Indigenous Gikuyu Herbs, Names of Places, and Climate Change Adaptation

Catherine Ndungo

Department of Kiswahili and African Languages

Kenyatta University

catemndungo@gmail.com

Abstract

Globally, more than 400,000 plant species are used for medicinal purposes. For centuries, African communities have relied on indigenous herbal medicine for the prevention and treatment of a wide range of diseases. Despite the introduction and widespread adoption of Western medicine, many African societies continue to depend on herbal remedies, particularly for ailments perceived to respond poorly to conventional biomedical treatment. Herbal medicine is also commonly regarded as more affordable and as having fewer side effects than Western pharmaceuticals, whose high cost often exceeds the purchasing power of many populations. This paper examines indigenous herbal medicine among the Agikuyu community, with particular emphasis on practices that predate colonialism and remain relevant in contemporary society. The study focuses on major medicinal trees whose names have been used to designate geographical spaces where they naturally grew or once existed. In several cases, environmental degradation has led to the disappearance of these trees, leaving behind place names whose original ecological and medicinal significance is no longer widely recognized by present-day inhabitants. The paper discusses the nutritional and medicinal value of these trees, the ailments they are used to treat, and the belief systems that underpin their use. The study further explores the continued relevance of herbal medicine in addressing both persistent and emerging diseases, including HIV/AIDS, cancer, and COVID-

19, while highlighting the challenges facing indigenous herbal practices in the modern context. Data were collected through oral interviews with scholars, herbalists, and individuals aged 50 years and above who have used herbal remedies, and were supplemented by relevant secondary literature. The study underscores the need for accurate knowledge regarding the efficacy and appropriate use of indigenous herbs, alongside increased awareness of potential side effects, contrary to the widespread assumption that herbal medicine is entirely safe. It also emphasizes the importance of preserving indigenous medicinal knowledge for future generations, particularly through place names as cultural and ecological markers, which can contribute to community resilience and adaptation in the face of climate change.

Keywords**:** Agikuyu, Herbal medicines, Indigenous, Climate Change, Adaptation

Introduction

The Gikuyu language belongs to the Bantu language family. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2019), approximately 20% of Kenya's population, about eight million people, speak Gikuyu as their primary language. The name *Gikuyu* is etymologically derived from the fig tree, known as *mukuyu* (singular) and *mikuyu* (plural). Kibicho (1972) notes that the ethnonym originates from this root form (p. 71), while Gatheru (1965) similarly observes that the Agikuyu are traditionally identified as "the people of the fig trees" (p. 7).

This paper examines the Gikuyu community's cultural and linguistic practice of place naming (toponymy), with particular emphasis on the use of indigenous herbal trees and shrubs as referents for specific geographical locations. The naming of places after medicinal flora reflects a close and enduring relationship between the Gikuyu people and their natural environment. Within Agikuyu culture, flora function not only as sources of medicine and livelihood but also as markers of identity, collective memory, and territorial organization.

The study explores how herbal trees and shrubs valued for their therapeutic, spiritual, and practical significance have influenced place names in Gikuyu-speaking regions. It seeks to demonstrate how indigenous ecological knowledge and linguistic expression intersect to preserve the Gikuyu community's cultural heritage, historical narratives, and environmental consciousness. Furthermore, the study highlights place names as linguistic archives that encode ethnobotanical knowledge and reflect the Gikuyu people's longstanding traditions of environmental stewardship.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected using both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained directly from respondents drawn from the Agikuyu community, specifically individuals aged 50 years and above. This age group was targeted on the assumption that older members of the community possess more extensive knowledge of indigenous herbal medicine and traditional place naming practices than younger generations. The study sample comprised 26 purposively selected participants, including 17 men and 9 women, all aged 50 years and above, who were identified as having knowledge of Gikuyu herbal medicine and the naming of places.

