

The Nkhamanga environmental situation: Is it indeed a wrath from the gods and ancestors?

By: Limbani Zak Phiri

Mabingo gha vula ghakubenuka waka literally meaning “the rain clouds are just flying over our area”, has become a common expression among my kinsfolk, whenever I visit my home village. The village is called Gwamba in the Northern part of Malawi in an area called Nkhamanga in the district of Rumphhi.

Rainy season brings smiles to my people, a majority of who are subsistence farmers. My people celebrate rains because they are a good sign of a season of plenty. However, on my regular trips around Christmas I have noticed that the mood has changed over the last decade. The rains no longer come on time if they make it at all. The faces of the people are now gloomy.

The rain crisis has prompted the elders of the area to look to the past. They are now invoking the ancestral spirits, pleading for mercy to give them rains. They have resorted to organizing visits to one of the ancestral shrines, *Mangwengwe*. They offer sacrifices to the ancestors, usually some locally brewed beer and animal meat, to seek their intervention.

The rain scarcity is construed by the leaders, as wraths from the ancestors or the gods for some wrongdoings committed within the land. A visit to the shrines is therefore aimed at appeasing the gone forefathers. It is alleged that the ancestors and the gods quickly bury their hatchets and forgive their children.

The elders claim that immediately after the sacrifice, people had to run from the shrine as rain would start falling immediately. Soon every farmer would be on his way, to his garden, to plant the crops. The rains bring sighs of relief in Nkhamanga plain, where communities rely on rain fed agriculture for their livelihood.

Nkhamanga plain lies below two major mountains, Nyika Plateau to the north and Rumphhi Mountain to the south and south west. The Rumphhi Mountain, which used to be covered with trees now lays bare. The forest that covered the mountains is gone. The shadows of darkness that accompanied the mountains during the intense summer days are no longer there.

The mountains are bare, revealing all the contours and gullies in them. From kilometers away, one can clearly see tiny creatures climbing up or down the *Nkhonjera*, *Rumphhi*, *Buwira*, *Thulwe*, *Sokoro*



Photo 1: Rumphhi Mountain, Now bare without forest cover
 Photo courtesy of Malawi Embassy, London

and *Jumbi* mountains. The tiny creatures are actually men, going to further strip down the already naked mountain. Yes, the same mountains that are catchment areas to some of the rivers that supply water to the communities in the Nkhamanga plain are now all bare, without trees.

Come night time, one might think that Nkhamanga is surrounded by towns filled with electricity. The hills are all lit up, with bush fires set by hunters to trap animals. The small patches of vegetation that were there a day before, along with the grass that holds the soil, is all gone the following morning.

The rivers *Rukuru*, *Lunyina*, *Luviri* that criss-cross the area confirm man's destruction of the very natural resources he survives on. Yes, that man has been very aggressive on them. The trees that used to protect the riverbanks are no longer there and the banks are either bare or used as gardens for crops cultivation.

Not really the gods', but our own destruction of nature and its goods that we once enjoyed.

Silence has now replaced the fresh smell of water and the perennial gushing sounds of waters running down the streams that greeted one's ears upon approaching a riverbank. The rivers are now dry during most months of the year. The areas that used to be marshy and swampy all year round are now all dry and cracking. Name them, *Kayunibata*, *Balwe*, and *Chavowo*. These places are now drier than the anti-hills upland.

A walk into the areas that were once natural forests will confirm that it is indeed a wrath, but one of our own making. All the trees are gone. The cool breeze that caressed one when passing through a forest has now been replaced by a heat wave, which requires one to always carry a bottle of water. When travelling on foot, which is very common in these areas, you have to walk for several minutes to find a tree under which to shelter yourself from the scorching summer sun and heat.

Even the melodies that were sung by birds, which made the trees and river banks their home, are now gone. The beautiful songbirds fled to higher mountains as their shelters were taken away.

Ironically, one would think that even the gods have moved from Nkhamanga as the very forest that used to house the *Mangwengwe* shrine has been stripped bare. Yes, the shrine can now be seen from several kilometers away. The home to the gods, which is supposed to be sacred and secret now lays visible to everyone, including kids.

Tobacco production has been heavily blamed for the state of affairs in the area. Farmers, both small scale and large scale, have wantonly cut down trees to meet the demands of their tobacco production. Annually, the farmers construct new tobacco sheds that are mostly made of forest materials (poles, ropes, grass). The use of wood sticks (*mtyangala*) for hanging the leaves to dry has also made it impossible for the forests to naturally re-forest themselves.

However, it is the cultivation of flue-cured tobacco that has exacerbated deforestation in the area. This type of tobacco requires extra huge amounts of wood to cure it, besides the obvious needs for shed construction materials.



Photo 2: Tobacco on a farm and some wood that will be used to cure it
Photo source: own photo

The implications of such deforestation have been huge

and women have borne the brunt of them. While the men now have to travel long distances, over 30 kilometers on bicycles to access forests materials for the tobacco production needs, the women, on the other hand, have to walk the same distance to access firewood. Unfortunately, the forests have annually retreated further and further from the communities, increasing the distance one has to cover to reach them.

The women and girls also have to walk long distances to access boreholes that have a continuous flow of water. These are in areas close the current annual rivers. The lowering water surface in the area has contributed to the drying out of most boreholes as well as saltation of others.

Women, therefore, spend most of their productive time either fetching water or firewood for domestic energy. This is a very precious time that they could have invested in their personal growth or that of their families.

