and their cheering on have made many of us the leaders we are today."

Elder Mathenge smiled. "Yes, I know the term '*Made in ABN, nurtured and mentored by ABN*'. I agree. We are truly the products of ABN."





Exploring pathways that lead to greater community and ecosystem resilience

Kerya turned to Hounsi. "Can you tell us more about ABN's approaches?"

"Oh yes, for sure!" Hounsi replied. "Some of the key approaches and methodologies that ABN partners use, especially around seed and food, are vital for dealing with climate change, which is hitting Africa hard."

"Yes, also for young people like me to re-engage with agriculture, nature and culture," Xoab added.

Hounsi continued. "The ABN partners have been deepening the work on seed and food systems, but they are at different levels of engagement. Those partners with deeper insights and knowledge have been working with women elders who have knowledge about seed diversity. There have been those partners who have been leading community seed work, others on community ecological governance and youth culture and biodiversity."

"This sounds great, I would love to hear more about what they've learnt," Kerya said, now turning to a new page in her notebook.

"Well, as we know, the big seed companies say that indigenous seeds are old-fashioned and unproductive", Hounsi explained. "This has led to serious erosion of seed diversity. It's important to have discussions and dialogues with the community, to reflect on what has happened and to remember the diversity they used to have."

Murithi agreed. "Through the dialogues, communities' knowledge and practices around seed and food diversity and customary governance system grows. They are able to look at their challenges from different perspectives. It helps them to realise they have the answers. This then gives them confidence."

Elder Mathenge got up slowly from the lunch table. "Friends, I need a little rest. Let us meet again tonight by the fire. There are so many more stories to tell, but my old bones are tired."

"It's important to have discussions and dialogues with the community, to reflect on what has happened and to remember the diversity they used to have."

Community dialogues in Rwanda

The friends were sitting at their favourite place, around the fire. Xoab and Kerya had made some hot chocolate for everyone and Elder Mathenge was drinking rooibos tea. Hounsi was ready to tell a story that Innocent Musore from Rwanda had told her about community dialogues.

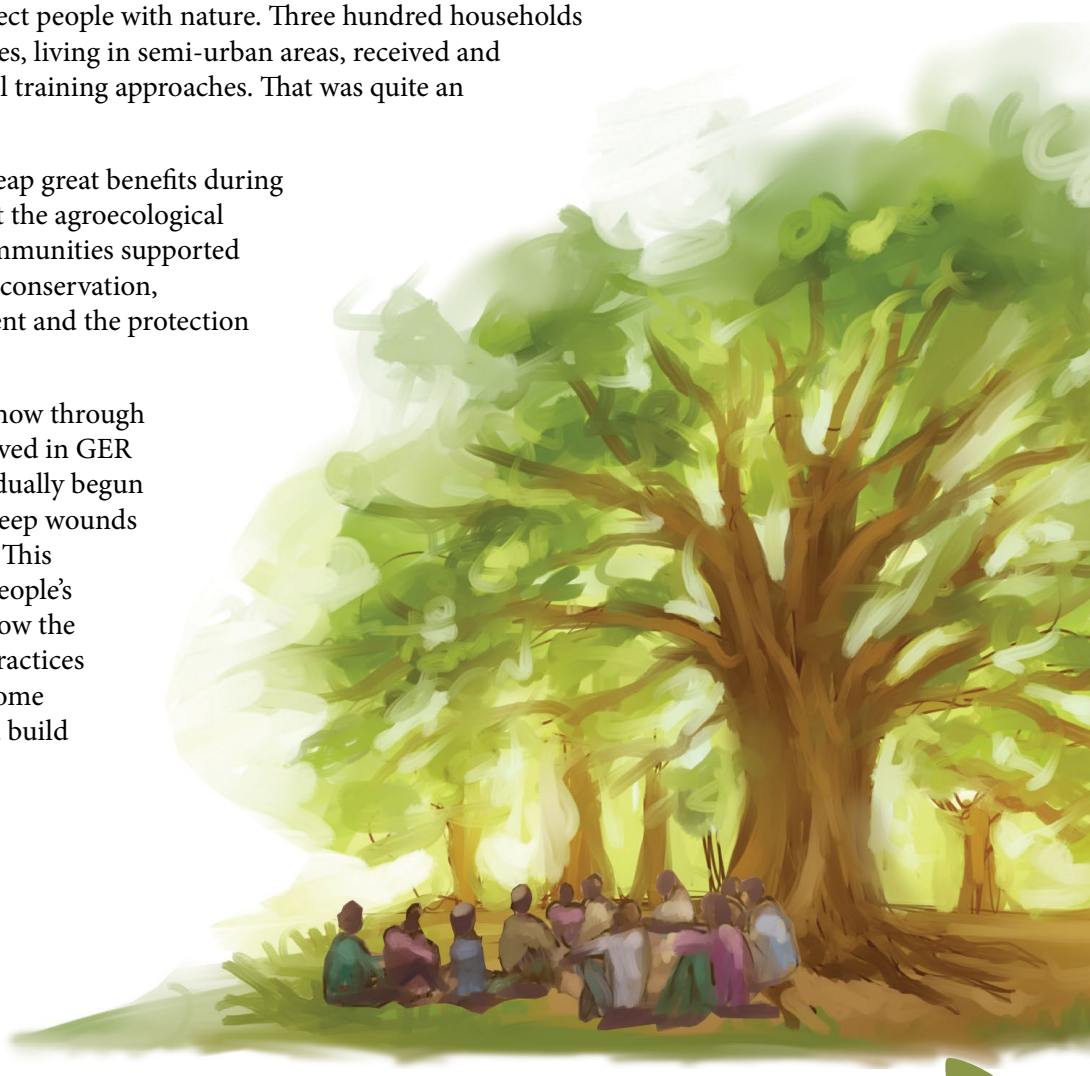
"When Innocent Musore told me about the work in Rwanda, he could not stop praising ABN's dialoguing approach. He could see that it was not only beneficial for the holistic health of the communities he worked with, but also the work with soil and the local environment. Families changed the way they farmed and grew vegetables and soon their nutrition improved. Reflecting on the past and remembering their stories helped them to rebuild what they had lost. Through the dialogues they began to listen more carefully, learning from each other's experiences. The dialogues contributed to peace-building and restoration of ties broken in the 1994 genocide.

"Innocent Musore described how through dialogues, communities involved in GER programs in Rwanda had gradually begun peace-building talks to heal deep wounds formed during the Genocide."

"Innocent Musore said that when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the dialogues had a great impact on agroecological approaches in Rwanda. Community dialogues which had been promoted by GER in 2017 and spread into its programs in Bugesera, Ruhango and Muhanga districts, had helped to build resilient communities. In collaboration with the ABN, GER promoted agroecology in Rwanda to improve food production, regenerate the soil fertility, recuperate the seed and connect people with nature. Three hundred households in fifty vulnerable communities, living in semi-urban areas, received and applied various agroecological training approaches. That was quite an achievement!

"Not only did these farmers reap great benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the agroecological practices passed on to the communities supported and sustained environmental conservation, strengthened food management and the protection of indigenous seed.

"Innocent Musore described how through dialogues, communities involved in GER programs in Rwanda had gradually begun peace-building talks to heal deep wounds formed during the Genocide. This program helped to improve people's relations. He also described how the agroecological training and practices helped communities to overcome hunger, revive their seeds and build relationships."



Training and Community Dialogues

By the Global Initiative for Environment and Reconciliation (GER Rwanda)

During training and dialogue events, communities often get together to describe how nature provides their food, medicine and cultural symbolism, and how their role is to conserve and uphold the connection to nature. After the training, they pledge to revive indigenous seeds and strengthen the seeds system through seed sharing and community seed banks.

Communities also learn how to organise and lead community dialogues to get more youth involved and to learn from the elders. They reflect on what has happened and remember and rebuild confidence in themselves by listening and learning from each other. This way they build unity and resilience.

The focus is on reviving the indigenous knowledge and practices which sustained the communities for generations before colonisation and all that followed. During the dialogues the community elders play a significant role, especially the women custodians of seed, who share their indigenous knowledge of seeds, herbs and foods.

Personal Testimonies of the GER Rwanda Training and Community Dialogues

Josiane, a genocide survivor working in Bugesera District

"When I did the GER program in Rwanda, I found that through the agroecological training and practices, the suspicion and mistrust which had been silently living amongst us, was broken down as we talked with each other about our struggles, nature and our dreams for the future.

During the training and dialogue events, our communities were able to describe how nature provided their food, medicine and cultural symbolism. They talked enthusiastically about their role as custodians of seeds and the actions they would take to conserve and uphold the connection to nature. After the training, they pledged to revive indigenous seeds and strengthen the seeds system through seed sharing and community seed banks.

Our communities learnt how to organise and lead community dialogues. The youth became more open to learning from the elders, and the elders listened to the youth as well. The intergenerational gap grew smaller. Some youth who focused on reviving indigenous seeds started agribusinesses."

Emmanuel a young man living in Bugesera District

"Rwandan society is rife with gender-based violence and family conflicts. I saw how the project improved relations at all levels. Men and women had to work together to develop and protect their families. Community interactions increased as families and local organisations found ways of sharing food with those who did not benefit directly from the project.

The project also contributed to the conservation of land and the protection of the environment. Many communities started to use organic manure and mulches of decomposable grass to grow their food. GER learnt that using simple and easily applicable farming practices helped small land to yield more. Communities benefited from this approach as it helped them fight against malnutrition and food problems, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic."

Elder Gakuru in Muhanga District

"I was one of the farmers trained by GER. Through the dialogues, seed and nutrition training we all came to remember and realise the indigenous and nutritional value of a traditional leaf vegetable, *Isogi*. *Isogi* seed is amongst the rarest and most expensive seed species in Rwanda. After the training, I decided to grow *Isogi*. We wanted to grow these plants so we could contribute to the availability and revival of this vegetable within our community, but also so that the young people could get to know it, eat it and value it for its nutritional, medicinal and cultural values. But finding the seeds was a hard task, so we, as elders, went on a mission to find the seeds. And we succeeded in finding the seeds and reviving the growing and eating of *Isogi*. The benefits of the GER project went further than solving food problems and malnutrition in families, it was also about redeeming our heritage."