Snowball sampling was employed to identify and access respondents through established field contacts. Participants were intentionally selected based on their recognized expertise, particularly those reputed as herbalists, as confirmed through testimonials from community members and clients who had utilized their services. In addition, consumers of herbal medicine were included to provide complementary perspectives and to enrich the field data. Local custodians of indigenous knowledge were also consulted to provide insights into the historical processes through which specific sites acquired herbal-based place names.

Secondary data were obtained from relevant scholarly literature to supplement and contextualize the primary data. The findings of the study are presented using tables and descriptive narratives to enhance clarity and facilitate interpretation.

Names of Gikuyu Herbs and their Uses

Mugane (1997) lists 17 noun classes in Gikuyu. For the most part, these classes generate the plural by replacing the single sign with a plural prefix. Table 1 indicates the names of some of the Gikuyu herbal plants and their uses.

Table 1: Names of Gikuyu Herbs and their Uses

Gikuyu Name	Botanical Name	English Name	Traditional Use(s)
Mũiganjo /Mũgũkũyũ	*Ficus thonningii*	Strangler Fig	The bark and root of this plant are used to treat gonorrhea.
Mũgumo	*Ficus sycomorus*	Sacred Fig	Sacred tree; used in rituals, prayer, and sacrifices; also believed to house spirits.
Mukinduri	*Croton megalocarpus*	Croton Tree	Used by the Gikuyu to treat stomachache
Mukuyu	*Ficus sycomorous*	Sycamore Fig	The bark, leaves, and milky latex of the sycamore fig all have medicinal value. The Gikuyu used the sap for toothache and the juice of the fruits as a topical treatment for skin diseases or irritation.
Mũthakwa	*Tithonia diversifolia*	Mexican Sunflower	Used to treat malaria and fever; crushed leaves applied to wounds.
Mũkenge	*Vernonia lasiopus*	Bitter leaf	Used as a tonic for stomach problems and to stimulate appetite.
Mũgatina	*Warburgia ugandensis*	East African Greenheart	Powerful herbal remedy for colds, coughs, and chest congestion.
Mũratina	*Kigelia africana*	Sausage Tree	Medicinal parts of this plant used by the Gikuyu include the leaves, fruit and bark.
Mutamaiyu	*Africana, oleacea*	Brown Olive	Used by herbalists to treat tapeworm, itchy rashes and hepatic diseases
Mũtiga	*Ocimum gratissimum*	African Basil	Used for respiratory issues and spiritual cleansing.
Mũrurũ	*Erythrina abyssinica*	Coral Tree	Bark used to relieve joint and muscle pain.
Mũrogi	*Solanum incanum*	Bitter Apple/Nightshade	Used as a purgative and for skin conditions.
Mũiri	*Prunus africana*	African Cherry	Bark used to treat prostate disorders and improve male reproductive health.
Mũthare	*Dracaena steudneri*	Dragon Tree	Parts used for medicinal purposes to treat high blood pressure among the Gikuyu include the bark and roots
Mũthiga/ Mũthaiga	*Carissa edulis*	Greenheart Tree	Roots used to treat fever and sexually transmitted infections.

Table 1 presents selected Gikuyu plant names and their associated medicinal uses. In Gikuyu, nouns are organized into classes, each characterized by specific prefixes and governed by systematic agreement patterns. Singular nouns are paired with corresponding plural forms within the same noun class. Notably, noun classes 3/4 (*mũ- / mĩ-*) and 5/6 (*i-, rĩ- / ma-*) commonly encode names of plants or plant parts. For instance, *mukinduri* refers to a single croton tree, while *mikinduri* denotes croton trees in the plural.

Table 1 further illustrates the medicinal functions of the identified Gikuyu herbs, with each plant associated with specific therapeutic uses. Some herbs, such as *mũtiga*, serve both medicinal and spiritual purposes, including ritual cleansing. Sindiga et al. (1995) observe that Gikuyu indigenous medicine is deeply embedded within the community's cosmological worldview (p. 130). Healing practices among the Agikuyu are therefore not limited to biological or physical interventions but are integrally linked to spiritual and metaphysical conceptions of health and disease. Illness is often understood not merely as a physiological condition but as an indication of spiritual imbalance, ancestral displeasure, or the violation of social norms.

