

# Nabongo Cultural Centre: A Heritage of the Wanga Kingdom in Kakamega County, Kenya

Florence Muteheli Anyonje

Department of Arts, Governance and Communication Studies, Bomet University College

E-mail: [anyonjeflorence@gmail.com](mailto:anyonjeflorence@gmail.com) ; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5936-4915>

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## Abstract

*The Kenyan Constitution (2010) Article 11(1) recognizes culture as the foundation of the nation and the cumulative civilization of the Kenyan people and nation. In light of this many Kenyans identify with their tribes or ethnic groups and follow their traditions which include the way of dress, food, naming, work and rites of passage. Most Kenyans in the rural areas are proud of their language and cultural heritage (Akama, 2002). Through practice and celebration of our culture we are able to impart values and behavioral norms to the future generations who will in turn continue the legacy and Kenyan identity. D'Souza (1980) describes the Kenyan culture as a way of life that blends tradition and modernity. The question is then how will Kenyans be able to preserve their diverse cultures in light of technological advancements that have changed the way we do almost everything? This paper is a case study of Nabongo Cultural Centre, also known as 'Eshiembekho' in the local language. It highlights the rich cultural heritage found in this cultural centre in order to create local and international awareness so that researchers, students, tourists among others can all learn the history of the Wanga Kingdom and experience the way of life of the Wanga sub-tribe from this resource centre in Kakamega County. This research was done through participant observation, interviews, document analysis, and archival studies found in Nabongo Cultural Centre. The findings of this paper indicate that indeed this cultural centre is a rich heritage of the Wanga culture and a research centre for Oral Literature.*

**Key Words:** Culture, Cultural Centre, Resources

## INTRODUCTION

Culture is the way of life of a people. It includes art, beliefs, institutions, code of conduct, dress, language, religion, and rituals that are passed from one generation to the next. Kakonge (2017) defines culture as a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life. Idowu (2021) gives the components of culture as social organization, language, customs and traditions, religion, arts, forms of government and economic systems. He further says that through culture a community can be identified as distinct. UNESCO defines culture as a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a person as a member of a community. So culture can be described as a system of learned and shared beliefs, language, norms, values and symbols that groups use to identify themselves and provide a framework within which to live.

## CULTURAL CENTRES

Cultural centres have become popular around the world because advancement in technology connects people easily and creates in them a desire to share their culture and also learn about other cultures around the world (Amareswa, 2009). The tourism industry flourishes because people would like to visit places and see that which is different from their norm (Chongwa, 2012). A cultural centre is an organization, building, place or complex that promotes the culture and the arts of a people. The aim of cultural centres is to preserve and promote traditional cultural forms and practices, artistic manifestations and all other cultural expressions (Deisser, 2008). Cultural centres are multifunctional interdisciplinary institutions that provide access to culture and a variety of cultural services promote citizen participation in culture and offer lifelong learning opportunities (Dita, 2022). These centres are also meant to teach and pass on a peoples' culture through events, festivals, workshops and exhibitions. In Kenya, cultural centres and heritage sites are spread across the country and they include places like: Kenya Cultural Centre, Nairobi National Museum, Uhuru Gardens Monument, Kariandusi Archaeological Site, Orlogosaile Pre- Historic site, Nairobi Gallery, Mugumo Tree in Thika, Hyrax Hill, Thim Lich Ohinga Archaeological site in Kisumu, Ololua Nature Trail and Nabongo Cultural Centre. Others are Fort Jesus, Gedi Ruins, Jumba La Mtwana Ruins, Lamu Old Town, Mijikenda Kaya Forests among many others (Orinda, 2016, Irandu & Shah, 2016).

