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Valorizing Cultural Landscapes for Rural Development:
A Case of Abindu and Kit Mikayi, Kisumu County, Kenya

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Abstract
Cultural landscapes (CLs) within rural areas are valued for their characteristics and values. However, limited recognition has been given to their landscape values in rural planning. This exploratory case study investigated CLs as potential drivers for rural development. The first objective was to examine the landscape attributes of CLs and their neighborhoods, while the second focused on their importance through landscape values. Abindu and Kit Mikayi sites in Kisumu County, Kenya, were purposively selected. A qualitative approach was used, involving interviews with on-site users, neighborhood respondents, and key informants. Expert opinion and field investigations through observation, photography, and mapping were also employed. Findings revealed rare rock formations with caves and indigenous flora of medicinal value as dominant characteristics. The sites are visited for multiple values, with spiritual and religious aspects being most prominent. Challenges include inadequate amenities and land encroachment. The study recommends improved infrastructure and formulation of supportive CL policies.

Keywords: Cultural landscapes, rural development, landscape values, rural planning, Kisumu County, Kenya, cultural heritage, heritage tourism

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas, according to Mpogole (2025), Tirnakci (2021), and Dalal-Clayton et al. (2003), fall outside urban municipalities and consist of farmlands and villages. Rural planning focuses on development, land use, and resource management within these areas (Gkartzios et al., 2022). In developing countries, rural planning is expected to deliver essential public services such as schools and health facilities. It also ensures efficient provision of water, sanitation, communication, and electricity (Mpogole, 2025; Dalal-Clayton et al., 2003). However, rural areas continue to face challenges, particularly in the sustainable use and management of natural resources (Mpogole, 2025; Kosieradzka & Ludwig, 2016).

UNESCO (2002) states that cultural landscapes (CLs) represent the combined works of nature and humans. In recent years, there has been increasing attention to CLs due to their heritage values. Since their inclusion in the World Heritage categories by UNESCO, interest in these landscapes has grown significantly (Tirnakci, 2021; Perry et al., 2021; Sitas et al., 2021; Shen & Chou, 2021; Odede et al., 2020; Kosieradzka & Ludwig, 2016). This recognition has helped promote awareness of landscape-related issues globally (UNESCO, 2002).

In this context, global policy frameworks emphasize the importance of cultural landscapes. Target 11.4 under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 highlights the need to protect and safeguard cultural and natural heritage worldwide. Similarly, Goal 8 target 8.9 supports cultural heritage through local cultures and products (United Nations, 2022). At the national level, the Republic of Kenya (2012) National Museums and Heritage Act (Cap 216) recognizes both natural and cultural heritage. It mandates the identification, protection, conservation, and transmission of heritage resources. It also promotes the use of cultural resources for social and economic development.

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However, despite this recognition, the landscape values of cultural landscapes remain underutilized in rural planning in Kenya, particularly in Kisumu County. This limits their potential contribution to sustainable rural development.

According to Perry et al. (2021), Kisumu County has diverse cultural heritage resources distributed across unique landscapes with scenic landforms. The key concern is how these resources can be mobilized to support broader development goals such as poverty reduction and economic growth. Few studies in Africa have examined the role of CLs as potential drivers of rural development.

Therefore, the two specific objectives of this study were: first, to investigate the landscape attributes of the CL sites and their neighborhoods; and second, to examine their importance through landscape values. This study contributes to the body of rural landscape research by emphasizing the role of CLs in shaping rural landscape identity and highlighting the need for planning approaches that incorporate their latent potential to support development.

THEORY

UNESCO, ICOMOS and IUCN Provisions on CLs

CLs "are regions of the world that express a long and intimate relationship between peoples and their natural environments, reflecting specific techniques of sustainable land use, the characteristics and limits of the cultural environment they established in a specific spiritual relation with nature" (UNESCO, 2009). CLs are defined by ICOMOS (2008) as "a combination of nature and man-made works that emphasizes the structural and harmonious interactions between man and their environments". They are described by IUCN (2005) "as a meeting point between nature and the people, between the present and the past and between the values that are considered as intangibles and the tangibles". Assessments of CLs have been carried out by both ICOMOS and IUCN with UNESCO support. Recognition of CLs through their importance across the world is being championed by these three international bodies among others.