The position advanced by Sindiga et al. (1995) aligns with earlier observations by Kenyatta (1978), who emphasizes that religious and magical beliefs constitute a fundamental component of traditional Gikuyu medical practices. Kenyatta characterizes Gikuyu medicine as both practical and symbolic, noting that healing rituals involve not only herbs and roots but also prayers, incantations, and offerings to ancestors or spiritual entities. Consequently, the *mũgo wa kĩrĩra* (traditional healer) functions not merely as a medical practitioner but also as a spiritual mediator, counselor, and custodian of cultural knowledge.

These perspectives demonstrate that Gikuyu indigenous medicine operates holistically, integrating the body, spirit, community, and environment. Understanding how the Gikuyu name and classify medicinal herbs, and, by extension, how these plants inform

place naming practices, thus requires a holistic analytical approach that recognizes the interconnection between language, culture, ecology, and belief systems.

Places Named after Indigenous Gikuyu Herbs

The Gikuyu employ various strategies in naming geographical locations. Some places are named after individuals, such as *Kwa Michael* in Kiambu, *Kwa Kiongo* in Nyandarua, and *Karuri* in both Murang'a and Kiambu counties, which is named after Karuri Gakure, a paramount chief during the colonial period. Other locations derive their names from prominent physical features, including wetlands and swamps (e.g., *Kiria-ini*) and hilly or elevated terrain (e.g., *Githunguri*).

For the purposes of this paper, however, attention is focused on place names derived from indigenous trees and medicinal herbs. Certain geographical locations are named after specific herbs because these plants are or were once abundant in those areas. Among the Agikuyu, indigenous herbal medicine has historically been highly valued, a fact that is reflected in the practice of naming places after medicinal plants. These herbs were not only widely used in the past but continue to play an important role in the treatment of various ailments within the community today. Table 2 presents selected place names that are derived from indigenous Gikuyu medicinal herbs.

Table 2: Names of Places Named after Herbal Trees and Shrubs

Plant name	Common name	Name of place
Mukuyu	Sycamore fig tree	Mukuyu
Mukinduri	Croton tree	Mukinduri
Muthiga/Muthaiga	Greenheart tree	Muthiga, Muthaiga
Mutamaiyu	Brown olive	Gatamaiyu
Mũratina	Sausage Tree	Karatina
Ithare/Muthare	Dragon Tree	Places named after this tree include Kamathare and Mathare one of the biggest informal settlements in Nairobi City
Mũiganjo	Strangler Fig	Kiganjo in Kiambu and Nyeri counties are places named after this herbal tree

Mũcarage/ Mucharage	Elgon Olive	Mucharage and Gacharage are places named after the herbal tree

Table 2 presents geographical locations whose names are derived from indigenous Gikuyu medicinal plants. As illustrated in the table, names of indigenous herbs have been extensively used to designate places, reflecting the close relationship between the Gikuyu people, their environment, and traditional medicine. For example, *Mukuyu* is the name of a geographical location in Murang'a County, Kenya. The place derives its name from the *mũkuyu* tree, an indigenous Gikuyu medicinal plant widely used by herbalists to treat various ailments, including skin diseases and irritations. Alongside *mũkuyu*, *mũgumo* and *mũtamaiyu* are regarded as sacred trees among the Agikuyu and are commonly referred to as "God's trees." Cagnolo (1933) describes these trees as constituting the "temple of Gikuyu paganism." Among them, *mũkuyu* was preferred for ritual purposes, while *mũgumo* and *mũtamaiyu* were used only when *mũkuyu* was unavailable. Leakey (1977) further notes that *mũtamaiyu* was regarded as the female tree within the sacred tree complex. Religious and ritual ceremonies were traditionally conducted beneath these trees.