A visit to a cultural centre gives one an opportunity to interact with culture through presentations and explanations done by curators, pictures and artefacts, drawings, live performances of song and dance, poems, narrations, foods, exhibitions among other interesting items. All these cooperate the culture and values of a people where the cultural centre is located (Abungu, 2005 and Omotosho, 2020). In Kenya, the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Heritage has provided the necessary policy and framework to foster the growth and development of her culture through the National Culture and Heritage Policy and the Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions Act 2016. Kenya has also joined the Community of Nations in passing legislations that promote the preservation of culture by ratifying the 2003 and 2005 UNESCO Conventions on safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage and promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Nabongo Cultural Centre among others has been documented for protection and preservation as a symbol of the country's culture, unity and to give them exposure locally and internationally. Indeed, Nabongo Cultural Centre – *Eshiembekho* in the local language – is one of the unique and special products for tourist attraction in Kakamega County, Kenya. Others include the 'Crying Stone', the Tropical Rain Forest, Bull Fighting and Cock Fighting. It is against this background that this paper is set to examine Nabongo Cultural Centre not just as a tourist attraction but as a research and resource Centre for Oral Literature. This facility is a home to the rich history and oral literature of the Wanga people, a sub tribe of the larger Luhya tribe. There is a mausoleum of the Wanga Kings dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> C, a Library and a museum with displays of pictures and Wanga traditional artefacts which show the way of life of this community. There still exists a Wanga King today (2025), Peter Mumia II. Such information and resources at Nabongo Cultural Centre are a knowledge base worth noting and disseminating locally and globally.

*All photos used in this paper were taken courtesy of the management of Nabongo Cultural Centre.*

## NABONGO CULTURAL CENTRE

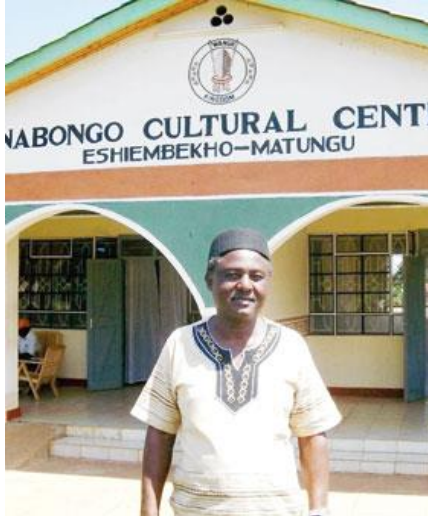


Figure 1: Nabongo Peter Mumia II



Figure 2: The Researcher and Proprietor of Nabongo Cultural Centre

Nabongo Cultural Centre is located in Kakamega County, Matungu Sub-County on the Mumias Busia road. It is approximately seven (7) kilometers from Mumias town and three (3) kilometers from Mumias Sugar Factory. Apart from being a cultural centre it is also a shrine or mausoleum for the Wanga Kings who were called 'Nabongo'. It is 'Nabongo' who was the executive head of central government, source of stability and custodian of traditions and customs of the Wanga royal dynasty. This shrine has a rich history dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, and it is of importance because Wanga Kingdom is believed to be the only kingdom in Kenya's history that still exists today.

The photos below show Nabongo Mumia the 11<sup>th</sup> Wanga King and Nabongo Peter Mumia II the current King.



Figure 3: Nabongo Mumia wearing a Muslim turban



Figure 4: Nabongo Peter Mumia II wearing royal Muslim cap

Source 1: Photos courtesy of Nabongo Cultural Centre Library

Nabongo Cultural Centre (*Eshiembekho*) was built in 2008 and is managed by Luhya Council of Elders. It was founded for the memory of Nabongo Mumia, a powerful Wanga King who died in 1949. This was meant to preserve the cultural heritage of the Wanga people for posterity (Siundu 2009). It was an initiative of Nabongo Welfare Society started by Mumia's grandchildren. It was later boosted by Mumias Sugar Company and Kenya Sugar Board as a tribute to King Nabongo Mumia. One of the objectives of setting up this cultural centre was to promote the unique cultural heritage of the Wanga people as one of the few remaining Kingdoms in Africa. Before colonialism Wanga Kingdom was one of the most highly developed and centralized Kingdom in Kenya (Siundu 2009). This Kingdom was established in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century by Wanga (the First) whose father fled from Buganda Kingdom because of leadership rivalry. The structural organization of Nabongo cultural Centre is a replica of the historical organization of the Wanga Kingdom, with three Chairmen and a Council of Elders.