While UNESCO emphasizes the cultural and spiritual relationships between people and landscapes, ICOMOS focuses on the structural and physical interactions between human and natural systems. In contrast, IUCN highlights the integrative dimension by linking ecological, cultural and temporal aspects of landscapes. This shows that CLs are multidimensional, combining cultural, environmental and socio-economic perspectives, which must be jointly considered in planning and development.

Importance of CLs through Landscape Values and Identity

UNESCO (2002) provides for the recognition of values associated with CLs and features they possess to indigenous people. Jelen et al. (2021) supporting Schulp et al. (2019) posit that heritage in landscapes results from historical cultural elements that possess religious meanings, resulting in highly individual and specific areas. They face threats from urbanization and agricultural activities that result from changes in land uses (Perry et al., 2021; Sitas et al., 2021; Odede et al., 2020). CLs have multiple values and functions. The values provided through their landscape functions include heritage, biological, economic, recreation, therapeutic, learning, wilderness, spiritual, life sustaining, and aesthetic values (Shen & Chou, 2021).

CLs represent livelihoods, identities and beliefs of people (UNESCO, 2002). The author in this paper supporting K'oyoo (2025) opines that CLs in this case study are important aspects of rural landscape identity. They are place specific and constitute the local identity and heritage at the county levels. Gkartzios et al. (2022); Shen & Chou (2021) supporting Di Pietro et al. (2018) point out the inter link between heritage, culture and identity concepts. They all influence heritage tourism strongly, providing insights into identities and development. Shen & Chou (2021) posit that they should be incorporated in planning policies and other legislations that may affect landscapes directly or indirectly.

Rural Planning for Development through CLs

CL heritage is a basis for major economic activity through heritage tourism. Vasavada & Kour (2016) opine that promoting heritage and focusing on preservation of local cultural heritage works towards sustainable heritage tourism development. Samsudin & Maliki (2015) supported by Gong et al. (2022) state that CLs in developing countries in

recent years have been used for tourism, making their values known to the public and enhancing their protection. These authors state that strategies for landscape tourism can ensure sustainability of culture in tourism activities, leading to acquisition of CL knowledge.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework presented in **Figure 1** illustrates the interrelationship between CL recognition, landscape characteristics and values, and rural development outcomes. It shows that recognition by international bodies such as UNESCO, ICOMOS and IUCN informs the identification of landscape attributes and values. These values, including heritage, cultural, ecological and economic aspects, form the basis for planning interventions. Through proper valorization and integration into rural planning, CLs can contribute to social, economic and environmental development. The framework therefore positions CLs as a bridge between heritage conservation and rural development strategies.

Figure 1 summarizes the need for CL valorization for rural planning for development based on their values and recognition by international bodies.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Area

Abindu and Kit Mikayi CLs under study are both within Kisumu County. **Figure 2** shows the location of the two sites and surrounding areas. "*Cultural landscape neighborhood*" according to the author in this paper refers to a 1kilometre (1000 meters) radius designated around each CL. This allows for an understanding of the socio-economic character that can inform rural planning towards development through the CL sites. Kisumu Urban Project (2019) situational report states that Kisumu County has several cultural sites including Kajulu Caves, Abindu Shrine, Kit Mikayi, Fort Ternan, Oneno Nam among others. Though many of these may be located beyond the city limits, they are supported by the city's infrastructure and hospitality (CoK KUP, 2019).