Mukinduri (*Croton megalocarpus*) is another indigenous Gikuyu medicinal tree and a drought-resistant species belonging to the Euphorbiaceae family. It commonly grows in forests and on rural farms, often serving as a boundary marker. Among the Gikuyu, a decoction prepared from the bark and taken orally is used to treat typhoid. Gachathi (2007, p. 98) observes that the same decoction is also administered for the treatment of coughs, pneumonia, malaria, and intestinal worms. Some respondents further indicated that sap extracted from the bark is applied to wounds and used to relieve stomachache. Several geographical locations that derive their names from this tree are similarly known as *Mukinduri*.

Mũthiga (greenheart tree) is another indigenous Gikuyu medicinal plant that grows in lowland rainforests, upland dry evergreen forests, and their relicts in secondary bushland, grassland, and swamp forests. Among the Agikuyu, the bark, leaves, and roots are used to prepare a decoction taken orally to treat ailments such as constipation, stomachache, toothache, cough, fever, muscle pain, weak joints, and general body aches. Some respondents associated the Nairobi suburb of *Muthaiga*, now home to many embassies and affluent residents, with the *mũthiga* tree. According to oral accounts, a colonial settler became intrigued by the removal of bark from many trees in the area and learned that the tree was highly medicinal. Unable to pronounce *mũthiga* accurately, he rendered it as *Muthaiga*, a name that subsequently became established, attracting settlers who believed in the tree's therapeutic benefits (Kiereini, 2018). The herb also lends its name to *Muthiga* in Kiambu County. Its augmentative form is *Githiga*, while diminutive forms such as *Gathiga* are reflected in place names found in both Murang'a and Kiambu counties.

Muiri is another indigenous Gikuyu medicinal tree. It is an evergreen species commonly found in forests, though in grasslands it may appear stunted and shrub-like. Among the Gikuyu, a decoction prepared from the stem bark is used to treat malaria. Gachathi (2007, p. 89) notes that the same preparation is also used for indigestion, liver-related ailments, and meat allergy. Places named after this tree are referred to as *Kairi*. In this regard, residents of such areas may reintroduce the tree as part of climate change adaptation strategies, since the place name itself suggests the tree's historical prevalence prior to its disappearance due to human activity.

Mũratina is another indigenous medicinal tree whose leaves, fruits, and bark serve multiple functions among the Gikuyu. Preparation involves boiling these parts in water to produce a decoction. The fruit of the tree is a key ingredient in the preparation of the traditional brew known as *mũratina*, which is fermented overnight with sugarcane juice and

used in major ceremonies such as dowry negotiations and traditional weddings. Place names derived from this tree include *Kiratina* and *Karatina*, a major town in Nyeri County. *Karatina* is a diminutive form of *mũratina*, with *ka-* functioning as a morpheme denoting small size in Gikuyu. According to Agikuyu belief, the fruit of the *mũratina* tree should never be plucked but allowed to fall naturally, underscoring its sacred status. Communities living in areas named after this tree can therefore be sensitized to preserve it for posterity and climate resilience.

Mũchatha is an indigenous Gikuyu medicinal tree whose root extracts are used to treat male sexual dysfunction and regulate menstruation among women. It is also used to treat venereal and skin diseases. Sap from fresh leaves is applied to suppurating ears, while chewed roots serve as appetizers and remedies for stomach problems. Places named after this plant are known as *Mucatha*.

Mũiganjo is another medicinal tree among the Agikuyu. A decoction prepared from its bark and roots is taken orally to treat gonorrhea. Place names derived from this plant include *Kiganjo* in Kiambu, Nyeri, and Murang'a counties. The terms *iganjo* (singular) and *maganjo* (plural) are also associated with fertile land, implying that such areas, if well managed, can be resilient to the adverse effects of climate change.

