YOU DESTROY BUNYORO

The Banyoro say Bugoma and Budongo are cultural forests which were planted by their kings, including the legendary Omukama Kabalega. "You are destroying the identity of Banyoro," he added.

KABALEGA'S PALACE

According to Kwampuro, Omukama Kabalega's palace was located at Muhanganza, which is being turned into a sugar plantation by Hima Sugar Limited in Bugoma forest reserve.

The Vision Group team also learnt about a tree species believed to have mystical powers and revered by the Banyoro. Locally named Mwitanoswaera, the trees grow in Bugoma and the surrounding areas. They are never touched or cut down, even the fearless and hardcore charcoal burners or illegal loggers do not dare bring them down.

It is widely believed that Mwitanoswaera produces electric shocks that can kill anyone who gets close to it.

According to Peter Mauto, a forest supervisor at Kisiizi sector in Bugoma Central Forest Reserve, the trees (Mwitanoswaera species) are spared because many insects, including flies, are found dead near them and hence the name, Mwitanoswaera, literally translated to "killer of insects". It is believed in the Banyoro that insects that approach it die of electric shocks emitted by the tree.

Whether Mwitanoswaera produces electric shocks to prevent intrusion or not, the belief that it destroys anything that goes close has been passed on from one generation of Banyoro to another and it is supporting conservation.

Fearing to be electrocuted, illegal loggers and charcoal burners have spared Mwitanoswaera from the chop. But it is now feared that the start of cutting part of Bugoma for sugarcane growing could see the tree with mystical powers lost before modern scientists study its mystical powers.

The Vision Group team found out that Mwitanoswaera even when it is

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**Deforestation in Bugoma Forest Reserve**

- **TOTAL FOREST AREA:** 411 square kilometers
- **900 hectares being cleared for sugarcane growing**

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**Kultural Dynamics**

Dr Arthur Mugisha, the former executive director of Uganda Wildlife Authority, says local beliefs like that about the mysterious Mwitanoswaera tree have enhanced conservation and are part of cultural conservation.

He says cultural conservation thrives on dos and don'ts, unlike the scientific approach to conservation, which was introduced by colonial and post-colonial governments. According to Mugisha, cultural conservation is well-grounded among the local communities and is easy to enforce since elders and clan leaders that enforce the rules and regulations stay in the community.

The Government needs to be reminded that culture drives communities and that the good beliefs and practices should be used to support and advance conservation and development.

In Uganda, cultural conservation is strong among kingdom areas, including Bunyoro. Even with the influence from other cultures and beliefs, the natives still try to conserve the natural forests on private land.

The forest is also a catchment for rivers, springs and streams. It has one permanent spring called Kamwirinjiku which was used as a source of water by the great grandparents of the Kwanga clan.

The forest provides a catchment for three rivers, Nyakabale, Wamahla and Wampongara, all of which originate from Mpanga Central Forest Reserve, located 4 km east of Bugoma. The rivers feed Wamabaya, where the 9MW Kabalega dam has been constructed. Wamabaya empties into Lake Albert.

The Kwanga people's practice of conserving forests is similar to that of the people of Killi in Kenya. In Killi, north of Mombasa, a coastal clan known as the Kayas have conserved their forests for generations. The forests stretch from northern Kenya to southern Africa.

The Kayas have preserved their forests and handed them from one generation to another.

The Kayas do not bury their dead in coffins and concrete graves. So, the bodies that have taken nutrients from the earth have to return them. As the clans conserve the forests, they also conserve water sources and also provide carbon sinks, which absorb emissions blamed for causing climate change.

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The Ugandan iron wood (cynometra alexandra) tree in Bugoma

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Saye Bugoma Forest campaign continues tomorrow