

# Chanjo

Lamu, Malindi and the North Coast  
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# Hollywood ending for Lamu's Boni-Lungi forest?

by Kevin Doyle

The blockbuster Hollywood film *Avatar* was not filmed in Lamu, though maybe it could have been. The plot parallels a story playing out today in Lamu's backyard, minus blue-skinned humanoids and flying dragons. The story depicts the battle between the forces of capitalism and of land and resource rights.

In the film, a foreign corporation has discovered rich deposits of a precious mineral called *unobtainium* (ironically, meaning 'unable to be obtained') on a moon in a far-away star system. The main characters are a three-metre-tall, blue-skinned sapient humanoid species called the Na'vi. They live in harmony with their mystical environment and worship a mother goddess called Eywa. The richest deposits of unobtainium are located beneath an enormous beautiful tree with sacred powers—the centre of Na'vi culture. Extraction of the mineral means destroying the tree and likely destroying the Na'vi people as well.



practising some agriculture, depend on resources in the forested lands between the Dodori and Boni National Reserves for collecting natural fruits, honey, plants for traditional medicine and building materials. They survive despite the fact that, technically, they are squatters on the land on which they live—without formal rights whatsoever.

Despite their identifying themselves as Muslim, the Boni maintain sacred forest shrines to protect their spirit world. The destruction of the forest and the expropriation of their land pose a serious threat to Boni survival, as well as the loss of significant biological diversity. Numbering about 3,500, the Boni are one of the most marginalized indigenous cultures in the country, and they are threatened with losing their land, their livelihoods, their way of life, and perhaps their very lives.

Ironically, the Boni themselves have not perceived these threats. Until recently.

The *shifita* wars of the 1960s and 1970s in Kenya's border area



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Here on earth, on the mainland side of Lamu, outsider (that is, non-local) investors and speculators threaten a rich forest and the land on which it sits. The inhabitants of the forest are the Boni people (also referred to as Aweer). Their situation is eerily similar to that of the fictional Na'vi. Boni identity is closely bound to the Boni way of life as forest dwellers. They are traditionally hunters and gatherers who, despite

*Boni children. Traditional land of the Boni community is threatened by outsiders.*

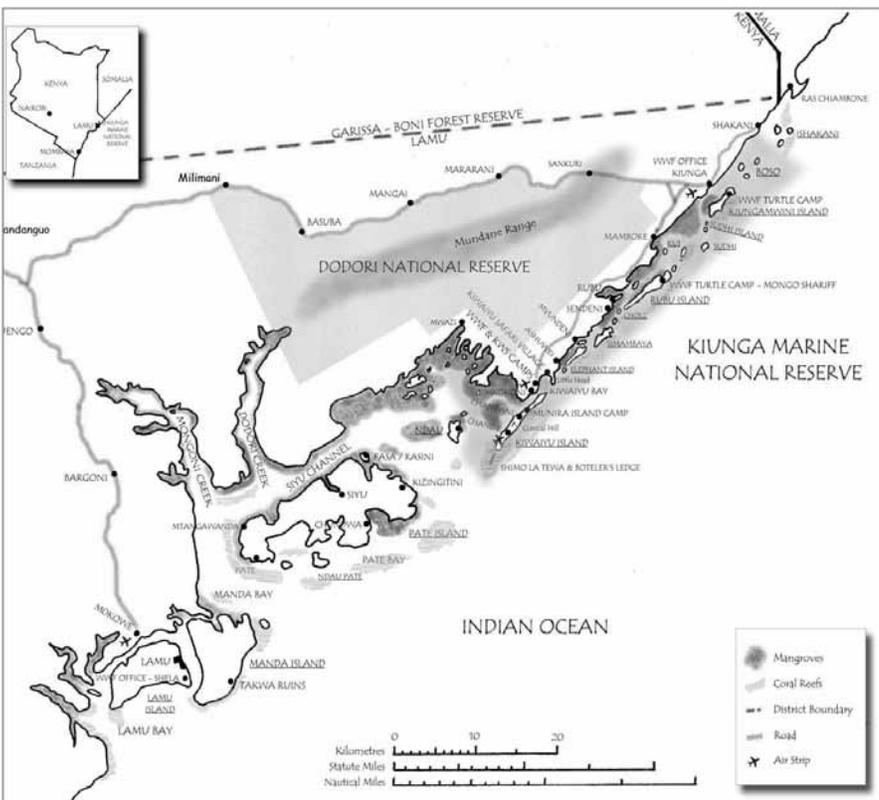
with Somalia precipitated a compulsory villagization program and the Kenya government moved the Boni out of the forest and into villages for reasons of security. This move effectively eroded their delicate relationship with the forest.

Today, the Boni practise some subsistence farming, using slash-and-burn and shifting cultivation methods. They eke out an income by selling woven



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Above: Boni-Lungi Forest in Lamu County. Forest canopy is diminishing at an escalated rate.



Left: Lamu County Map. Protected areas Dodori National Reserve and islands in the Kiunga Marine Reserve are being encroached by land speculators.

mats and honey collected from the forest or harvested from beekeeping projects, and it is likely that they supplement their diet with small quantities of game meat.