Research and Sampling Design

This case study research used qualitative techniques to investigate Abindu CL within Kisumu West Sub-County and Kit Mikayi CL within Seme Sub-county. Data for both sites was collected through interviews with on-site CL users, residents within the CL neighborhoods, county and national government officials as

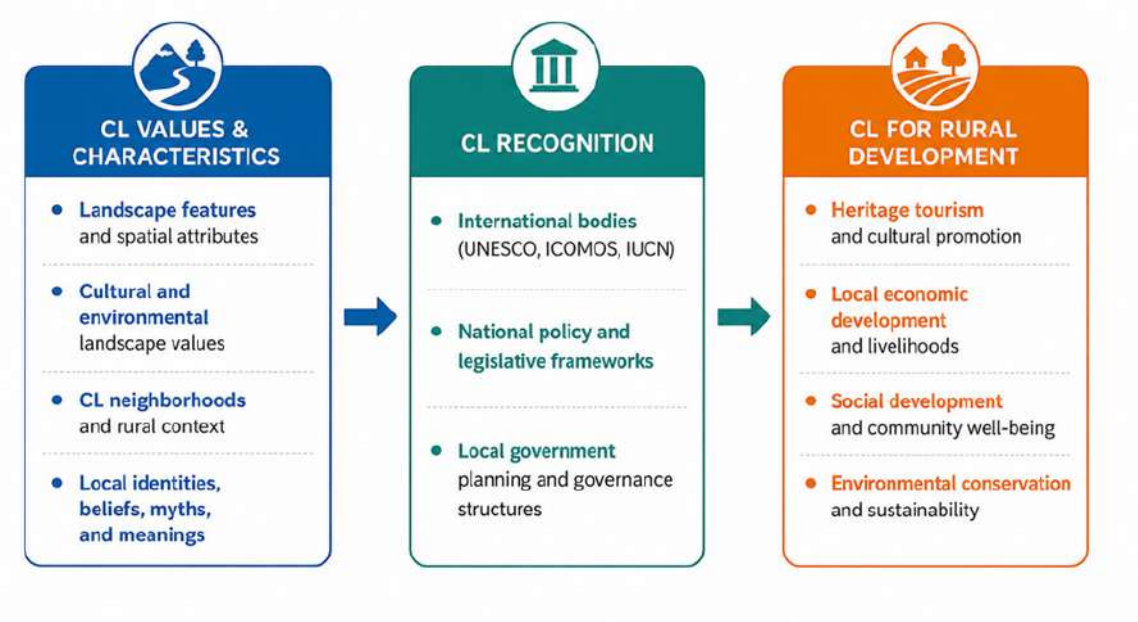


FIGURE 1
Conceptual framework for CLs valorization towards rural development
Source: Author, 2026