## FINDINGS

Data for this research was collected through reading, visits to the cultural centre, and oral interviews with the curator, the hotel and restaurant manager, proprietor and other personnel at the cultural centre. Some members of the community including my mother, the late Jerusa Atemba Wasiche who hailed from this ruling clan also gave me vital information about Nabongo Cultural Centre, creating in me a desire to document and disseminate the findings globally and to the future generations. I also used observation methods because on some visits there were various cultural activities going on like dances, narrations, preparation of meals and the traditional brew. A visit to the Library elicited written information on the history of the Wanga people, and a tour around the Wanga homestead showed the structure and organization of the home which included the main house which belonged to the man of the home, the wives' huts, their kitchens and the boys' huts called *Simba*. All the houses were round and the compound neatly kept. I also toured the Museum where there are well kept artefacts like the coat of arms, the four legged royal stool, shields, spears, the King's headgear, all which formed the symbol(s) of power. There are also photographs of Wanga royalties and events spanning centuries. I interacted with some of the visitors at the cultural centre to get information that showed this is a place of research, education, entertainment, food joint and a tourist attraction, and also got an opportunity to partake of the traditional meals prepared at the cultural centre and an interview with the cooks which was an eye opener that traditional cooking styles give healthy, nutritious food.

Nabongo Cultural Centre has preserved the culture of the Wanga people and especially the Kingdom that has been in existence from the 10<sup>th</sup> Century. The Curator at this centre explains that the founder of Wanga Kingdom was Nabongo Wanga whose tomb dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century is located in this cultural centre. This photograph shows the place believed to be the grave of the founder of Wanga Kingdom.



Figure 5: Plaque showing burial site of Nabongo Wanga first King of Wanga Kingdom

This photograph shows the sacred trees at Matungu Shrine and place believed to be a worship shrine of Nabongo Wanga.



Figure 6: Holy ground where Nabongo Wanga worshipped

The curator further explained that the Wanga were part of the Bantu migration from Central Africa around 1000 B.C. Records at the Cultural Centre Library show that the Wanga came to Kenya from Kush in North Africa (Zamani, 2009). The memory of Wanga Kingdom lives on in the hearts of many people in Mumias. It is so deeply rooted that it is only until recently that a Member of Parliament could be elected from the other clans. The (political) leader was always chosen from the *Abashitsetse* clan which was regarded as the Royal ruling clan.

The rich culture of the Wanga people is showcased at this cultural centre. For example, there is a traditional Wanga homestead called *Olukoba* as shown in this photo and the Royal Palace which is a round hut used for ceremonial meetings and functions.





Figure 7: Traditional Wanga homestead



Figure 8: The Royal Palace

The houses were round, mud walled and neatly kept. The house at the centre belonged to the man of the home surrounded by his wives' huts (the Wanga were polygamous). Each wife had a kitchen next to her house and at the entrance to the homestead was a hut for the sons of the home. When a son married he would be shown a place outside the homestead to put up his house and start his own family.



Figure 9: The Royal Mausoleum

This cultural centre is also a shrine or mausoleum where the Wanga Kings (*Nabongos*) are buried, hence the local name *Eshiembekho*. The curator gave me a detailed account of how this burial takes place. The King is actually buried twice; First, immediately he dies he is buried at the Royal residence (*Itokho*) in *Elureko* which is in Mumias town. Many years later his bones are transferred to the shrine in *Eshiembekho* in Matungu for the second burial. This is an elaborate ceremony filled with song and dance. Nabongo Mumia the 11<sup>th</sup> Wanga King died in 1949 but his second burial was done after three decades in 1979. The Royal shrine with cemented graves of previous Kings is shown in the photo below.

In this mausoleum lie Kings like Nabongo Mumia, Nabongo Shiundu, Nabongo Wamukoya and Nabongo Osundwa among others. The graves of the previous Kings are believed to be in this burial site and identified by each *Olusiola* tree which was used to mark graves to show respect and identification for the departed relatives.