The Boni live in the forested corridor between the Boni and Dodori National Reserves, and southwest of the Dodori Reserve towards the tip of Dodori Creek in what is known as the Boni-Lungi forest. The international conservation community regards this area, together with the coastline and islands of the Lamu Archipelago, as a hotspot of biodiversity and a priority for conservation, because of the concentration of endemic plants and animals, and the severe degree of threat to their habitat.

The Boni-Lungi forest is a vast expanse (approximately 95 km<sup>2</sup>) of coastal scrub forest, with pockets of savannah, harbouring a significant amount of wildlife. The area provides wildlife corridors between the Boni and the Dodori National Reserves, as well as southwards to the Kipini forest and the Tana River area. The forest is ungazetted and unprotected despite its rich wildlife, including buffalo, lion, leopard, African wild dog, coastal topi, Abyssinian bushbuck, Ader's duiker, desert warthog, golden-rumped elephant shrew and the critically endangered hirola (Hunter's hartebeest) as well as hundreds of bird species. The region once supported one of the largest herds of elephant in East Africa. From an estimated 30,000 in the 1970s, their

current population is estimated to be about 300—yet still poachers prowl the area.

**Threats to the Boni-Lungi forest**

The most immediate threat to the forest is the slash-and-burn cutting by the Boni and, more significantly, by immigrant outsiders establishing agricultural plots. Each new growing season, more people arrive with machetes to cut the forest for farming. The soil in the area is not highly suitable for agriculture. If farmers are lucky, they may have two years of productivity, but even that depends on adequate rainfall. If they want to continue farming, they will need to shift cultivation to a new plot—ultimately requiring them to slash and burn more native forest.

But a disturbing new trend is emerging: chain saws are entering the scene, giving way to fears that larger swaths of forest will be cut at a faster pace than ever before. Power tools also assist illegal loggers to decimate the forest hardwoods.

Recently rumours abound about outside investors and developers eyeing large tracts of this forest land—for ranches and commercial farming, including a plantation of jatropha (a biofuel crop). But the indigenous occupants of the land, the Boni, are left out of any discussion about the land and its uses. Soon they may find their land appropriated or sold (extra-legally) out from under their feet.



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The door to East Africa's Past

The proposed port in Lamu District is also a potential threat to the Boni-Lungi forest and the culture and livelihood of the Boni people, but details of its construction (and the associated developments) have yet to be made public. The rights of the Boni (as well as the other local groups, including the Swahili, the Sanye and the Bajuni) need to be addressed, as well as the environmental concerns that accompany such a huge development, particularly in an area that is so culturally and biologically rich. Hopefully there will be appropriate planning and mitigation measures to avoid, minimize or offset any negative impact.

While the proposed port looms large, perhaps the most immediate threat is the planned upgrading of the road that transects the forest between Hindi and Kiunga. Granted, improving the often impassable road is not a bad idea. It will encourage much-needed economic activity and make it easier to provide social services in an area that is often inaccessible when it rains. A tarmac road could also play a significant role in improving the security of the region, which has been ravaged first by *shifita*, then poachers and now Al Shaabab from border-

and the National Land Policy could be years away—years that the Boni and the Boni-Lungi forest cannot spare.

Presently, the Ministry of Lands is working on a new model of land ownership that recognizes, for the first time in Kenya, community customary rights to land. The Community Customary Land Rights Recognition model, developed by the ministry in conjunction with the Kenya SECURE Project, intends to identify, demarcate and recognize—through title—community lands. The model will be piloted this year in the Boni area and other select coastal villages in Lamu East.

In conjunction with these measures, the Kenya Forest Service has also expressed interest in protecting a large tract of the Boni-Lungi forest outside of what will be designated as Boni community lands. Hopefully, the government will grant the Boni specific user rights to the protected forest and its products, to help sustain their way of life. In this scenario, the Boni would become owners of the land they have lived on for eons, and would have a say and a responsibility in how the larger forest is managed, as



Photos: © Kevin Doyle



ing Somalia. However, without first securing the land rights of the Boni and without proper land-use planning, the road may facilitate a faster intrusion of outsiders at an exponential rate—thus spelling doom for the forest and demise of the Boni.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

The new Constitution and the National Land Policy provide a legal framework for dealing with these acute land issues. The Bill of Rights in the Constitution states that the government shall put in place affirmative action programs for minorities and marginalized groups. Certainly, the Boni fall within this category. And, the National Land Policy calls for the protection of land rights from unjust and illegal expropriation of both vulnerable and minority communities. Again, the rights of the Boni are established here.

However, full implementation of the Constitution

*Left: Forest devastation caused by slash-and-burn cultivating methods in the Boni-Lungi forest.*

*Right: Coastal topi enjoy open glen in the Boni-Lungi forest*

well as share in benefits accrued from the use of land-based natural resources.

In *Avatar*, a bloody battle for land and resources ensues between the greedy corporation and the indigenous forest dwellers. The Na'vi beat back their invaders with tactical ingenuity and their bows and arrows. Here on earth, in Lamu county, the Boni must rely on the government to fulfil the promise of the new Constitution and the National Land Policy to save the forest, the land, their way of life, and their community. ■

**Kevin Doyle** is team leader for the USAID-funded SECURE Project based in Lamu District. The project is implemented by the Ministry of Lands, facilitated by Tetra Tech ARD, and works in collaboration with Kenya Wildlife Services, as well as a number of civil society and community-based organizations and community members.