Alice, a young mother living in Bugesera District

"I was pregnant when I was part of the GER project. They showed me how to start my home vegetable garden, they gave me seeds and compost. Over the months my garden grew and my older children and I could eat fresh vegetables from my garden. When I gave birth, I had no problems. My baby was born healthy and I could breastfeed her. I had eaten well during my pregnancy and I felt strong. I was able to work in my garden soon after. I think that the GER project saved my baby and my other children did not suffer any malnutrition because they had vegetables at every meal. I'm very grateful for this project!"

Amza, a genocide survivor in Ruhango District

"After I did the training held in Ruhango, I decided to grow sorghum. In the past sorghum provided food, natural beer and was used in cultural ceremonies. However the seed species was becoming rare and hard to find. I had 10 hectares of land to grow a crop. This would help to protect and spread the sorghum seed for people who needed to grow sorghum in my community and beyond. The day I planted the sorghum, my neighbours came to watch. Some of them were sceptical, but others shared their stories of how they had grown sorghum in the past. My efforts proved successful and I was able to share seeds and some of the harvest with my community."

Nature and experiential learning exchanges

> "These learning experiential exchanges play an important role in encouraging them to know they are not alone and that they can learn from each other as peers."

Elder Mathenge looked around at his friends. "Community dialogues remind me of the traditional gatherings that require us to keep fully connected to the whole process and to weave threads according to the emerging energies. What about nature/experiential learning exchanges?"

Hounsi smiled. "Yes, nature or experiential learning exchange is an important approach and a tool that ABN uses with partners to work with young people to connect them with culture and nature."

Elder Mathenge took another sip of rooibos tea. " My friends, '*rain does not fall on one roof alone*'. When our communities feel isolated, these learning experiential exchanges play an important role in encouraging them to know they are not alone and that they can learn from each other as peers."

Hounsi nodded in agreement as she thought about the many community exchange visits she had had in Benin. "Yes, I have seen this. The exchanges inspire them to work hard to revive their knowledge and practices. When they share their stories, others are inspired to join in the process."

Murithi agreed. "Within some of the countries where ABN partners are operating, some of the learning exchanges have become annual community festivals, to share lost seed biodiversity, indigenous knowledge, recipes, and dances and celebrate their tradition. It is an opportunity to affirm identity and inspire others to join the movement."

"Yes," smiled Elder Mathenge. "*The earth is a beehive. We all enter through the same door.*"

A PATH TO YOUTH LEADERSHIP

by Dr. Million Belay

Through various programs such as SEGNI by its partner MELCA Ethiopia, Wilderness Therapy through its partner USIKO, GRAINE FUTURE by GRABE-Benin, Nature Tropicale and others, ABN has been piloting ways of exposing people to nature through experiential learning which involves listening to inner feelings and voices coming from Nature.

The purpose of these programs has been to explore the relationships between culture, nature and self. I wrote a YCB Learning Guide, called 'A Path to Youth Leadership' in collaboration with ABN. It was launched online at the end of September 2019. The Guide followed the approach of a youth-nature experiential learning program called IMBEWU from South Africa and started a similar program in MELCA, Ethiopia which was called the SEGNI program.

The term SEGNI means 'seed' in the Oromifa language of Ethiopia, IMBEWU means the same in the Zulu language, South Africa. The guide brings out the story and development of the cultural biodiversity program in ISD and its link with the IMBEWU programme. The YCB Guide is designed to support the practitioners mentoring the youth to reclaim their identity, culture and indigenous knowledge.

Learning and Working with Nature

> "'Read books and study Nature. When the two don't agree, throw out the books."
>
> *William Albert Albrecht*

Just then John, their friend from Zimbabwe joined them. Murithi welcomed him into the group. "John, you're just in time."

John smiled. His glasses propped neatly on his nose, his wise eyes twinkling in the firelight. Out from under his cap, his greying hair showed his eldership, but his step was firm, yet light. John was happy to be part of this group. He knew them all well. He sat down next to Xoab, accepted some local tea, then he cleared his throat.

"John has agreed to come and speak to us about what it means to learn and work with Nature. This is key to ABN's whole philosophy."

"Thank you, Murithi. Friends, let me start with a quote by William Albert Albrecht, one of my great heroes. After a life of studying Nature and reading and writing many books, he said, '*Read books and study Nature. When the two don't agree, throw out the books*'. I really love this quote, because Albrecht was a distinguished professor at the University of Missouri at a time when the USA was leading the world in converting to what is now called industrial agriculture. His was one of the few voices that warned of the dangers of pursuing that route. He wrote of studying Nature when for most agriculturalists the purpose of farming was to dominate and exploit Nature.

"More than half a century later a number of people are starting to talk about 'nature-based' approaches. At one level this is very encouraging. At last, one might say! But what does this 'nature-based' actually mean? Does it mean throwing out the books when they don't agree with Nature? Or does it mean let's base our activities on something like what Nature does? There are several people who are concerned about this becoming a greenwashing approach that pays lip-service to the idea of working with Nature, to the idea that nature should be our ultimate teacher when it comes to how we use the land.

"Many large companies with dubious histories of being 'nature-based' are now using the term. I remember teaching Permaculture Design courses in the early 1990s and emphasising one of the main principles of Permaculture: "Work with not against Nature". More than 25 years later I have realised that if you want to do this there are two main things involved."

He paused and looked around.

“But the main thing is to keep trying different practices as a farmer, learning constantly from other farmers who are in a similar environment, learning from others elsewhere, adjusting, and linking with scientists where possible who can give guidance.”

Kerya was sitting on the edge of her seat. She asked impatiently , “Yes, John, what are the two main things?”

“First and foremost, you need to develop a deep reverence for Nature and its more than a billion-years history of adapting and creating the most remarkable living systems, more remarkable than we can ever hope to understand fully. This reverence needs time in Nature, feeling the way it works, honouring its beauty and diversity, learning to ‘read’ its rhythms and cycles, learning to empathise with Nature and to see the whole picture as much as possible. Watch how it revolves around processes. See all the connections and know that there are multitudes more.

“The second aspect is to learn how to work with Nature in everything you do on the land. Scientific diagnosis and monitoring can help in this endeavour. Traditional wisdom can help too. But the main thing is to keep trying different practices as a farmer, learning constantly from other farmers who are in a similar environment, learning from others elsewhere, adjusting, and linking with scientists where possible who can give guidance. It is my belief that there are very few people anywhere farming in harmony with Nature to the kind of potential that’s possible. There are many at the beginning of the transition to a fully flourishing Agroecology, with lots of learning to come.”

REVERENCE FOR NATURE

Reverence for nature is the recognition that the natural world is sacred and worthy of our deep respect. It’s the understanding that we are not separate from nature, but a part of it, and that our actions have consequences that affect the delicate balance of Nature’s ecosystems. It’s the appreciation of the beauty and complexity of nature, from the intricate patterns of a butterfly’s wings to the grandeur of a mountain range.

In these times when we seem to be losing our humanity we can look to Nature to reconnect to what is best in ourselves. Nature is selfless and generous, beautiful and forgiving. If we let ourselves be guided by Nature we can find a path back to our humanity.

Reverence for nature requires us to act with care and responsibility, to protect and preserve the environment for future generations. It’s a call to live in harmony with nature, to celebrate its gifts, and to honor its wisdom.

Elder Mathenge added. "In my view the work of ABN, and others with a similar outlook, is foundational to all our work in Agroecology because ABN's work is about reviving our deep reverence for Nature and linking this to culture because most African cultures had this reverence."

John nodded. "You are right, Elder Mathenge. Without this reverence we won't learn from Nature, we will end up paying lip-service to our understanding of Nature. This act of understanding needs to come from this place of love and reverence, knowing that it will be a life-long journey and even then we will only get so far. Out of this reverence and desire to learn will come practices that are truly in line with the principles and processes of Nature."

"Let's not forget teachers in classrooms, and practitioners in the field who are talking and teaching about reverence for Nature, showing young people the wonder of plants and animals and creating a love for the earth."

Xoab then added, "I know that the Esteve family in Western Kenya, the Götsch family in Brazil and the Browns in North Dakota, USA, are some of the people who are leading the way with an example of learning to work with Nature and farm very successfully and viably. They are leading lights, pointing to the full potential of Agroecology in practice. All these families base their farming practice on a humble yet in-depth and growing understanding of Nature. Like William Albrecht they read books and study Nature and when the two don't agree they throw out the books."

Kerya agreed and added, "Yes, Xoab and then there are also all the other people who we don't know, and who don't write books or even read books, but they are all doing the same, in their home gardens and small farms."

Hounsi smiled, her cheeks flushed from the warm fire. "Yes, and let's not forget teachers in classrooms, and practitioners in the field who are talking and teaching about reverence for Nature, showing young people the wonder of plants and animals and creating a love for the earth. There is now a true movement of people who care for the earth and grow their food with a reverent and deep understanding of Nature."

Everyone nodded in agreement, but it was time to go to bed. The fire had died down and everyone slowly made their way back to their rooms. Kerya looked up at the sky. The stars were twinkling brightly. There was so much about life and the universe she wanted to learn.

As she climbed into bed she thought about all the stories which had been shared around the fire. They gave her a deep sense of hope. Maybe the world could be a better place? These thoughts went around in her head as she finally fell asleep.

“It spoke about living together with other insects and plants to keep the balance of the earth going. Such a little creature had taught her so much.

A final mystica

The next morning Hounsi led the group in the mystica process. The air was fresh and clear and the sky a light blue. Already the sun was warm.

> “Dear friends, today we are going to allow Nature to speak to us. Let’s form groups of four and walk around looking closely at what is around you, on the ground, or the trees, in the sky. Then find something to focus on and imagine this ‘nature being’ connecting and speaking to you. Do this as a group for about ten minutes. Then, we will all share the messages from the ‘nature being’ in the larger group, but in the voice of the ‘being.’”