Figure 10: Olusiola tree used to identify a grave. This is one of the oldest trees at the shrine



Figure 11: One of the cemented graves in the mausoleum

Trees like these date back to many hundreds of years and among the Wanga they are revered because they are marks of a grave. In the modern times some graves at *Eshiembekho* have been cemented and clearly marked as shown in the picture above. There is a library at Nabongo cultural centre where one can read books that contain the rich history of the Wanga people. There are also photographs of previous Wanga Kings and important ceremonies and activities. All these give a vivid memory of the lifestyle of the people before and even during colonial rule.



Figure 12: The library at Nabongo Cultural Centre



Figure 13: One of the oldest photographs in the library



Figure 14: Photos of Wanga Kings and subjects



Figure 15: Photo showing the Wanga Kings



Figure 16: Chart showing genealogy of the Wanga Kingdom

A chart showing the genealogy of the Wanga people is displayed in the library. This gives researchers an opportunity to follow the origin and know the clans of the Wanga community.

The Cultural Centre has a museum with artefacts from the royal family and tools used by the Wanga people in their daily activities. Some of the tools are believed to be as old as the Kingdom itself, for example the Royal bracelet called *Omukasa*. It is normally worn on the wrist by the King to symbolize power.



Figure 17: Animal ornaments



Figure 18: The museum



Figure 19: Old currencies (notes)

The Royal head gear made from monkey skin (*Ikutusi/Isimbishila*), gown (a reward from the Arab traders), four legged stool, shield, spears and coat of arms are also displayed at the museum. These are symbols of power for the Wanga King who was highly respected even during the colonial times as explained by Kenyanchui (1992).



Figure 20: Artifacts used by the Kings



Figure 21: Old currencies



Figure 22: Royal four legged stool





Figure 23: Royal Head Gear



Figure 24: Royal Gown made from leopard skin



Figure 25: Drawing of the Wanga Kingdom Coat of Arms



Figure 26: Bow and arrow used for defence



Figure 27: Portrait of Nabongo Mumia

Other tools displayed in the museum show the daily activities of the people like fishing, hunting, special cooking utensils like pots, baskets, guards, grinding stone among others.



Figure 28: Fishing basket



Figure 29: Cooking pots



Figure 30: Hunting baskets and guards



Figure 31: Grinding stone



Figure 32: Plates made from reeds



Figure 33: Beer pot with straws

There is a hotel and restaurant where traditional foods are prepared. For example, they prepare foods like *obusuma* (ugali), *omuranda* (dried meat), *eliani* (vegetables), *ingokho* (chicken), *amaenjera* (mixture of maize and beans), *omutekete* (ground simsim), *eshitianyi* (ground beans), *omushenye* (mixture of maize, beans and potatoes), *tsiswa* (white ants), *obusela* (porridge) *obwoba* (mushrooms). Visitors to this centre can make an order to have a taste of these delicious meals. Below are photographs of some foodstuffs available at Nabongo Cultural Centre.



Figure 34: Food serving point



Figure 35: Dried meat



Figure 36: Ugali, vegetables and dried meat



Figure 37: Ugali and chicken



Figure 38: Visitors enjoying a meal of brown ugali with chicken





Figure 39: Students enjoying a meal at the cultural centre

Traditional brew, *amalwa* (*busaa*) is also prepared and sold to visitors who come to the place. The brew is taken in a pot using traditional straws (*tsinzeshe*) as seen in the photograph below.



Figure 40: Traditional brew in a beer pot



Figure 41: Roast chicken



Figure 42: Customers enjoying busaa from a pot

At the Cultural Centre there are also songs and dances performed by local experts and sometimes invited artists. An interview with the proprietor, cooks and other staff showed that many visitors come to the place to eat, for entertainment or just to pass time. Football fans also have an opportunity to watch their favourite games on a large screen. Tourists also visit the place to learn about the culture of the Wanga people, and enjoy the presentations of song and dance. The curators take time to give the folklore of the community including tales, legends, poems and other forms of Oral Literature.