Mũcharage or *Mũcarage*, depending on dialectal variation, is a medicinal tree that grows mainly in upland dry evergreen forests. Among the Gikuyu, a decoction from the stem bark is used to treat gonorrhea and syphilis, while powdered bark is applied to old wounds. Pieces of the wood are also used to smoke milk gourds. Places named after this tree are known as *Mucharage* (standard form) or *Gacharage* (diminutive form) (Gachathi, 2007, p. 65).

Other medicinal plants used to treat sexually transmitted diseases include *Wanjiru wa Rurii* or *Wanjiru wa Kieni*, depending on location. This herb has recently gained attention due

to its association with COVID-19 treatment. *Wanjiru* is a common female name among the Agikuyu and is traditionally associated with the first daughter of Gikuyu and Mumbi, the community's ancestors (Lisanza & Ndungo, 2024). The leaves are boiled to prepare a decoction used to treat malaria, fever, toothache, dysentery, chest congestion, headaches, and other infections (Makena, 2020).

Mũkandu, belonging to the Labiatae family and known in English as African basil or clove basil, is another indigenous medicinal plant. Leaves are boiled to prepare a decoction used to treat headaches. Places named after this plant include *Ngandu* (standard form) and *Gikandu* (augmentative form). *Mukenia*, commonly known as tick berry, produces fruits known as *ngenia*, a term meaning "something that brings happiness." A decoction made from its leaves is used to treat headaches. Places named after this plant are called *Ngenia*.

Muhuti, known in English as lucky bean or flame tree, is used medicinally through decoctions prepared from its bark, roots, or leaves. Places named after this tree include *Kahuti* and *Muhuti* in Murang'a County, as well as *Kihuti* River, all of which indicate the ecological suitability of the tree in these locations. *Mũringa* is a medium-sized evergreen tree whose bark is used to prepare a decoction for treating chest complaints, sore throat, and typhoid. Places named after this tree include *Karinga* in Murang'a County. *Mukoigo*, belonging to the Phyllanthaceae family and known as coastal golden-leaf, grows in riverine and swamp forests. Decoctions from its bark and roots are used to treat typhoid and diarrhea. Places named after this shrub are referred to as *Gakoigo*, a diminutive form.

Ithare or *Muthare*, a member of the Dracaenaceae family, is used to treat high blood pressure through decoctions prepared from its bark or roots. Place names derived from this tree include *Mathare* in Nairobi and *Kamathare*. *Mũrembu* is a deciduous plant found in riverine forests, wooded savannahs, and bushlands. Decoctions from its stem bark are used to

treat male sexual dysfunction and diarrhea, while sap from fresh leaves is applied to wounds. Places named after this plant are known as *Irembu*.

Mũhĩndahĩndi or *Muhindihindi*, commonly referred to as mulberry leaf, is a wild banana plant found near rivers and wet forests. Its roots are used in meat soup to promote general health and treat rheumatism and sexually transmitted diseases. Places named after this plant include *Ihindi* and *Kamahindi*. *Mununga* or *Kanunga*, known in English as Australian blackwood, is characterized by its strong smell. *Mununga* is the standard form, while *Kanunga* is the diminutive. Gachathi (2007) cautions that the indigenous *Mununga* should not be confused with its foreign counterpart, a distinction that is linguistically encoded in place names such as *Kanunga* and *Mununga*.

Finally, *Makomboki* is a high-altitude plant common in bamboo zones. Its small black berries are edible, while its flowers are used to treat chills. Places named after this plant are known as *Makomboki*, the plural form of *Mukomboki*.

Overexploitation of Indigenous Herbal Medicines and Climate Change Problems

The practice of naming places after indigenous herbal trees and shrubs among the Gikuyu underscores the central role these plants played in cultural life and everyday subsistence. Such place names were not arbitrarily assigned; rather, they emerged from the community's intimate knowledge of the natural environment, accumulated through long-term interaction and lived experience. When particular herbs or trees were abundant in a given area, their local Gikuyu names were often adopted as place names, thereby embedding ecological features directly into the linguistic landscape. In this way, language functioned as a repository of environmental knowledge.