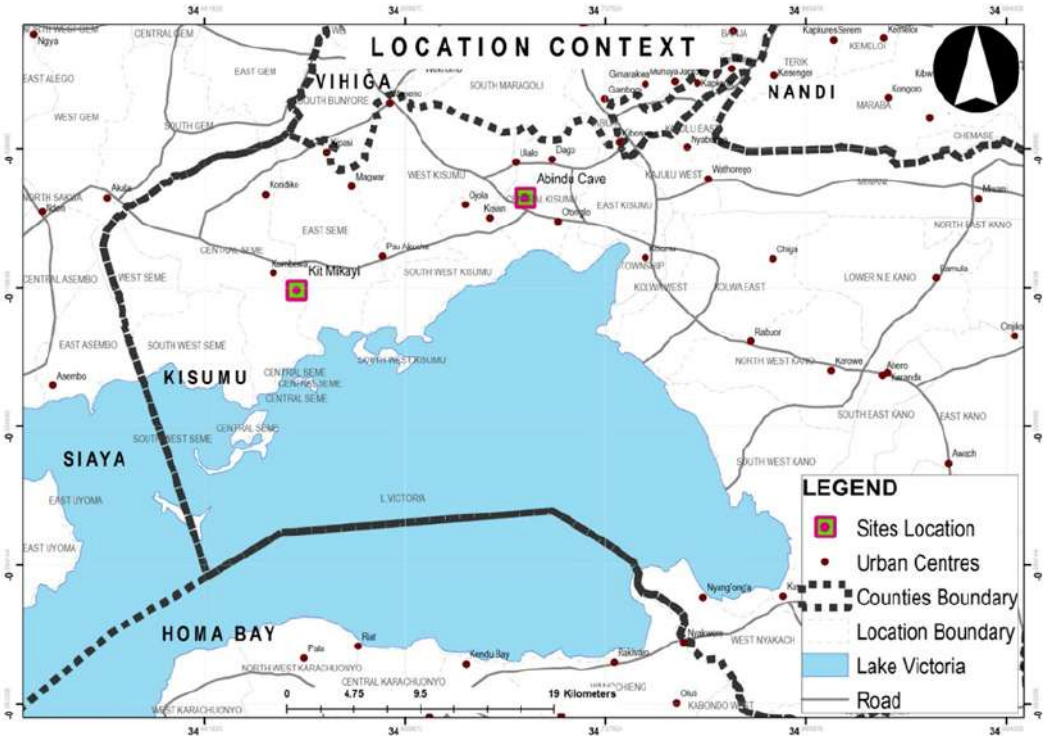


FIGURE 2
Abindu and Kit Mikayi CLs within Kisumu County and its environs
Source: Author, 2026

key informants and expert professionals. Field investigation through observations, CL site analysis and mapping to understand the landscape attributes and activities that are important to rural spatial planning was also undertaken. Purposive sampling was used to select the two sites due to proximity and easy accessibility by the researcher. The respondents were purposively selected based on availability, relevance to the study and willingness to participate.

Ethical approval was not formally required for this exploratory qualitative study because the research did not collect sensitive personal information or involve vulnerable participants. However, ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Permission to undertake data collection was granted by the Kisumu city management and the CL caretakers and management. The purpose of the research was clearly explained to each respondent before participation. Verbal consent was sought from all participants before the interviews. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were selected based on availability, relevance to the study and willingness to participate. The purpose of the study was also explained in simple local Dholuo language where necessary. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and no private personal information such as age, education level or place of residence was collected. The participants were also informed of the benefits of the research findings.

Data Collection

Field Investigation

CL neighborhoods were investigated for the infrastructure attributes, housing types, flora and fauna, views and the economic activities. These are crucial for rural planning towards growth and development. The two cultural sites were investigated for their landscape attributes besides the on-site user activities through observations. These are important in investigating the landscape values. Field investigation involved on site documentation through photography and mapping. The photographs served as qualitative data and were taken between 9:00 am and 5:00 pm within September 2025. Observational techniques employed to assess the activities on site. Aerial images from Google Maps were utilised in ArcGIS to locate the sites.

On-site Interviews

Eighteen interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants in September 2025. An interview schedule consisting of semi-structured questions was used. County Government of Kisumu (CGK) official and two respondents from the National Museums of Kenya that has national government mandate on CLs contributed as key informants. Notes were taken in addition to consented mobile phone recordings. Each interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. Guest et al. (2006) found that data saturation occurred within the first twelve interviews, with key thematic elements emerging as early as the sixth interview. This justifies the use of eighteen interviews for investigating the CL sites that was supported with other techniques for verifications and validity.

Data Analysis

The interview responses were analysed based on contents that address research questions. The narrations were classified according to each research question. No specialised software was employed for the analysis and the responses were transcribed verbatim and translated into English in case of responses in the local language. Observational notes were recorded according the attributes listed for investigation within the observation checklist for activities and landscape spatial attributes. Observations were analysed in terms of activities carried out within the CLs and the neighborhoods.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study based on field investigations, interviews, and observations conducted at Abindu and Kit Mikayi cultural landscapes and their surrounding neighborhoods. The results highlight the key physical, economic, and environmental attributes of the sites, as well as the distinctive landscape characteristics that define their rural context and cultural significance.

The section further examines the landscape attributes and values associated with each site, including their cultural, spiritual, ecological, and economic importance. It also identifies similarities and differences between the two cultural landscapes, providing insight into how these attributes contribute to their potential for rural development and planning interventions.