Kerya found herself in a group with Murithi, John and Rose from EarthLore. They chose an ant. Other groups chose a sunbird, a tree, soil and a leaf.

Kerya was amazed by what the ‘ant’ had to say. She realised that nature had so much to teach her. The ‘ant’ seemed wise. It told of the hard work it did every day, how it protected the nest and made sure that there was enough for the whole ant community. Kerya listened as the others in her group spoke as the ant. She wondered what she would say. When it was her turn, the ‘ant’ voice rose up inside her. It spoke about living in harmony with Nature, about carrying seeds down to the nest, of churning up the soil, helping it to breathe. It spoke about living together with other insects and plants to keep the balance of the earth going. Such a little creature had taught her so much.

Free writing

After the Mystica, the participants gathered together. Hounsi then took them through a process of free writing where they wrote a short story from the perspective of what they had found in nature to observe. They could use what had been shared in their groups, but now they were asked to link some of the ideas to the work they were doing. Kerya lifted her pen and started writing; “*I am an ant. I am ancient and wise...*”

FREE WRITING

Free writing is writing without stopping. It helps to access less conscious thoughts and feelings before they are filtered out or corrected by our conscious brain. When you free write, you use a prompt to start your writing and then you write without stopping. You can imagine that you have a magic pen that just keeps writing. When you let the pen write, you let the words flow as they would, one after the other. Try not to lift your pen off the page to pause or think or to correct your work. Don’t worry about spelling or grammar and if you get stuck, then just keeping repeating the last word that you wrote, until a new thought comes.

Reconnecting and re-rooting with Nature and Culture

After the morning session, participants went off in groups of three or four to share more of their work. Hounsi, Murithi, Elder Mathenge and Kerya went off together. They found a quiet spot under a tree.

"I still want to hear more about ABN's approaches. Yesterday we spoke about Community Dialogues and Nature/Experiential Learning Exchanges, what else is there?" Kerya asked.

Murithi leant forward. "I can best tell this through an interesting story told to me by John. Would you like that?"

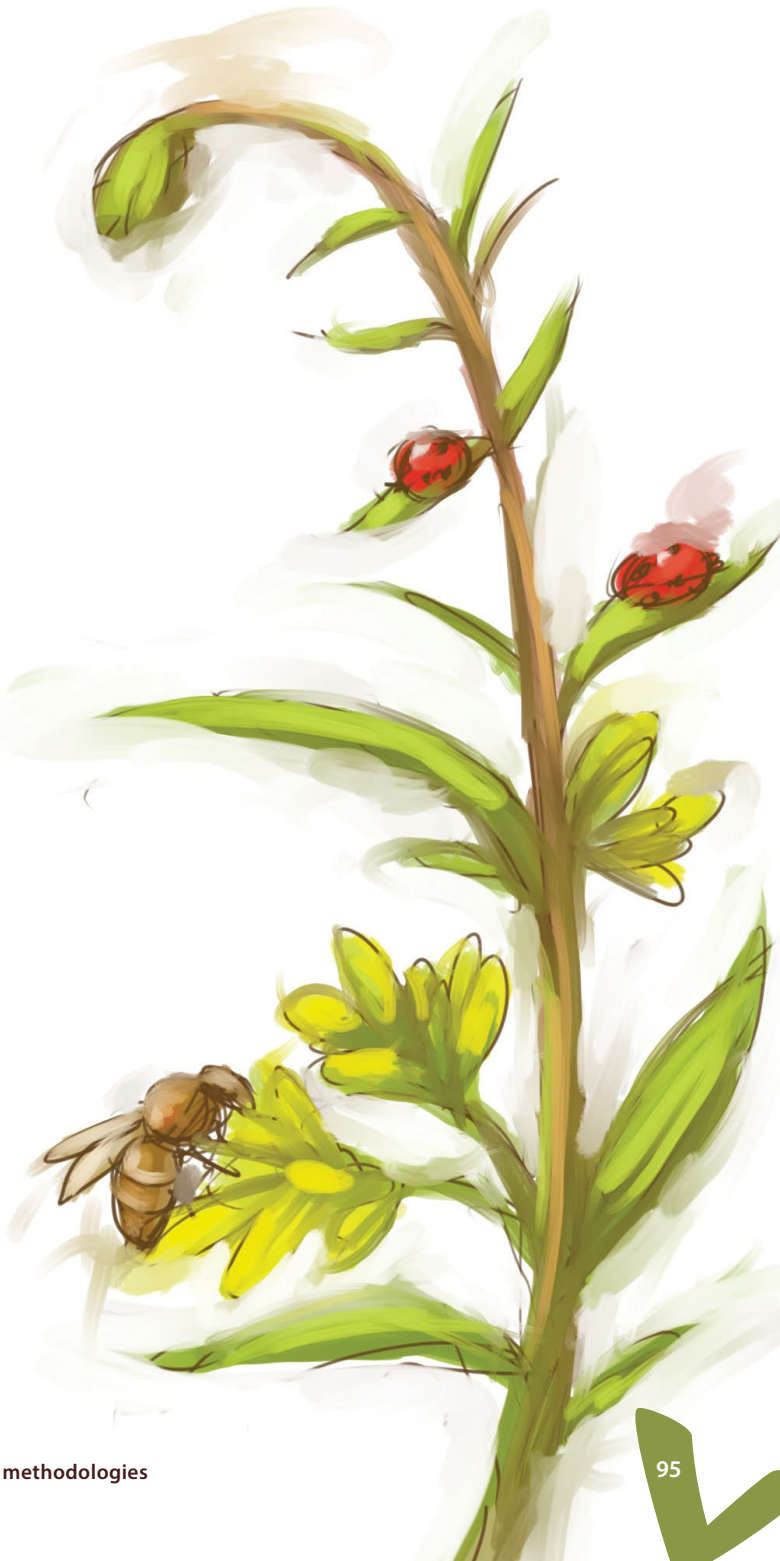
The others nodded enthusiastically.

"Well, this story happened during a meeting that John attended. While he was there, he met Nomore, a junior village head in Mhandarume, Chimanimani District, Zimbabwe. Nomore was part of a gathering at PORET, an agroecology centre for arid and semi-arid areas, a member of PELUM, and a founding member of AFSA.

"John said that he was struck by what the village head said during the opening address, so he wrote it down and he sent it to me the next day. Nomore said that, '*If we don't deepen our relationship with Nature and reconnect to our culture and history that are deeply embedded in this landscape, we will never find our way to living in harmony with Nature. And only when we live again in harmony with Nature will we have streams and rivers running again. Only then will we learn to restore health to our soils.*'"

"Nomore then took them on a walkabout around the community centre, describing how it had grown over the years. John walked alongside him, listening intently.

> "And only when we live again in harmony with Nature will we have streams and rivers running again. Only then will we learn to restore health to our soils."



> All this was made possible by a water-harvesting system that captured every drop of rain that may ran off the surface, whether off roofs, roads, paths or soil that was still baked hard.

"Nomore continued to say that many cultures have a saying along the lines of '*we need to go back to go forward*', that this was what agroecology in Africa was about – about reconnecting and re-rooting. He bent down and picked up a handful of soil and said quietly, '*Many people think that arid and semi-arid areas of southern Africa, northern Kenya and Uganda, parts of Ethiopia and South Sudan, and the Sahel are inherently poor, but this is far from the truth. These environments can have very rich biodiversity. For example, as the sun breaks the bird song echoes from every corner of this small community centre in the driest part of Zimbabwe. There are well over 70 species of trees on this 20-hectare piece of land. This is a piece of natural woodland that acts as a reminder of the abundance of Nature in our dry, hot regions.*'

"As they walked past the 17 traditional-design huts that house visitors, Nomore described how the community had inter-planted exotic fruit trees throughout. He explained how they grew vegetables in small, more open areas around the centre, the natural trees giving some shade to the vegetables. All this was made possible by a water-harvesting system that captured every drop of rain that may ran off the surface, whether off roofs, roads, paths or soil that was still baked hard. There were ponds and swales that doubled as spillways, all interlinked and woven across the sloping landscape; a design that captured all rain, including run-off from the hills above in heavy storms.

'*These people are not going backwards. They're heading forwards into the 21st century with agroecology providing the framework for their land-use practices. This is highly sophisticated, grassroots land management, based on restoring their relationship with Nature.*"

At this point Murithi paused. He could see that the others were listening intently, but he needed to shift on his chair. Then he continued.

"John said that Nomore took them to visit Mr. and Mrs. Mazungunye, a young couple who were putting into practice what PORET had helped them understand. They were re-rooting and reconnecting to their land in creative ways. What was most impressive about the walk around their small farm was their energy in explaining what they were doing."

Seed and Food Exchange visits and festivals

Hounsi clapped her hands at the end of the story. She was very impressed to hear the stories of great men and women who have passion for Nature. "I will pay you with a story," she told Murithi.

Hounsi smiled at Kerya. "With this I'll tell you about another one of ABN's approaches. You know this well, but since we are here in Zimbabwe, I will share some of my experiences with you about one of the Seed and Food Exchange visits and festivals I have attended.

"I remember the 7th Annual Good Food Festival that took place in the botanical garden of Zimbabwe's capital of Harare. The festival was themed; '*Promoting Consumption and Marketing of healthy oils from Zimbabwean Traditional seeds*'. It was so wonderful being there and meeting so many farmers. The first day started with farmer dialogues and discussing marketing opportunities. The second day was dedicated to seeds. This was a highlight for me as about 100 farmers working through 47 organisations exhibited their seeds from each of the ten provinces of Zimbabwe. It was truly a national event. There were EarthLore farmers from Bikita and even from CELUCT from the eastern district of Chimanimani. They were there despite the difficulties that Cyclone Idai had brought earlier in the year.

Mere Jah, director of ABN partner CEVASTE also took part in the event's activities. She looked fresh and regal in her white head-wrap and crisp white and green outfit, even though she had travelled from Benin in West Africa to participate. She was delighted to see so many women participating and talking about their seeds and their farming methods.