These plant-based place names served both practical and symbolic functions. Practically, they acted as spatial indicators, guiding community members and travelers by signaling the presence of specific plant resources and their associated uses. Symbolically, the

names reflected the cultural meanings attached to particular plants, including their medicinal, spiritual, or ritual significance. As a result, place names encoded information not only about physical geography but also about cultural values and belief systems.

Gikuyu traditional herbalists frequently visited these herb-rich locations to collect plant materials such as roots, bark, leaves, and seeds for the preparation of indigenous medicines. Plants found in these areas were believed to possess potent healing properties or to be associated with spiritual forces, ritual practices, or ancestral presence. Consequently, such locations held ecological importance as well as social and, in some cases, religious significance within the community. Access to and knowledge of these sites reinforced communal ties and the authority of herbal practitioners as custodians of indigenous knowledge.

More broadly, the use of plant-derived place names functions as a mechanism for cultural documentation and transmission. Through language, indigenous ecological knowledge is preserved and passed down across generations, even in contexts where the original plant species may have declined or disappeared. Over time, these place names have come to serve as linguistic markers of biodiversity, pointing to historical plant distribution and signaling the medicinal, economic, and spiritual value attributed to particular species. In this sense, Gikuyu toponymy constitutes an enduring archive of ethnobotanical knowledge and environmental memory.

In this way, the landscape itself became a living archive, with layers of information about cultural identity, health practices, and environmental stewardship. However, some indigenous Gikuyu herbs are in danger of extinction due to overexploitation by local pharmaceutical companies for medicinal use. Destructive harvesting of medicinal plants with limited abundance and sluggish growth typically leads to resource exhaustion and even species extinction (Baker et al., 2007). For example, the excessive exploitation of the

Muthiga tree for medicinal use has led to the classification of the tree as an endangered species (Maroyi, 2014). The tree is among the plant species listed in the international Union for Conservation of Nature red list as an endangered species. According to Muchane (2019), *Mukinduri* (croton tree) is also becoming an endangered plant species due to its overexploitation for medicinal purposes among the Gikuyu people. *Mukuyu* tree is used for medicinal purposes and other uses which has also endangered its existence.

Muchane (2019) observes that the harvesting of whole plants or critical plant parts without replacement inevitably leads to their depletion and eventual extinction. The *mũthiga* plant, for instance, has become endangered due to prolonged and unsustainable harvesting for medicinal purposes, with little effort devoted to regeneration. Traditionally, however, the use of herbal medicine among the Gikuyu was governed by a system of taboos, cultural norms, and environmental ethics. Drawing on ancestral knowledge, traditional healers harvested plant materials with considerable care, observing seasonal cycles, respecting sacred species, and adhering to sustainable harvesting practices designed to ensure long-term availability.

Herbal resources were primarily collected for medicinal and subsistence purposes, with the aim of enhancing community well-being rather than commodifying plants or exploiting them for profit. This ethical framework sought to balance human health needs with environmental preservation. However, similar to *mũthiga*, other indigenous Gikuyu medicinal plants such as *mukinduri* and *mũtamaiyu* have experienced overexploitation for therapeutic use without adequate replanting or conservation measures. Muchane (2019) warns that if current patterns of unsustainable harvesting persist, only place names derived from these plants will remain as linguistic reminders of their former presence in the landscape after the species themselves have become extinct.

