

Rooted: An Art Installation about and with the Benet

The installation consists of three elements, which are explained below.

The first stands for the ancestral heritage: it is the paramount identity to which the Benet people refer.



This resembles the forest obviously, yet the 'trees' are grouped 4 x 4: a holy numerical value within Benet society. Anything 4 (times 4) is holy and considered to be good. E.g.: before circumcision, the boy needs to run around his hut four times before the ritual can take place.

The baskets mounted on the stems are symbolical for ancient trade; since time immemorial, Benet women used to trade these either for money or food: a basket could be exchanged for the amount of maize, wheat or rice it could hold. Furthermore, baskets are (still) used to greet visitors, meaning 'good':



The stems are common rough wooden poles, used to build huts, crop-containers, fences etc.. They have names of deceased Benet written on them, again in four separate groups: healers (green 'dipped' baskets), elders (white), judges (black) and victims of the evictions (red).

The names have been chosen by Benet elders and spokesmen and are written in their original Kupsapiny clan-form, which makes them directly identifiable among local folk.

(Pictured right: Chelangat Saima and his brother were killed by UWA rangers, when they were grazing their cattle inside the park boundaries).



The second element are the tree-seedlings. These have a highly symbolical value, both negative and positive, as this quote from David Karl Himmelfarb's dissertation "*In The Aftermath Of Displacement: A Political Ecology Of Dispossession, Transformation, and Conflict On Mt. Elgon, Uganda*" proves:

"Some residents above the 1993 line explained to me how trees have become symbolically associated with the park; to plant trees is to make the park. By contrast, clearing trees from one's land to make way for individual cultivation has become a way of resisting the park and marking the land as an individual's property."

Yet planting trees is also a necessity for soil-conservation (to avoid landslides). Planting trees means to invest in the future, to trust one's land tenure security. The seedlings are hanging just above the floor, so the roots cannot reach the soil. They symbolize the longing and doubt, whether to hold on to the past or invest in the future.



The third element represents the past, the current situation and the future at the same time. These children's drawings on plywood parts (25x25cm and 30x15cm) portray the small plots of land dotted on the slopes of Mt. Elgon and the futures the Benet children living here have envisioned on them through their drawings.



There are drawings of the animals they have, what they want to be in the future, what they would buy with Ush 10.000 and what they would grow on their lands. The line behind the seedlings represents the situation as it once was: enough land was there to herd the cattle, so that is why this line of drawings is spaced. The line in front of the seedlings however, depicts the lack of land: all is piled up.

It's obvious that either intensified agriculture or more land is needed to supply the growing population or education that can secure different professions.

Sound

The soundscape-composition that accompanies the installation consists of environmental sounds that were recorded inside Mt. Elgon Forest (cicadas and crickets, birds, streams and bees).

Voices of elders and women tell stories that depict life as it was in the old days, emphasizing on the pride and beauty of the beliefs, rituals and customs in those days. In contrast, children's voices proclaim their future plans and dreams. Traditional instruments and song accompany the recordings to form the total soundtrack.

The installation was premiered on December 22nd in Kapchorwa. Many VIP's were present (Local Commissioners, District Officers) and 75 Benet were ferried down from the mountain to attend the presentation and to perform traditional Benet songs and dances





Performance with traditional instruments and ritual dancing.