The unpredictable rainfall patterns have not only affected the production of the cash crops but also hampered the cultivation of food crops such as maize and ground nuts. Poor yields have resulted in malnutrition amongst Nkhamanga inhabitants, especially the kids. It is sad that in an area that once was the food basket for the district, entire communities now have to go to the neighboring districts of Mzimba and Chitipa to buy maize for home consumption.



Photo 3: A typical sight of each morning in Nkhamanga: women, walking miles and miles to fetch firewood
Photo: Courtesy of RIPPLE Africa

It is even more awkward when one considers that in the past it was those in the towns who would usually take a bag or two of maize from their home villages while going away. Now the situation has changed. It is mostly those who are visiting the villages who carry with them a bag or two to assist their families.

The situation has not spared the livestock farmers. Those rearing sheep, cattle and goats, have to walk long distances to the remaining perennial river, *Lunyina*, to quench their herds' thirst.

While it is almost a mission impossible for Nkhamanga to reclaim its glorious past: when lions, hyenas and buffaloes roamed and roared in the forests of the area; when people could go hunting well-assured that they would bring some meat for the evening meal; when men could go fishing and come back home within an hour with a catch; when women could fetch firewood right behind their own houses; when girls could draw water from nearby wells and rivers, there is a chance of putting a halt to the current development and mitigating some of the challenges faced by the communities.

There is an urgent need for stakeholders, local leaders, community based organisations, non-governmental organisations and government departments in the area, to develop by-laws that regulate access to forests and mountains. The communities themselves should be allowed to lead and manage the processes.

The forests should be allowed to re-grow without much human interference. The by-laws should ensure that communities are granted access to the forests for resources such as medicines, fruits, mushroom, and dry wood from fallen trees, while placing some restrictions on fresh wood materials like poles and logs.

Furthermore, the villages should revive that old concept of each village having a specific area designated as a village forest. Most of such forests are now completely depleted, and the concept is dead. If well revived and regulated, the village forests could meet some of the needs of the communities, like wood for energy production and timber for the tobacco needs.



Photo 4: Reforestation community based initiatives like these will help
Photo courtesy of RIPPLE Africa

The villages should also plant trees along the riverbanks. In the 1990s, I recall that the Forest Department would produce various tree seedlings at *Lomborwe* where communities in *Nkhamanga* could access them at very affordable prices. The last time I passed the area, there was no sign of such an activity.

In addition, stakeholders in the tobacco industry also have a huge role to play. The National Land Policy stipulates that every tobacco estate should set aside 10% of their landholding to forest cover. However this has not been the case. There is a need for the Tobacco Control Commission to start enforcing this provision. The Commission visits most farmers when making output estimations and should use such tours to also check to which extent the farmers are implementing and adhering to this provision. Most estate farmers could meet their huge wood demand, for curing their tobacco, if such forests existed and were well managed.

Furthermore, the smallholder tobacco farmers should be urged to plant trees around their gardens and houses. The "contract arrangement" that the tobacco companies now prefer could assist in such arrangements. Under this arrangement, the tobacco companies provide the farmers with inputs and

extension services throughout the growing season. The companies should therefore ensure that tree seedlings are a part of the inputs that are given to the farmers. The companies extension workers, stationed in the communities, would also monitor the farmers on the same, besides fulfilling their routine advisory role.

The communities, especially women, should also be encouraged to use energy efficient stoves that require less wood but still give enough heat to meet the household needs. The Malawi Forestry Policy actually calls for the development, adaptation and promotion of energy saving devices. Usage of such stoves would not only save a lot of trees in the area but also reduce the frequency of the long trips that the women and girls make to fetch firewood. Affordable stoves made from locally available clay should be promoted at community level for most household to access and use them.

Schools and religious communities should also be brought on board in this re-forestation initiative. Previously most schools had their own woodlots, for practical lessons and demonstrations of some of the theories being taught in class. I still remember my days at *Chikwawa* Primary School when we could cut poles, to be used for the school, from the school woodlot that was located close to the *Masanika* Village.

All the schools in Nkhamanga used to be places with a lot of vegetation and different species of trees. Unfortunately this is no longer the case. The woodlots are no longer there. Therefore, the school management committees should be encouraged to revive the concept of schools owning their own woodlots. Likewise, the religious communities should be sensitized to planting trees around their churches and mosques.

Although the dividends from such interventions may not be realized promptly, the benefits of the undertaking outweigh the waiting period. Yes, I look forward to the days when the kids of Nkhamanga will once again debate whether to swim in *Rukuru, Lunyina, Ruviri or Balwe*. Yes, that time when every borehole in the area will once again produce water and the girls have a choice of which one they should go to (usually choosing the one closest to their boyfriend's home). Yes, the days when women will go to the village forests to collect fire wood. Yes, the days when the herdsmen, will just walk to the closest river to quench their herds' thirst.

Indeed the days when *mabingo gha vula ghazamuleka kubenuka waka pa nkhamanga* (when the rain clouds will eventually stop just flying over the area). Yes, the days when kids can access wild fruits, *maviro, tchinkha, mbwanga etc.*, few meters from their homes. I am sure that when that time comes, the visits to the Mangwengwe shrine will be few and not well anticipated annual events as they currently are.

I am sure the gods whose home now lays bare will then no longer deny my kinsfolk rain. I simply cannot wait for this to happen again, soon.

About the Author

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