The large-scale harvesting of indigenous medicinal plants without replacement further exacerbates climate change–related challenges. Deforestation and the overexploitation of

medicinal plants have been identified as significant contributors to climate change (Baker et al., 2007). Harvesting practices that involve uprooting entire plants or removing roots and bark are particularly destructive to herbs, shrubs, and trees, compared to the selective harvesting of leaves, flowers, or buds. Plants such as *mũthiga* are especially vulnerable because multiple parts of the plant, including the bark, leaves, and roots, are all considered medicinal, increasing the likelihood of total destruction during harvesting.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) reports that deforestation and forest degradation, including unsustainable harvesting of indigenous plant species, account for approximately 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The removal of indigenous herbal plants without replacement contributes to the release of substantial amounts of carbon stored in plant biomass into the atmosphere. This process intensifies the greenhouse effect, thereby accelerating global warming and compounding the environmental risks associated with biodiversity loss.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) also highlights that indigenous herbs play a critical role in maintaining the local hydrological cycle. Through transpiration, these plants release water into the atmosphere, which supports precipitation patterns and contributes to soil moisture regulation. Additionally, they enhance soil fertility by enriching the nutrient content of the surrounding environment. The destruction or overexploitation of these plants disrupts these ecological processes, leading to altered precipitation patterns, elevated surface temperatures, and reduced land productivity. Consequently, ecosystems lose resilience, biodiversity declines, and their capacity to adapt to climate change is significantly diminished. Maintaining indigenous plant species is therefore not only crucial for ecological balance but also for sustaining the cultural, medicinal, and environmental knowledge embedded in local communities.

Mitigation Measures

There is a pressing need for the government, in collaboration with community leaders, to encourage local populations to plant and restore endangered indigenous plants that have given their names to geographical locations, such as *Mũthiga*, *Mukuyu*, and *Mũtamaiyu*. The names of these areas serve as living reminders of the historical presence and cultural significance of these herbal plants to the Gikuyu people, underscoring the importance of reviving them. Beyond their cultural and medicinal value, restoring these plants can act as a mitigation measure against climate change, which has been exacerbated by extreme deforestation and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. Achieving this goal requires comprehensive climate literacy, which should be systematically integrated into educational curricula at various levels of learning. Wekesa et al. (2017) note that documenting and validating traditional knowledge systems in partnership with academic institutions can promote sustainable practices that are grounded in both empirical evidence and indigenous insights.

Educational programs should include information on the scientific, social, and economic benefits of these trees within their natural catchment areas, thereby sensitizing children, youth, and adults to the importance of environmental conservation. Since these plants are indigenous and the local climate is favorable for their growth, place names that reflect their presence can serve as natural guides for conservation efforts. It is therefore imperative that all sectors of society collaborate to develop innovative and inclusive strategies to address climate-related challenges. One effective avenue is to explore and leverage the knowledge embedded in place names, particularly those associated with the local flora and fauna.

Community-based initiatives, such as the Greenbelt Movement, provide practical models for mobilizing populations to participate in tree-planting and reforestation activities. Such initiatives combat deforestation, enhance ecosystem resilience, and mitigate the impacts

of climate events such as droughts and floods. These efforts highlight the critical need for collective and strategic action by all stakeholders to address the adverse effects of climate change. Part of these strategic initiatives involves raising awareness among community members about the historical and ecological significance of the names of their localities, particularly those linked to indigenous herbal trees and plants.

It is important to note that, at the continental level, climate literacy in Africa remains low, with only approximately 37% of the population possessing adequate knowledge about climate change. This limited understanding constrains the ability of communities and individuals to make informed decisions regarding environmental conservation. Without sufficient knowledge of their environment, including the historical and ecological meanings embedded in local place names derived from trees and herbs, communities may struggle to engage effectively in sustainable environmental management and climate adaptation practices.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the naming of geographical locations using natural features, particularly indigenous trees and herbs, among the Gikuyu. The findings indicate that several places are named after indigenous medicinal plants, demonstrating the high cultural, ecological, and medicinal value that the Gikuyu historically attributed to these herbs. The practice of naming places after these plants reflects a deep ecological knowledge and an understanding of the utility and significance of local biodiversity. However, some of these indigenous herbs are currently at risk of extinction due to overexploitation for medicinal purposes, highlighting the urgent need for conservation interventions.