Figure 43: Traditional dancers doing a jig



Figure 44: Traditional dancers entertaining the King and Council of Elders

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF NABONGO CULTURAL CENTRE TO ORAL LITERATURE

Oral Literature is a component of culture. On a visit to a cultural centre, one interacts with culture through presentations, language use and artistic expressions. Cultural centres enrich our society by promoting the arts, history, religion and heritage of diverse cultures. Such is the case at Nabongo Cultural Centre. According to Cooper (2019) cultural centres are places that foster interaction between tourists and locals and thereby meet the demands of the new cultural tourist. As a tourist attraction Nabongo Cultural Centre has unique artefacts dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. They have been preserved and passed on from one generation to another. For example, the Royal Regalia and Kingship tools that includes the four legged stool, shield and spears, leopard skin and the monkey headgear worn by the Kings. The Royal gown given to Nabongo Mumia by the Arab merchants is kept in the museum and is worn by the present King during ceremonial functions as seen in this picture. The elders here are dressed in *kanzus* and red caps.

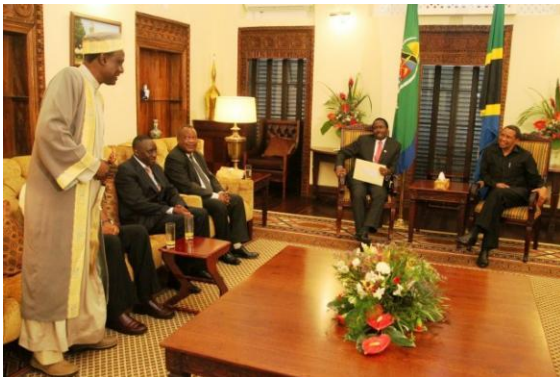


Figure 45: King Peter Mumia II with Dignitaries



Figure 46: King Peter Mumia II at Nabongo Shrine with Elders

Samples of traditional clothes called *amaboya*, *amachengeche* and *eshikhonela* are kept in the museum. Tourists also get an opportunity to enjoy live performances of traditional songs and dances. They can also have a taste of the delicious traditional meals prepared in the restaurant. This is an excellent chance to compare their culture and that of the Wanga people, creating a worldwide audience.





Figure 47: Tourists in the Royal Palace



Figure 48: Students in the Royal Palace keenly following a presentation

This Cultural Centre preserves the rich history of the Wanga Kingdom. One of the functions of Oral Literature is to pass on the history of a people from one generation to another. There is first hand historical information given by the curators, the cultural activities, live performances and varied artefacts on display and data for researchers. The origin of the Kingdom is not only well documented but also clearly explained by the curators and some of the elderly people who come to pass time over a drink there. An interview with the curator revealed that the Wanga are part of the Bantu who migrated from Central Africa around 1000 B.C and settled in Kampala forming Buganda Kingdom. Because of Kingship rivalry in Buganda one of the sons called Kiminye fled to Tiriki and settled there, upon which he was hired as a herdsman. He carried out his duties very well but always had a piece of cloth tied round his wrist. During his private time, he would remove the cloth and clean the Royal Bangle (*Omukasa*) which he was always hiding. One of his wives one day saw the Royal Bangle and informed the others, who hastened to confirm that it was indeed genuine. The Tiriki were seized with fear because they had unknowingly subjected a King to manual work. This was an abomination. They decided to send him away and gave him land in the present day South Wanga where he put up his home in Imanga and later Elureko, where he built the Royal Palace called *Itokho*. And thus began the Wanga Kingdom in Kenya.