On the third day of the festival, the public joined in the festivities. This was such a festive day. There were twelve brightly decorated stalls forming a bustling food court, with deep fried sadza balls being served alongside Ethiopian fare and more *indigenous* Zimbabwean food. Fifty-three different stallholders filled the market section with solar dryers, livestock, research/university demonstrations, SMEs and eighteen farmer stalls. The organisers estimated that there were around 2,500 visitors to the festival.

“...but they are huge giant sized maps created with stones and sticks and anything that the community can find to represent different aspects of their community and landscape.”

I remember Mere Jah's words on the last day of the festival; *'Three days, three different days but everything was connected. The second day was really strong as a farmer's day. It was important for me to see the dimension.*

And today? You can see some of yesterday. The farmers were here, but with a different set up. This was like a society that puts the farmer at the centre. Everything that you see was connected with the soil, with seed, with energy, with environment, with Nature.'

This time Murithi and Kerya clapped. Then Kerya said, “Thank you Hounsi for telling us about that wonderful seed and food festival. Phew, but COVID-19 changed many things all over the world, including the food festivals. Remember in 2020, the Good Food Festival was 100% online to keep everyone safe. They had music, cooking demos, discussions and talks and stories from farmers and people around Zimbabwe, all online! The three-day virtual food festival was streamed on the festival Facebook page @TOFFZim. I participated from my home in Ethiopia. It was so amazing!

But in 2021, I was very lucky to be at the Seed and Food festival in Zimbabwe September 2021. Even though all the dialogues and discussions were held online on Zoom, it was strange, but it was also wonderful to see and meet people from all over the world. I really enjoyed the talk series '*Unsung heroes*' and '*From farm to fork*'. They were both so informative. One of my favourite events was the play, '*Fighting COVID-19 by eating well – the neglected remedy!*', it was so funny, but also so informative.

I watched so many of the festival videos. I learnt how to make superfood flapjacks, a protein roast, about seed banks, about different wild vegetables and then of course the very cool music. After all these virtual events, it was so great to have the in-person Seed and Food festival and to enjoy all the delicious food and music!”

Maps and calendars

Hounsi enjoyed listening to Kerya and seeing her enthusiasm. “Kerya, there is another tool that some partners use. It's about doing the various kinds of maps and calendars with communities.”

Kerya nodded. “I have a question though. Are they like the maps we used to draw and read in school?”

Hounsi smiled. “In a way they are, but they are huge giant sized maps created with stones and sticks and anything that the community can find to represent different aspects of their community and landscape.

“Some communities may draw them in the sand, while others may draw them on huge pieces of paper, taped together. Years back MELCA worked with the Telecho community to draw a map of their land 50 years ago, then one of the present, and one of how the land would be if they did nothing. They used layers of cardboard and paint to create a 3D map. The youth were very involved in cutting the cardboard and creating the 3D landscape.

"Their historical map showed how their past was rich in biodiversity and when they compared with the map of the present, they saw biodiversity degradation. From there they were inspired to draw the map of the future – which enabled them to think about how they could restore their land and food system."

Kerya was excited. She had heard so much about this project and had read some research work on it during her time at university. "Yes, I read much about the community Telecho Kabele, in Ethiopia. I remember a famous quote from that time; '*Before there was forest. Now there is bare land. In the first map there was a lot of water with the rivers flowing all year. Now the rivers are drying and we have a lot of gullies and erosion. I felt very sad doing the maps because we can see how our land was and how it is now. But I also felt happy because I know what we have to do now.*'"

A 3½ day mapping exercise in the Telecho community

Facilitated by MELCA Ethiopia, high in the hills about an hour from Addis in 2010.

The exercise was the first in the relationship between MELCA Ethiopia and the Telecho community. MELCA staff, Government officials and representatives from four other NGOs in Ethiopia stayed with families in Telecho for four nights. For some this was an unusual experience. The community representatives drew three large, colourful sketch maps over those three days: the first was of the situation 40-50 years ago.

The second illustrated the present situation and the third captured how they would like it to be in future. The community representatives also drew a timeline of their seed, illustrating how their diversity has slowly been eroding. And they drew an Eco-calendar to show their annual activity rhythms on the land, in relation to the climate and the cosmos.

In the evenings everyone shared stories, drank local drinks and danced traditional Oromo dances. Delegates spent time with their host families, learning about their lives and talking in particular about seed and its different uses.

Elder Mathenge had been quietly listening to the conversation. Now he sat upright. "I was at that event in 2010. It was a truly powerful experience. I was lucky to return to Telecho in early July 2012 with some other delegates. We wanted to hear what had happened since the exercise in 2010. On the way we visited the large map that the community had built in December 2010. The map represented an area of 24km by 28km. This process had therefore brought in the involvement of communities from a much wider area. On the walk up to our meeting place, we saw a number of examples of recent earthworks. There were gabions and small catch dams and long ditches wending their way along the contours.

"At the village where the mapping exercise had taken place in 2010, there were warm reunions before we sat down to share. The group of 20 or so who had gathered told us what they had done since 2010. Soon after the exercise they had formed the Telecho Environment Protection Association. Representatives of this association have been on three exchange visits, organised by MELCA. The first was to Tigray where they saw how farmers, working with the Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD), have reversed degrading land and improved their production.

"The second was to Harar in Oromia where they saw various soil and water conservation techniques, and the third was to a place east of Addis called Ejere, from where they brought back five farmers' varieties of wheat and barley."

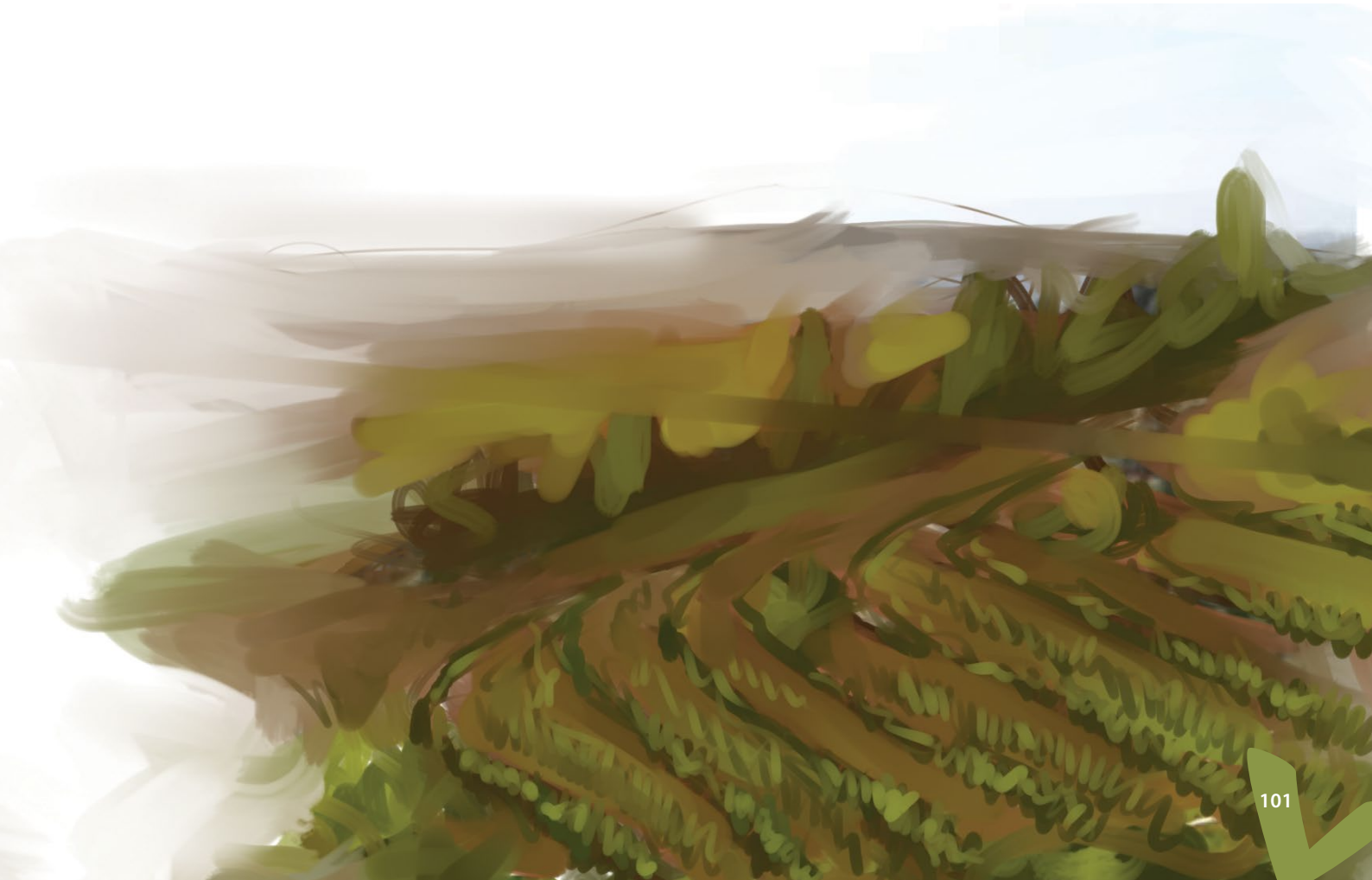
As Elder Mathenge paused, Hounsi continued. "I heard that they are now multiplying and spreading these to farmers in Telecho and so far they are very happy with what they have seen of these varieties. This is a community that has galvanised itself into action and is motivated. They are working hard to reverse the trends that were very apparent in 2010 – in particular the trends of land degradation and seed diversity loss. They have confidence, momentum and a sense of self-belief in what they are doing. Before 2010 they were aware of what was happening, of course, but to some extent they felt helpless. Now they don't."

> "I asked them what the turning point in all this was. They all said that it was when they drew the historical map and it became clear to them, both young and old, what they used to have."

Elder Mathenge agreed. "Yes, I asked them what the turning point in all this was. They all said that it was when they drew the historical map and it became clear to them, both young and old, what they used to have. This was the moment of deep insight that began a new chapter for the Telecho community. They paid further tribute to MELCA, who had facilitated the original mapping exercise, by describing how MELCA had not come to them with answers, like other agencies tend to do. 'They didn't come in and say 'we know'; they rather said to us 'you know'. And since then they have helped us see how we know!'"

Hounsi nodded her head. "Yes, what is happening in the Telecho community is a very good illustration of what ABN encourages. MELCA learnt and developed a way of working with communities that respects and celebrates the local knowledge and culture. It was this combination that has helped catalyse the substantial shift in the Telecho community that is now providing momentum for current actions. The community is not only looking at the past but is now actively working towards the future."

Elder Mathenge smiled. "Yes, tomorrow belongs to people who prepare for it today."



A MAP TO THE NEXT WORLD

By Joy Harjo

In the last days of the fourth world I wished to make a map for those who would climb through the hole in the sky.

My only tools were the desires of humans as they emerged from the killing fields, from the bedrooms and the kitchens.

For the soul is a wanderer with many hands and feet.

The map must be of sand and can't be read by ordinary light. It must carry fire to the next tribal town, for renewal of spirit.

In the legend are instructions on the language of the land, how it was we forgot to acknowledge the gift, as if we were not in it or of it.

Take note of the proliferation of supermarkets and malls, the altars of money. They best describe the detour from grace.

Keep track of the errors of our forgetfulness; the fog steals our children while we sleep.

Flowers of rage spring up in the depression. Monsters are born there of nuclear anger.

Trees of ashes wave good-bye to good-bye and the map appears to disappear.

We no longer know the names of the birds here, how to speak to them by their personal names.

Once we knew everything in this lush promise.

What I am telling you is real and is printed in a warning on the map. Our forgetfulness stalks us, walks the earth behind us, leaving a trail of paper diapers, needles, and wasted blood.

An imperfect map will have to do, little one.

The place of entry is the sea of your mother's blood, your father's small death as he longs to know himself in another.

There is no exit.

The map can be interpreted through the wall of the intestine—a spiral on the road of knowledge.

You will travel through the membrane of death, smell cooking from the encampment where our relatives make a feast of fresh deer meat and corn soup, in the Milky Way.

They have never left us; we abandoned them for science.

And when you take your next breath as we enter the fifth world there will be no X, no guidebook with words you can carry.

You will have to navigate by your mother's voice, and renew the song she is singing.

Fresh courage glimmers from planets.

And lights the map printed with the blood of history, a map you will have to know by your intention, by the language of suns.

When you emerge note the tracks of the monster slayers where they entered the cities of artificial light and killed what was killing us.

You will see red cliffs. They are the heart, containing the ladder.

A white deer will greet you when the last human climbs from the destruction.

Remember the hole of shame marking the act of abandoning our tribal grounds.

We were never perfect.

Yet, the journey we make together is perfect on this earth who was once a star and made the same mistakes as humans.

We might make them again, she said.

Crucial to finding the way is this: there is no beginning or end.

You must make your own map.

From How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems: 1975-2001 by Joy Harjo

CHAPTER FIVE

Communication and Advocacy

SPREADING THE WORD TO THE WORLD

"It is so good to meet again!" exclaimed Elder Mathenge as he greeted Hounsi, Murithi, Kerya and Xoab. It was their first virtual meeting and Elder Mathenge was pleased that his internet was finally working. He had been looking forward to reconnecting with his young friends again.

"And thank you for responding to my invitation so enthusiastically. This isn't the forest but it does not mean we cannot continue our conversations." After they had all exchanged greetings, Elder Mathenge started the conversation.

"We had agreed to talk some more about ABN's approach to advocacy and communication as a vital part of influencing change," Elder Mathenge commented. "I hear that ABN and its partners use unorthodox approaches to these. Who can tell us more about this?"

"I can say a few things," Hounsi responded. "Change happens at different levels and from different directions. Legislative and policy change at government level is crucial for wider systemic change to be secured. But for these changes to be lasting they must be rooted in community and movement initiative. Their leadership is vital because they are the ones who are closest to the issues and can be most trusted to defend the gains that have been made. If NGO partners win a policy change it is easy for the government to break its promises. But if strong, united communities win, the government will think twice before it does that!"

"So what is the role of ABN's NGO partners in communication and advocacy?" Xoab chipped in.

Murithi cleared his throat before answering. "The key practice for these partners is to accompany, support and encourage communities to make their voices heard on matters that concern them. NGOs have wider, often global, access to people and information and these must be shared with community and movement. For example, we encourage community members, preferably as a movement, to stand up to corporations who are destroying the biodiversity of communities across Africa by engaging the government to be accountable to citizens on these matters. So they must serve the community that put them there, rather than serving corporate profits.

Hounsi continued from Mutithi. "But it is not possible for individual communities or even individual countries to stand up alone to these threats in Africa. Nature and biodiversity flow from one community to the next and from one country to the next.

> Kwame Nkrumah said '*The independence of Ghana was meaningless unless wholly linked to the total liberation of the Africa continent*'.

"Rivers and forests do not need national borders. Threats to biodiversity, like pollution, GMOs and disrupted water flows caused by industrial agriculture and mining also cross borders. Becoming 'one with nature' means liberating our mindsets from colonial and neo-colonial ideas of separate and divided communities, tribes or even nations."

Elder Mathenge's eyes brightened. "Yes, so while we are rooted in communities we also have to embrace the idea of wider society, of a community of communities! This sounds like the proclamation at the dawn of Ghana's independence when Kwame Nkrumah said '*The independence of Ghana was meaningless unless wholly linked to the total liberation of the Africa continent*'. Murithi, please continue. Tell us more about ABN's approach to this work."

"We have a simple framework that captures our various approaches," Murithi said, "It is called the Scaling Framework with three layers. I will share it on the screen."

The Scaling Framework

- **Scaling deep:** by empowering communities through establishing capacity-building networks and initiatives to ensure that people develop the necessary depth of skills to do the work.
- **Scaling out:** through facilitating networking among communities, by promoting the use of mapping tools and stakeholder engagement (e.g. learning journeys and peer-to-peer exchanges) to accelerate the replication and adaptation of successful field-tested community-led solutions.
- **Scaling up:** through enabling communities and civil society organisations to effectively mobilise and join forces with partners and platforms to ensure their voices, and their needs, are recognised and reflected in decision-making. Securing an appropriate flow of resources to support these communities to be effective stewards of the resources on which they depend.

"Essentially, **Scaling Deep** is about member communities and organisations becoming empowered in themselves, recognising, deepening and spreading their own skills and resourcefulness amongst themselves and adding to those where necessary. **Scaling Out** is connecting out or networking with other communities to learn together and to collaborate around areas of common interest. **Scaling Up** is about bringing communities, members and partners together to join forces to advocate for policies and resources."

Hounsi picked up the thread. "Of course, they are not separate processes. Quite often in Scaling Out, communities meet and share key experiences and skills, empowering each other, which is Scaling Deep and in the process the trust and solidarity are built that enables upward advocacy, or Scaling Up, to be effective."

"This is a simple but elegant framework," Murithi declared. "Perhaps you can share some examples."

The Caravan advocacy approach in West African region

Hounsi continued, "Certainly, Murithi. Here's a story of how some ABN partners, CEVASTE and GRABE-Benin, have joined up over the past few years to go on a transnational Caravan every second year across West Africa under the auspices of the Global Convergence of Struggles for Land and Water."

"I heard about that Caravan! Were there not thousands of people in buses and cars on a journey through West Africa?" asked Xoab.

"Quite correct, Xoab," answered Hounsi, "It was composed of more than 300 peasant organisations, breeders, pastoralists, fishermen, foresters and organisations representing victims of land and water grabbing and corporate exploitation, both in rural, peri-urban and urban areas among others."

> "It was a momentous occasion but joyous at the same time because we were angry at the land-grabbing and destruction but also celebrating our unity and vision of the future."

"Hounsi, please tell us how the Caravan unfolded. Were you there?" Kerya asked.

"I was there!" smiled Hounsi. "It was a momentous occasion but joyous at the same time because we were angry at the land-grabbing and destruction but also celebrating our unity and vision of the future. As you know, family farmers, foresters, indigenous breeders, pastoralists and fisherfolk across Africa are at the receiving end of the threats to biodiversity and cultural degradation. So, what better way to defend the land and biodiversity than to bring all of these people's leaders and organisations together into a united march across the continent to put forward their demands and to inspire Africans with a different vision of the future?"

"I love the idea of a caravan!" said Kerya clapping with excitement, "I remember our teacher at high school telling us about the ancient trade caravans of West and North Africa, from Ghana and Mali to Morocco, from Senegal and Timbuktu to Tunisia, from Libya to Nigeria! Such a rich history of how communities were connected to each other in the past through peaceful trade."

"Yes, and this unconventional advocacy is also about peacefully connecting communities across West Africa. We use it to amplify the voices and the struggles of communities to defend their biodiversity, a voice that governments ought to hear, see and act on, rather than serve the interests of profiteering global corporations. The Caravan strengthens the solidarity among all threatened communities.

"The Caravan raises awareness and mobilises the grassroots communities and decision-makers in the sub-region to advocate for beneficial legislation for the people. It is organised every two years across different countries of West Africa, bringing awareness to communities around a common agenda and vision, by asking important questions and recommending solutions."

How is the Caravan organised?

Murithi, had been quietly listening, in a reflective mood. "Mmmm" he started, wondering out loud, "I think this must be complex to organise. Tell us, how is it done, Hounsi?"

"A theme is agreed upon to guide and focus the whole process and keep the advocacy focused. Also, it helps maintain focus on local dynamics relevant to communities' customary rights in the region. For 2016, the theme was *Right to Land and Water: A common struggle!*"

"In 2021 the theme was *Rights to land, water and peasant agroecology: a common struggle*. For the Caravan to be relevant, the inter-country advocacy must focus on themes and struggles typical to communities and movements across several countries in the region."

"Who participates?" Elder Mathenge asks.