The government, in collaboration with stakeholders in the indigenous herbal medicine sector, can develop programs to regulate and promote the sustainable harvesting of medicinal plants. For instance, the issue of toxicity and safety can be addressed through rigorous

scientific research evaluating the efficacy of indigenous herbal medicines. Further, it is necessary to engage other stakeholders in designing and implementing long-term sustainable harvesting practices, such as guidelines to prevent the complete removal of tree species like Red Stinkwood. Such initiatives would contribute to the conservation of endangered medicinal plants, enhance biodiversity, and ensure the sustainable use of indigenous natural resources. Additionally, research could investigate whether specific plant parts, such as leaves or flowers, possess the same medicinal properties as the whole plant, thereby providing alternative harvesting methods that do not threaten plant survival.

Climate change adaptation strategies should actively incorporate indigenous knowledge, enabling communities to lead locally appropriate measures. Linking the ecological and medicinal significance of place names to contemporary conservation and climate adaptation practices can provide culturally relevant and scientifically informed approaches to environmental management. In this context, the Indigenous Knowledge discursive framework demonstrates that traditional knowledge continues to hold relevance in the modern world. Recognizing and integrating this knowledge is particularly critical in the digital age, as communities seek innovative solutions to climate change, which remains a globally recognized threat to human wellbeing and ecological sustainability.

References

Baker, D. D., Chu, M., Oza, U., & Rajgarhia, V. (2007). The value of natural products to future pharmaceutical discovery. *Natural Product Reports, 24*(6), 1225–1244. https://doi.org/10.1039/b714184f

Cagnolo, C. (1933). *The Akikuyu: Their customs, traditions, and folklore*. Catholic Printing Press.

Cartwright, M. (2021, April 30). Kikuyu people. *World History Encyclopedia.* https://www.worldhistory.org/Kikuyu_People/

Gachathi, M. (2007). *Kikuyu botanical dictionary: A guide to plant names, uses, and cultural values*. Tropical Botany.

Gatheru, R. M. (1965). Child of two worlds: A Kikuyu's story. *Africa Today, 12*(1), 7–10.

Guthrie, M. (1967). *Comparative Bantu: An introduction to the comparative linguistics and prehistory of the Bantu languages*. London: Gregg International.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2022). *Climate change 2022: Mitigation of climate change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg3/

Kenyatta, J. (1978). *Facing Mount Kenya*. Heinemann Educational Books.

Kibicho, S. G. (2006). *God and revelation in an African context*. Acton Publishers.

Kiereini, D. (2018). The early history of present-day Muthaiga. *Business Daily Africa.* https://www.businessdailyafrica.com

Leakey, L. S. B. (1977). *The Southern Kikuyu before 1903* (Vol. 3). Academic Press.

Lisanza, E. M., & Ndungo, C. M. (2024). *Indigenous languages and indigenous knowledge in East Africa: Swahili, Kikuyu, and Kamba*. Lexington Books.

Makena, E. (2020, August 27). Ten medicinal plants gaining popularity. *People Daily.* https://www.pd.co.ke/lifestyle/ten-medicinal-plants-gaining-popularity-49570/

Maroyi, A. (2014). The genus *Warburgia*: A review of its traditional uses and pharmacology. *Pharmacology Biology, 52*(3), 348–356. https://doi.org/10.3109/13880209.2013.839768

Muchane, M. N. (2019). Population status, distribution patterns, and conservation needs of endangered *Croton alienus* Pax in Kenya. *International Journal of Natural Resource Ecology and Management, 4*, 120–128. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijnrem.20190403.12

Mugane, J. M. (1997). A paradigmatic grammar of Gikuyu. *Language, 77*(4), 857–860. https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.1997.0091

Sindiga, I., Chacha, N. C., & Kanuna, P. M. (1995). *Traditional medicine in Africa*. East African Educational Publishers.

Wekesa, C., Mbaluka, R., & Mutie, A. (2017). *Conservation and sustainable utilization of medicinal plants in Kenya: A review of current status and strategic actions*. Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI).