**"This Forest Is Ours"**

***Human Rights Dialogue*: "Cultural Rights" (Spring 2005)**

[Muthee Thuku](http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/people/data/muthee_thuku.html)

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| April 22, 2005 |

When Yiaaku people gather, or a father blesses his family, the prayers uttered are full of symbolism and poetic beauty.

*Entropilo*\*   
May the land of our fathers and   
mothers embrace you   
May you grow as huge as a   
Loimugo tree   
May you smell as sweet as the   
Songoyo tree   
Be as straight as the Itarokwa tree  
Be as studious as Ol Donyo   
Keri mountain   
And as cool as the forests of Mukogodo

When a Yiaaku person has been scorched by the hot sun beating on the plains, he faces the direction of Mukogodo forest and cries, “How I long for the forest of my father and mother!”

Since time immemorial the Yiaaku have been a part of the Mukogodo forest in the central Kenya highlands, living as cave dwellers and practicing a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Today, however, they are settled in six villages located in a wide area around the forest where they supplement their traditional beekeeping with the raising of cattle and goats. Still, it is the Mukogodo that gives meaning to their concept of life and spirituality, and they continue to hold a deep attachment to the trees, hills, animals, and caves that comprise their natural environment and their cultural heritage.

A dwindling ethnic minority, fewer than a thousand people identify themselves as Yiaaku. They speak the Maa language, which they adopted from their populous Maasai neighbors through many years of assimilation. Maasai are of Nilotic origin while Yiaaku are Cushitic. According to UNESCO’s [*Red Book of Endangered Languages*](http://www.tooyoo.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/archive/RedBook/index.html), Yiaaku is officially extinct. Fewer than ten speakers remain of their original mother tongue.

Because they were initially cave dwellers and without livestock, the Maasai branded the Yiaaku as “ontorobo,” meaning “poor people”—a name that stuck for centuries, deeply affecting the psyche and pride of the Yiaaku. “We were never a poor people,” counters Jennifer Koinante, a Yiaaku by birth and the Director of Yiaaku Peoples Association, a recently formed organization championing Yiaaku rights. “The resources of our forest have always been abundant.”

Colonialism in the nineteenth century brought unprecedented tribulations to the Yiaaku. Game hunting was banned and the colonial government attempted to settle the Yiaaku outside their forest in order to “civilize” them. Coupled with a high rate of assimilation into Maasai culture, such external onslaughts left the Yiaaku weakened and disoriented, both culturally and socially. But perhaps the worst that befell them was when in 1937 the government designated the Mukogodo a protected forest, which in turn led to their eventual relocation into villages and their transition toward a more pastoral lifestyle similar to the Maasai. Since that time the Yiaaku community has been undergoing an identity crisis amounting to a slow death. It has only been in recent years, following education and the passing of a generation, that the Yiaaku have rediscovered a deep pride in their unique ethnic and cultural identity.

Although the Mukogodo is now protected by official forest guards, the small number of remaining Yiaaku continue to have direct and unrestricted access to the forest and its resources—for the moment. However, it is known that several years ago forest guards spoke to locals about government plans of eviction. Such threats have resulted in forced evictions for other forest dwellers, such as the Ogiek group of the neighboring Nakuru District, and the warning has left the Yiaaku alarmed and unsure of their future.

“We have been the silent guardians and keepers of Mukogodo forest for centuries,” explains Koinante. “When other forests across Kenya are being destroyed, ours is still intact. We protect it because it is our only heritage on this planet. How can a law passed in a far-away city decide that our forest is now public property? Does the law consider us as part of the wildlife?”

Whereas the government views the Mukogodo as a strategic national resource worthy of protection, the Yiaaku view the Mukogodo as a cultural heritage and as inseparable from Yiaaku life. Yiaaku refer to the forest as *loip* (the shade) and as *gorgola* (the armpit): The shade protects them from severe droughts, the armpit shields them from enemies and other potential harm. In the traditional Yiaaku land tenure system, different clans own the various hills of Mukogodo forest. It is within these hills that clan members hang their beehives. As Koinante explains, “When children of pastoralists inherit cattle, the sons of Yiaaku inherit trees with beehives…We know every type of tree and the flowers that yield nectar.” Yiaaku also invoke their ancestral attachments to the Mukogodo forest. “Our ancestors sleep in this forest,” asserts Koinante. “This is where all umbilical cords of our community lie. Our attachment to this forest is maternal. To ask us to leave is to sever all our links with the past generations. We will be without history.”

Indeed, Yiaaku guardianship and occupation of the forest ensures their unity and the continuity of their ancestral domains. The vital connection between the people and the forest is reflected in their language, folklore, traditions, and indigenous knowledge in such areas as beekeeping, ethno ecology, and herbal medicine. As Koinante explains:  
  
Our language is one of the forest. It describes our flora and fauna heritage in ways only we can understand. It’s a language of trees, wild animals, bees, and caves. Without the forest, our language becomes obsolete and ceases to exist. To remove us from the forest is to ask us to develop a new language. It’s unimaginable.  
  
In short, to deny the Yiaaku their ancestral right to the forest is a form of ethnocide.

What the Yiaaku want is for the status of the Mukogodo forest to be changed from a protected forest to a Trust Forest in their name. That change of status should come with the relevant legal documentation, demarcation of boundaries, and a Title Deed. A Title Deed would legally allow the Yiaaku and Forest Department joint management of Mukogodo. The Yiaaku consider these measures the only way to herald a new beginning for their threatened ethnic and cultural identity. It would also set a precedent for other forest-dwelling ethnic minorities of Kenya. At this time when Kenya is drawing up a new constitution and a comprehensive land policy, Yiaaku people hope that the demands of forest dwellers will be taken into account and given legitimacy. To them, the new concepts of nation-state and globalization should embrace, respect, and preserve cultural diversity and not suffocate it in the quest for a homogenous society.

Koinante clearly sees the claim to the forest as a struggle for human rights. She asserts:

"Cultural rights are human rights. That is why we are articulating our claims from a human rights perspective. The Kenyan constitution guarantees the right to culture, and so does the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We are entitled to Mukogodo forest as our cultural abode and to a full recognition as a complete and living ethnic group. We are ready to defend our claims in Kenyan and international courts of law."

Lobbying for support of their cause is in high gear. The Yiaaku Peoples Association is an active member of local and national human rights networks, and the Yiaaku are a member of the [Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC)](http://www.ipacc.org.za). Over the past year the Association has held awareness forums for elders, women, and youth aimed at mobilizing community resources and strengthening the struggle through collective decisions. To promote community management of forest resources, the Association has set up a community honey refinery and marketing center in Dol Dol Township, on the fringes of the forest. The proceeds go to joint community development activities spearheaded by the Association. The Association also intends to build a cultural center in Mukogodo forest, which will serve as a documentation and education facility; among its activities it will teach the Yiaaku dialect to young children and compile a Yiaaku-Maasai dictionary.

“We know we are going to win in the end,” says Koinante. “To take the Yiaaku out of their forest is like asking fish to live out of water. Mukogodo forest is our culture and identity. We are not bargaining with anyone. This forest is ours.”

\**Entropilo, meaning “fragrant breath,” is the opening word for all prayers in Maa. It is a form of blessing and a wish for ceremonial cleanness uttered by the elder saying the prayers.*