

Intertwining Culture, Language and Land Conservation: Ha Ethnobotany Book of Bubango Village, Tanzania, Africa

Culture, Language and Forest Demise



The Ha people in Bubango village in western Tanzania live in an area that suffers from deforestation and resulting erosion. Moreover, their village is on the border with Gombe National Park, the site of Jane Goodall's chimpanzee research. Thus the land on which they reside affects not only themselves but also notable wildlife. It is important that they use their own land as sustainably as possible so that they do not need to encroach on the park. Increasing the rapidity and depth of change in the Kigoma region, are the inclusion of the Burundian refugees. These people increase external influences to a culturally shifting area. As more people enter, not only is the land further degraded, traditions modify. As the younger generation becomes less interested in their native language and how to use their environment, they value their culture and forest less and less.

Reigniting the Culture/Forest/Language Connection



We worked with the locals to reconnect them to traditional plant culture and language by recording their plant use. Through interviews, illustrations and photographs we created a book of local knowledge to give back to the community. The importance of this work comes from both the product and the process. The product was a record of their knowledge so that people will have access to their own plant information, and to pass on to future generations. Furthermore, the process of book creation, the act of discussing, recording, photographing and drawing plants affected not only those individuals with whom we worked directly, validating their relationship to the natural world, but also the children who watched and listened, teenagers who drove us on their motorcycles as well as passing villagers who became curious.

The book contained plants in the categories of medicine, crafts, musical instruments, house construction, food and spirituality. We also included ecological information, such as in what kind of ecosystem the plant grew and how available it was. Most notably for many of the villagers, the booklet was tri-lingual. The first language was Kiha, making it most prominent. After Kiha then the text was in Swahili and lastly English. Having a book of their own knowledge in their own language, put not only on par, but at a slightly higher level than Swahili and English proved to be exciting for those in Bubango and also people in neighboring communities. People even in the large town of Kigoma heard about the book and were eager to see their own language printed. Furthermore, for those who were illiterate, we included illustrations (either a photograph or a drawing) of the plant. Anyone could connect with the information.

To reach the younger generation, we had a drawing contest where students picked plants from the list the elders created. We held a celebratory gathering of all the students to award prizes to the winners, further working to elevate ecological and cultural knowledge. Finally, we held a ceremony, complete with traditional dancers (and their plant ankle rattles) to honor the elders, the knowledge, the forest, emphasizing their importance to the larger village, especially the school children. We invited the village schools, including them in the ceremony. After giving copies to the people who had shared their information and to the village headmen, we awarded copies to the school children. Seeing the students with their heads pressed together looking at the pictures and reading the Kiha, seems a positive sign for the future of their language, culture and the forest on which they depend.