The tools and artifacts show the lifestyle of the people even before the coming of the white man. They hunted animals and birds for food like the delicious *tsisindu*, rabbits and squirrels and fished in the nearby Nzoia River. They cultivated the land using *eshisili* (hoes) and planted crops like *obule* (millet), *amabele* (finger millet), *emioko* (cassava), *amapwoni* (potatoes), *tsinjuku* (groundnuts), *tsinuni* (simsim), *eliani* (vegetables) like *murere*, *litoto*, *likhubi*, *tsisaka*, and *obwoba* among many others. The vegetables were cooked using traditional salt called *omunyu* and cereals were ground on a stone called *oluchina* or *isio* to get flour used to make *obusuma* (ugali) or *obusela* (porridge). Chicken was kept and used as a delicacy especially when visitors came. *Imondo* (gizzard) was a preserve of the man of the home. Food was cooked in pots each designated for a type of food like *eyamunyu* for vegetables, *ikhafuka* for ugali, *yamachenga* (for boiling water) – and all were served on plates made from *efitelu*, reeds. Water and porridge was taken from *eshisanda* (calabash) and milk and porridge were kept in *eshimuka*, a gourd. Grains and flour were stored in *eshimwelo* (a basket). They had round houses but with designated areas like the cooking area *amaika* and *eshibero*, firewood place (*inungo*) sleeping area (*abwelu*), and sitting area *Omuseletswa*. Cattle were kept outside in an enclosed place called *eshitwoli*. All this information not only contributes to learning about the way of life of the Wanga people, but it is also an excellent opportunity to learn morphology, syntactic structures, semantics and the Wanga dialect as it is spoken by the local people.



Figure 49: Traditional brewery at Nabongo Cultural Centre

The traditional Wanga homestead which is well kept serves as a club where traditional beer (*busaa*) is prepared and sold. The proceeds from this business are used to maintain *Eshiembekho*. High standards of cleanliness and discipline are key at this club. The proprietor asserts that beer is a respected drink among the Wanga hence those who visit here for a drink should show respect knowing that they are in the royal shrine. And sometimes the King is around for ceremonial functions or when carrying out his royal duties.

Pictures and artefacts portray the way of life of a people, which is their culture. The major components of culture are language, symbols, norms, values and artefacts. Others are social organization, religion and economic system (Sobania, 2003). The pictures in the Library and museum are a summary of what Wanga people were and are today. At Nabongo Cultural Centre researchers in Oral Literature can see pictures and artefacts of Wanga culture. For example, they can see tools use in the olden days, artefacts safely kept from the Wanga lineage, King Wanga's worshipping place, shrine of the departed Kings, traditional Wanga homestead layout, Royal Palace used for meetings, and pictures and drawings in the museum which give a rich history. Samples of Royal regalias handed over from the Kingship lineage from the 12<sup>th</sup> Century can also be seen in the museum. Traditional foods are also prepared on order at the Restaurant and for those who love the traditional brew *busaa* it is found in the sample traditional homestead.

There are live performances of songs, dances, narratives and tales about the Wanga people. Among the popular musicians who sing in the local language are John Mukhuyu, Ali Akeko, Sukuma bin Ongaro, and Vincent Ongidi. Sometimes artists from other areas are also invited to perform, for example Maroon Commandos Band, Ohangla Band, Les Wanyika, Jose Chameleon from Uganda and others. All music has a place in Oral Literature hence the relevance of this Cultural Centre to Oral Literature. The performances also promote the local artists to National and International levels. Furthermore, Wanga proverbs and sayings are rich in use of figurative language. On any visit to this cultural centre you meet some old men who come by to take drinks and also pass time. An interaction with them indulges you in deep Wanga dialect coupled with traditional songs, narratives, riddles, proverbs and wise sayings.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Nabongo Cultural Centre and its contribution to the field of Oral Literature. Far from being documented for preservation and protection of Kenya's culture this shrine has a host of functions. The paper has discussed Nabongo Cultural Centre as a mausoleum for Wanga Kings, a tourist attraction centre, a research centre, a historical site, an education hub, an entertainment place and a traditional food joint. From the discussion advanced it is evident that cultural centres have a place as a repository of Oral Literature and also provide space for appreciation and critical engagement with Oral Literature. It is hoped the study will help open up Nabongo Cultural Centre locally and internationally, and pave way for culture exchange, revenue collection and peace building across the globe by appreciating other people's cultures.

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