Hounsi continued. "As a trans-national advocacy event, the Caravan reaches several countries. For instance, the first Caravan brought together more than 200 actors. It crossed three countries, Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal, with 11 stopovers in 17 days. Nearly 10,000 people joined with almost 300 organisations participating. The climax was in Senegal, handing over a document with the peasant farmers' challenges and suggested solutions. They handed over this document to the then President of ECOWAS and the President of the Republic of Senegal.

"The second edition of the Caravan in 2018 brought together 300 participants, social movements and civil society, and NGOs within and beyond West Africa, such as Algeria, Cameroon, the DRC, Madagascar, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, and the USA, and reached approximately 15,000 people. It crossed five countries, had 17 stopovers in 21 days and recorded launch activities in Benin, Burkina, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal. There was active involvement of authorities and communities from the countries involved.

"In the last edition in 2021, the Caravan departed from the Gambia, heading to Sierra Leone, crossing Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, and Guinea to hand in a petition."

"On the way they touch many communities facing the same problems, inviting them to join, helping them to see how all of our destinies are connected and bringing hope and inspiration.

Uniting communities and waking up politicians

"What was achieved from these Caravans, Hounsi?" asked Xoab.

"Many things, Xoab. Caravans connect people in all kinds of ways. Farmers, fishers, elders, youth and civil society workers from different communities and countries meet each other face-to-face and this builds warmth and trust between them. As they journey together, they learn from each other and about each other. During the caravan, participants share their stories and struggles and interact with government officials, and traditional and religious leaders to make their voices heard.

"It's a beautiful process that builds bridges of political and human solidarity, vital for taking struggles forward, Africa-wide. On the way they touch many communities facing the same problems, inviting them to join, helping them to see how all of our destinies are connected and bringing hope and inspiration. And of course, when you mobilise large groups of people and there is big publicity then the politicians start to wake up and there are opportunities to influence them and to strengthen advocacy and stimulate policy changes that benefit people and help protect our natural heritage and biodiversity."

"I am going to join the next one!" Xoab declared.

Communication as an umbilical cord of ABN philosophy

"You mentioned that people share stories on the Caravan, much like we have been sharing stories with each other. For me stories of things like origin, nature and food are woven like a fabric that that a community wears as an expression of their unique identity and culture. It unites them and distinguishes them from others, while underneath they are the same." Murithi stated.

"Quite poetic, brother Murithi!" responded Hounsi. "But what about communication? Elder Mathenge, how did communities pass on messages to each other, before phones, radio and newspapers?"

Elder Mathenge spoke up, "Communities have always had their unique, local ways for communicating among themselves. Like beating drums, blowing a horn, starting a fire to have smoke in the air, with the wind blowing from a certain direction. But of course, the richest way to communicate is by voice, sending messengers or delegations, and having meetings and dialogues. It used to be much slower before cell phones but, in some ways, our communication was deeper. It is still happening like this in many places."

"It seems like the African continent has similar ways of doing things," Hounsi mused. "In Benin, my grandparents passed on messages from community to community, in a relay system. They had a communal way of doing things."

Xoab joined the conversation. "In South Africa too, elders say the same thing. They have Legotla, which are dialogues where people come from far to meet for days to discuss and solve issues."

Using Free Prior Informed Consent to protect their local indigenous knowledge

Murithi came in, "Documentation of local, indigenous knowledge is also part of communication. ABN's philosophy respects the rights of the communities. All documentation of community knowledge adheres to the agreement of Free Prior Informed Consent forms as guided by the Convention of Biological of documenting anything from such a community. The leader of the community signs such consent forms on behalf of the community after everyone is clear what it's all about.

"Partners also educate communities on how to protect themselves from any person or organisations, especially researchers and corporations looking for profits, who may want to publish or make public the sacred aspects of the communities without permission. Or to commercialise a local medicinal plant. The Free Prior Informed Consent protects the indigenous knowledge from piracy too," Murithi explained.

> *If there is no enemy within, the enemy outside can do us no harm.* ABN works with communities to revive their governance structures, Sacred Natural Sites, and other aspects of traditional and indigenous knowledge.

"Can you tell us more about how this happens, please?" Elder Mathenge asked Murithi.

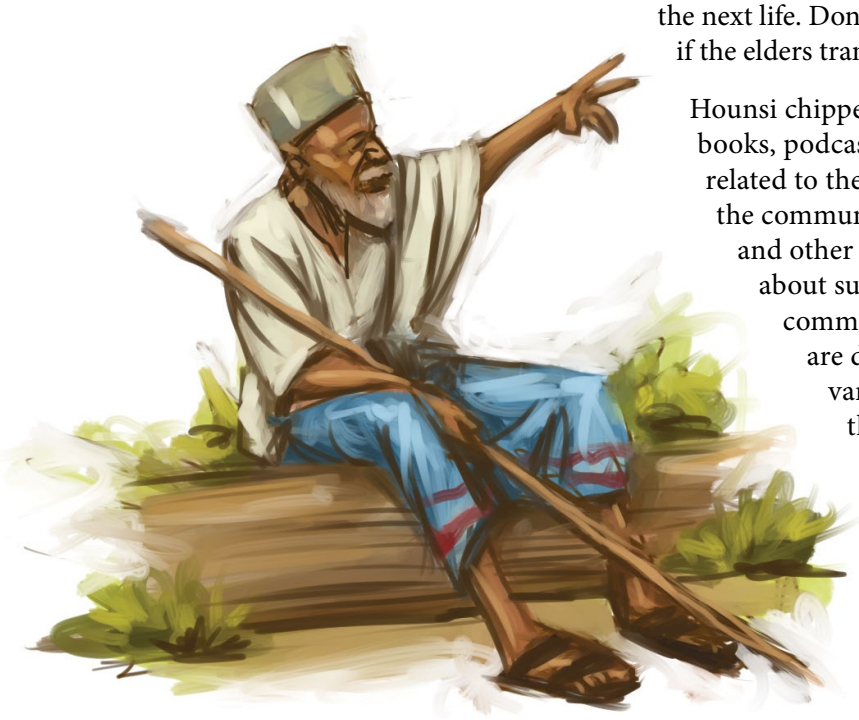
Murithi replied, quoting an African proverb, "*If there is no enemy within, the enemy outside can do us no harm.*" ABN works with communities to revive their governance structures, Sacred Natural Sites, and other aspects of traditional and indigenous knowledge.

"Communities are first empowered to ensure they understand the intention of the documenter to document their indigenous knowledge. Then the next step is signing the Free Prior Informed Consent after the communities are clear about the purpose and the intent of the documentation. This approach allows the communities to guard their traditions, their Sacred Natural Sites and anything they place in high value from the exploitation by people with different interests to those of the communities."

Documenting living, community process

Elder Mathenge wondered aloud, "I hear you document local indigenous knowledge, which is the living knowledge. But once it is documented, is it still living knowledge? Don't you think that life in the indigenous communities is slowly dying with continued documentation?"

Murithi nodded, "You have a point, Elder Mathenge because we must be sure that knowledge stays up-to-date and relevant. But when knowledge is documented, it becomes information that the younger generations read and appreciate. Over time, elders, who are the custodians of such knowledge, transition to join their ancestors into the next life. Don't you think generations can be disconnected if the elders transition with this undocumented knowledge?"



Hounsi chipped in, "Documentaries, newsletters, comic books, podcasts of elders speaking on various topics related to the ABN work and other documentation in the communities stir up curiosity among the youth and other younger generations to want to know more about such practices. Then, they go out into the communities to look for the elders whose words are documented, to help them understand the various contexts and put human emotions into the documented work."

"Yes, that's right, Hounsi, well put," said Murithi. "For the elders who have transitioned, their documented work helps other elders to pass on their wisdom to the community members with a curious mind. They educate youths and other people on such indigenous knowledge. Young people interact with elders who help put meaning to the documented work through sessions held between the youth and the elders. This approach rekindles life in the documented indigenous knowledge. But your point about living knowledge must not be forgotten."

Elder Mathenge nodded in agreement with Murithi's reflections.

Ecological maps and seasonal calendars – Bridging different knowledge systems

> “When they work in this creative way, their minds are triggered to remember what it was in the past. The pictures come back to them, first slowly and then like a flood. It is quite magical to witness.”

Murithi said, “I’d like to tell you how various ABN partners have worked together. For example, the Institute of Culture and Ecology (ICE) in Kenya, Movement for Ecological Learning And Community Action (MELCA) in Ethiopia, and Nature Tropicale in Benin have found ways to bridge different knowledge systems together to bring synergy in their work.

“They work with communities to create ecological maps and seasonal calendars to show the location of their Sacred Natural Sites, agricultural farming areas and grazing. Through active participation and dialogues, the communities are able to illustrate locations where plants, animals and even clouds were. When they work in this creative way, their minds are triggered to remember what it was in the past. The pictures come back to them, first slowly and then like a flood. It is quite magical to witness.

“The Gaia Foundation offered an in-depth training to a few partners and the ABN secretariat who were ready to take up the deep process of Earth Jurisprudence to facilitate the development of the ecological maps and calendars unique to their context.

“I know that many of the elders often felt disempowered and lacked confidence in their own knowledge. Modern education did not acknowledge or value their wisdom. However, after interactions with the ABN, through the partners, these elders gained confidence in their indigenous and traditional knowledge. Hence, they protect their Sacred Natural Sites and the community ecosystems services. Together with other community members, they prevented corporations and big business from interfering with such ecosystems. The pitching of telecommunication masts in such areas is a good example.”

“This is interesting!” Kerya said. “So, how else is communication handled between the ABN and the communities?”

Xoab responded, “Community dialogues, where the elders and youths interact, help elders to pass on the knowledge to the youths through the art of telling stories. With stories, all the senses are enlivened.”

Murithi added, “ABN’s ‘Futures thinking’ is also a powerful tool to better understand and deal with an uncertain future. It includes visioning, building scenarios and storytelling, among other things. It takes communities to their past, helps them to appreciate their present and reimagine their future - but it’s not a linear approach.”

The use of digital platforms for peer communication

"How has communication helped communities since the emergence of COVID-19, Murithi?" Elder Mathenge inquired.

"Well, ABN and partners used various digital platforms like Zoom, Facebook and Whatsapp to talk to communities about the COVID-19 pandemic. Partners used digital platforms like YouTube to share information with the communities about the pandemic, mitigation measures, government advisories. They also shared information and resources on how to find the best foods to eat to boost their immune systems, like AFSA's Barefoot Guide *Surviving COVID-19*, which can be accessed freely online. Many communities used digital platforms to teach each other and catch up on their joint activities because they could not meet face-to-face. Elders from such communities appreciated it."

Hounsi continued, "The Regional Advisory Information and Network Systems (RAINS) in Ghana used radio platforms to get discussions going on what food could strengthen the immune system. They also described how communities recorded their activities on maps and calendars. These radio broadcasts ignited discussions locally, nationally and even globally. Now even the outside world could see what these communities were doing during the COVID-19 lockdowns."

Murithi nodded. "Yes, I remember the videos that the Kivaa community shared of their activities within the Kivaa hill in Kenya. The Borusellasie community in Ethiopia also shared a video on community dialogues."

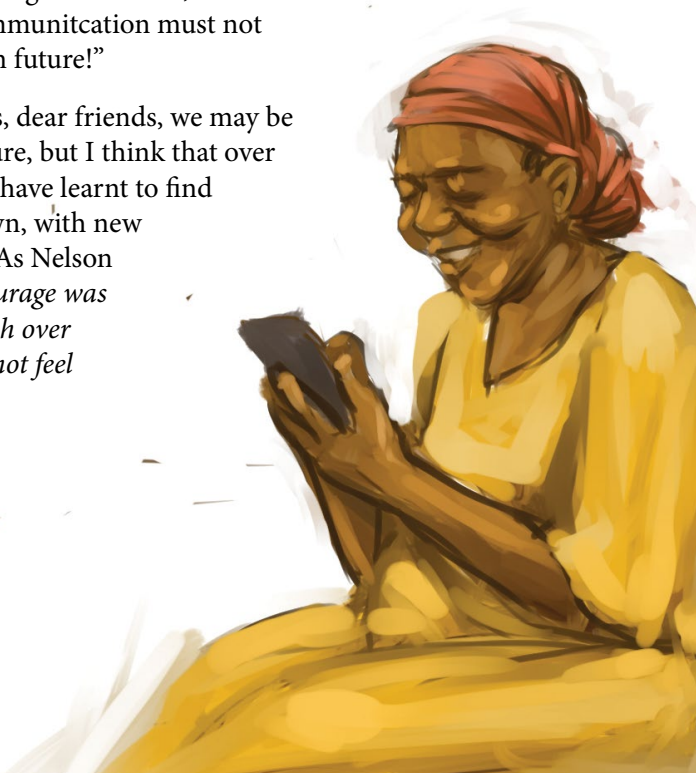
Hounsi agreed. "ABN's philosophy has communities' interests at the heart. We must continue to find good ways of communicating with each other and sharing information. This is the way that we will all grow and strengthen our communities.

"And as we have experienced there is no substitute for meeting face-to-face, and in nature. Virtual communitcation must not become the norm in future!"

"And as we have experienced there is no substitute for meeting face-to-face, and in nature. Virtual communitcation must not become the norm in future!"

Elder Mathenge, "Yes, dear friends, we may be anxious about the future, but I think that over the past few months we have learnt to find courage to face the unknown, with new ways of connecting with each other. As Nelson Mandela once said; *'I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.'*

"On that note, let's say goodbye to each other. We will continue our conversations when we next meet face-to-face."



The Journey Continues… from the past, through the present and into the future

A final word from each host

Elder Mathenge

I speak for the generations that have come before me. We once lived as one with nature until we were thrown out and then forgot so much of our sacred knowledge. We were told to become clever, to adopt ways that were alien to our culture and to our souls. We became unwise. Now, our work is to remember. To remember what was once possible and can be possible again and to pass on that vision of the memory to the next generation. We are reconnecting to nature, and so reconnecting to our true selves and to each other.

Xoab

I speak for the youth and the generations to come. We grew up in hope but those hopes seemed dashed as we witnessed our future unravelling. But now we have experienced the power of nature, the power of stories and the wisdom of our elders and can see that there is possibility and hope if we choose to act together.

Kerya

I speak with you Xoab and also for young women who must claim their equal role and unlock their extraordinary power for good and for change. We carry the seed for the future and our work is to share that seed with our peers, to connect them with elders and help them to reignite hope and life within them and create a movement to claim a bright future.

Murithi

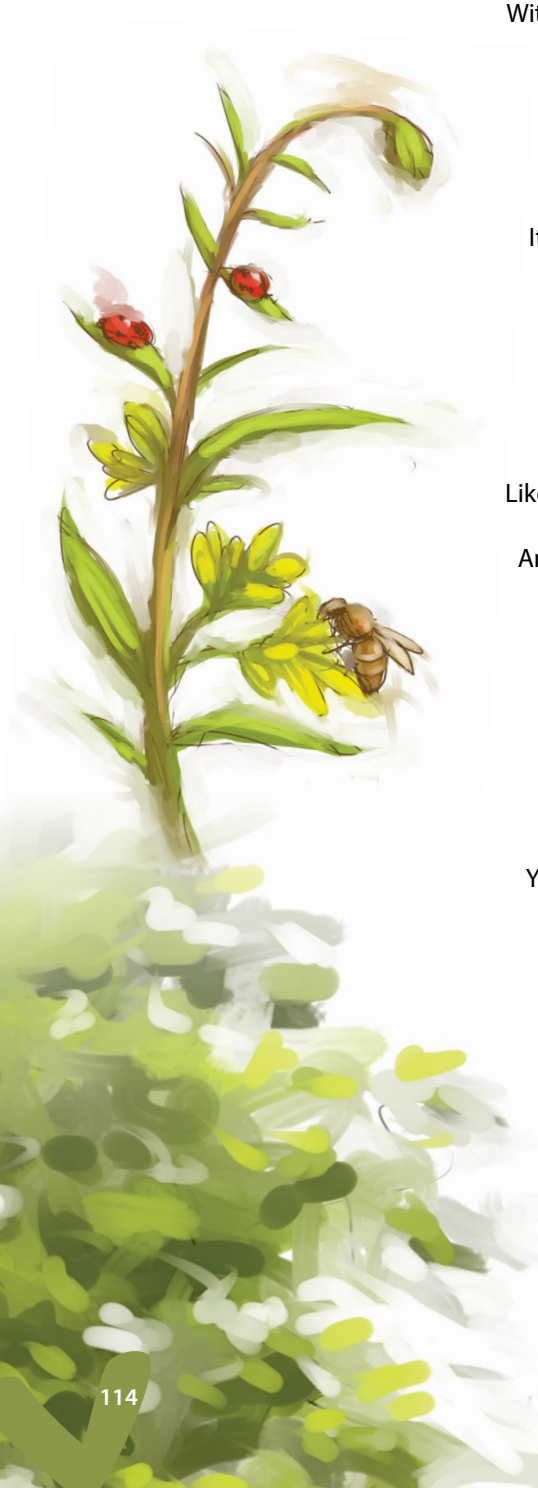
I speak for the adults who understand what is happening in the world and carry the burden of that responsibility. I speak for the movements of farmers and civil society workers who are embracing each other and creating solutions. Our work is to speak the truth but to offer possibilities for creating a new truth, a new story to carry us into the future.

Hounsi

I speak for nature, that lives inside of me and that I experience in the forests, the wetlands and rich grasslands of Africa. I will survive whatever hurt humans inflict on me, but I can embrace humanity if they choose to recognise their true nature and accept the sacred and eternal invitation to return home.

WE CAN PLANT A SEED

By Nnimmo Bassey, Nigeria



Way back yesterday
In the glow of nighttime fires
We sat around steamy bowls
Carving up mounds of foo foo
Then dipping our hands in hot soups
Mouths long open awaited the feast
With every bite our tongues knew the source
Jolly jolly bellies, happy happy hearts
We danced our way through the night
These days we line up at the shops
Awaiting junk foods and maybe small chops
Bright coloured walls and blinding lights
We take selfies as we down deadly sodas
With loud music, we munch and munch but hear no
crunch from our plastic foods

We can plant a seed
And not eat poison

These days we go to the farm
It could also be the harvest is next to our homes
Straight bananas
Squared up squash
Cassava tubers that don't ferment
Genetic engineers target our staple crops
Especially ones grown by women
With mythic tales they sell lies
Crops kill pests and innocent species
Like their ancestors sold beads, mirrors and whiskies
And we are to be excited eating pesticides
And wash down with water packed in plastics and
served like drugs

We can plant a seed
And not eat poison

We live in the city
Streets blocked with cars
Every piece of land thoroughly cementified
The Earth is denied rain from the sky
You want some water, toxic drains send a deluge
We want some corn?
Go to the shop
You want vegetables?
Go to the shop
"This food is safe"
That's what they say
Made by giant conglomerates
On the back of imperial neocolonial agencies
But they cannot even say what they sell
All they yell
Is "shut up and eat
"A hungry man has no choice"

Genetically engineered
Isolated from weeds with glyphosate

We can plant a seed
And not eat poison

All around us seeds are sprouting
Along the rivers and streams through our cities
Every city block long abandoned
Day and night we sow the seeds
Many don't ask where magical fresh foods emerge
We labour all day to bring yet nothing to eat
Officials feed fat on our labours
Then loosen their belts
Call the bulldozers
Pull down our dreams
Level our fields
Destroy our homes
"This urban space isn't for rats
Go back to the village unwanted migrants
Our foods are imported, packaged, some even come as aid"

We can plant a seed
And not eat poison

The food we eat must not eat us
Mother Earth warns: we are all her children
The plants, the birds, the beasts, the worms, the bees, the butterflies
In the soil and above the soil
On the seas and beneath the seas
Trillions of our relatives call to us
"Globalise the struggle
Globalise hope!"
Globalise the people
Not transnational corporations
Resilience
Solidarity
Hope
Power
Life
are all in the seed
And if we care we can touch the soil
We can plant a seed
We can water a plant
We can nurture life
We can raise a goat
We can connect to the soil
And allow Mother Earth to feed us all

We can plant a seed
And not eat poison

In memory of Mr. COUDJOU Cyrille

1963 to 2022 - Dignitary of the Sacred Forest

You joined the ancestors at 59 years old. Throughout your life, you accepted and embraced the task of serving others. Your community trusted and believed in you and made you the village chief of Katé, where you spent your active life working to protect nature and uplift the lives and situations of those around you. GRABE-Benin has known you for more than ten years. You spared no effort to mobilise and encourage your community to support us so that we could work together to save biodiversity and humanity.

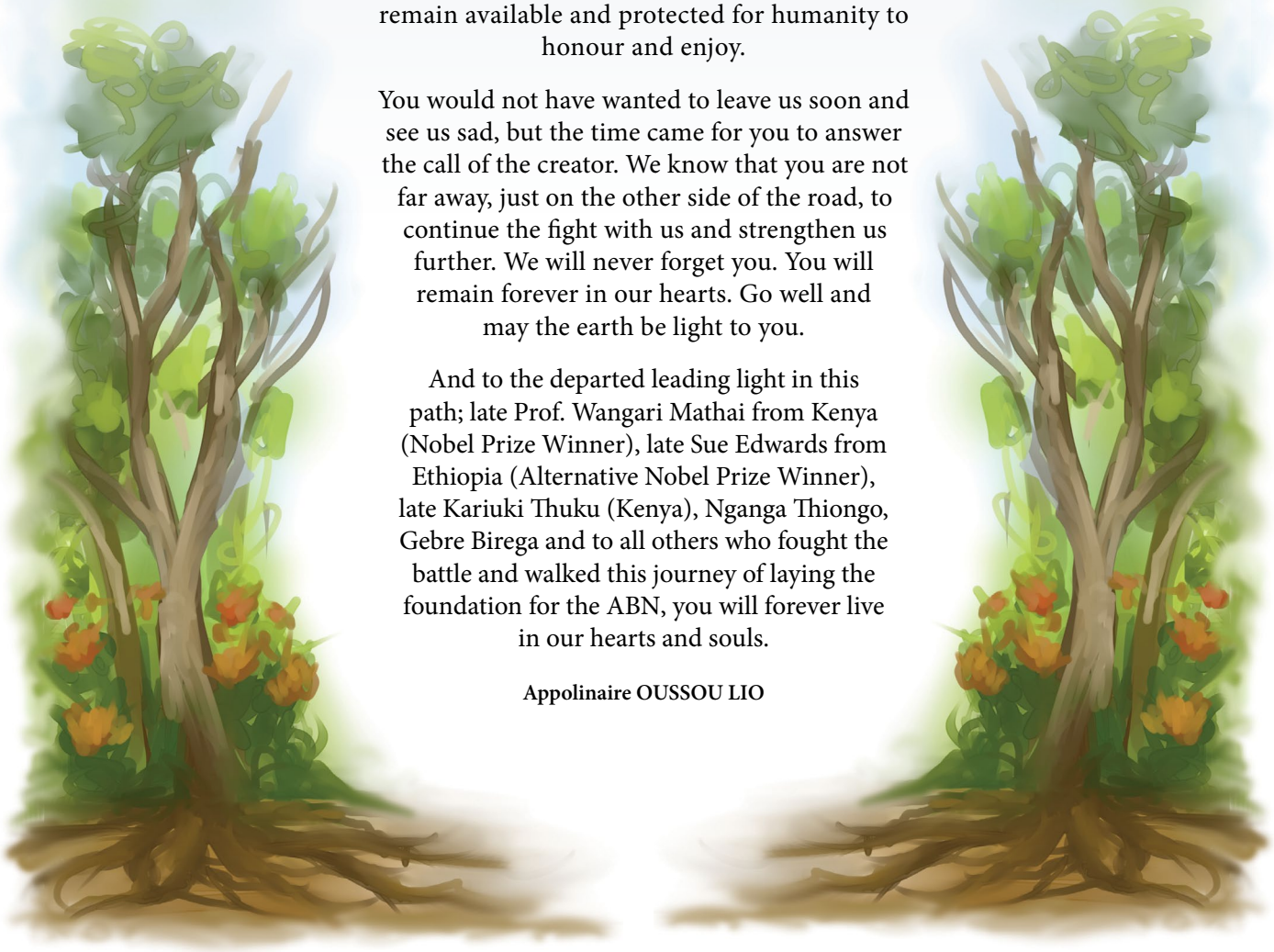
Through your generative leadership, your dynamic ability to mobilise and organise, we managed to obtain official recognition for the sacred forest of Kotan-Ségbé. It is now integrated into the heritage of the Avrankou City Council and we have started the process of integration into the system of protected areas.

Thanks to you and the community, we learnt so many things. But more than anything, through your work, we made the sacred forest of Kotan-Ségbé safe from all human threats. It is now a heritage that will remain available and protected for humanity to honour and enjoy.

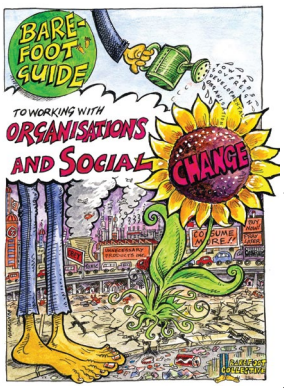
You would not have wanted to leave us soon and see us sad, but the time came for you to answer the call of the creator. We know that you are not far away, just on the other side of the road, to continue the fight with us and strengthen us further. We will never forget you. You will remain forever in our hearts. Go well and may the earth be light to you.

And to the departed leading light in this path; late Prof. Wangari Mathai from Kenya (Nobel Prize Winner), late Sue Edwards from Ethiopia (Alternative Nobel Prize Winner), late Kariuki Thuku (Kenya), Nganga Thiongo, Gebre Birega and to all others who fought the battle and walked this journey of laying the foundation for the ABN, you will forever live in our hearts and souls.

Appolinaire OUSSOU LIO



Published Barefoot Guides



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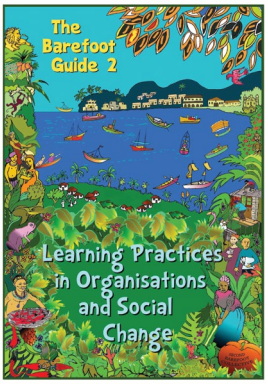
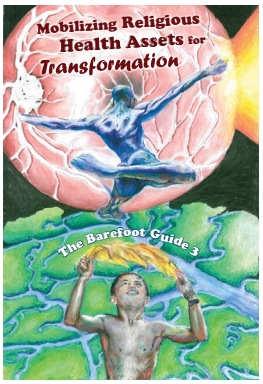
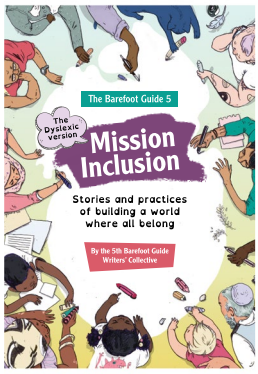


Kiswahili • Español • English
Français • Việt

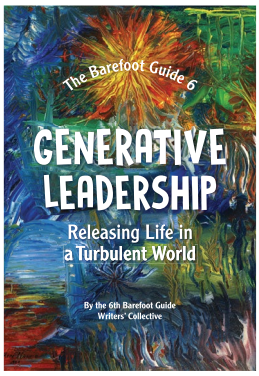


English

English • Français



Kiswahili • English • Français



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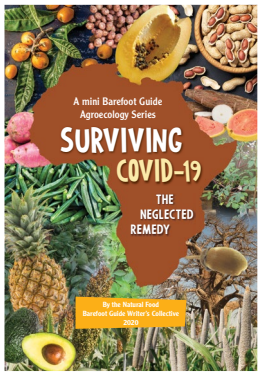
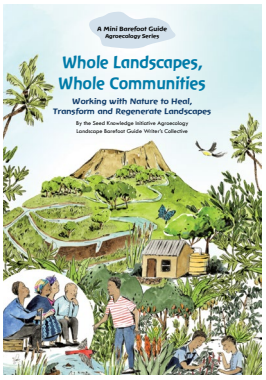
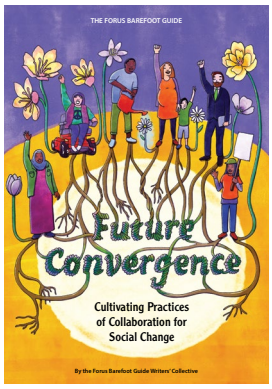


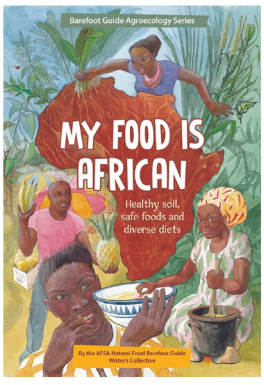
English • Français • Español



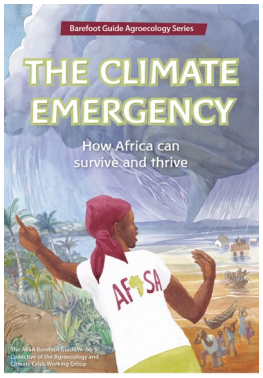
English



English • Français • Español



English • Français



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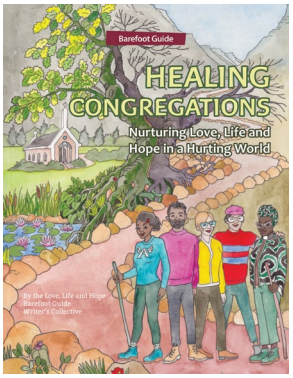

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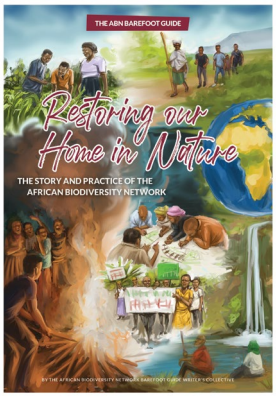

English

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