Abindu CL Neighborhood

Physical Attributes

Abindu CL falls within a rural setup with traditional homesteads and villages. Housing typology consists of traditional Luo houses with modern bungalows and maisonettes. The area is sparsely populated, with the southern part being hillier, with rugged terrain and fewer homesteads. The area has primary and secondary schools, with roads within being murrum roads. The main road from Kiboswa market to Daraja Mbili is tarmacked.

Economic Activities

Various businesses present include fast foods at Ulalo centre, which has a bus stop. Other businesses include posho mills, shops and small eateries. Agriculture includes crops such as bananas, maize, millet, sorghum and cassava.

Environmental Features

Tree cover includes mangoes, guavas, Grevillea robusta, Blue gum, Makhamia lutea, Azadirachta indica among other indigenous plant species.

Figures 3a to 3c and **4a** to **4c** depict the CL attributes described. **Figure 4** shows that most settlements within the CL neighborhood are concentrated to the northern part. The southern and most parts of the eastern and western are mostly covered by vegetation. **Figure 5** shows the settlement distribution within the CL neighborhood radiuses.

Kit Mikayi CL Neighborhood

Physical Attributes

Kit Mikayi CL neighborhood has homesteads with large compounds. Housing typology consists of traditional Luo houses with modern bungalows and a few maisonettes. The area is sparsely populated, with the southern part being hillier, characterized by rugged terrain and fewer homesteads.

The boundary of the CL is marked by homes. The area has primary and secondary schools with murrum feeder roads.



(a) (b) (c)

FIGURES 3a-3c
(a) Signage of Abindu CL at Daraja Mbili junction to Maseno, (b) Ulalo shopping centre and bus stop, and (c) Shop and guest rooms at neighbouring home
Source: Author, 2026



(a) (b) (c)

FIGURES 4a-4c
(a) Modern maisonettes, (b) CGK Technical and Vocational Training Institute, and (c) Agricultural farmland with bananas and tree cover in the background
Source: Author, 2026

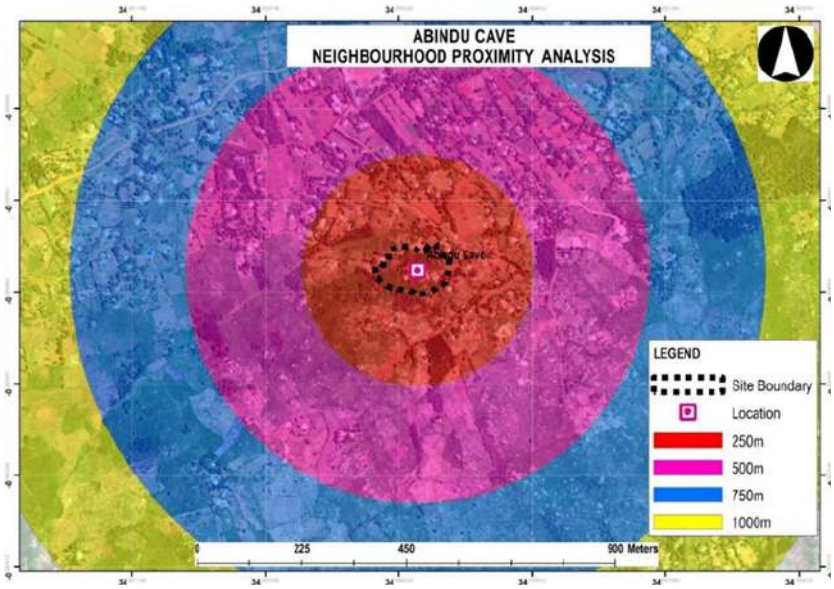


FIGURE 5
Abindu CL neighborhood within a one-kilometre radius
Source: Author, 2026

Economic Activities
Businesses include fast food stalls at Yago centre. Other businesses include posho mills, shops and workshops. Farming includes crops such as bananas, maize, millet, sorghum and cassava.

Environmental Features
Trees include mangoes, guavas, Grevillea robusta, Blue gum and other plant species.

Figures 6a to **6c** and **7a to 7c** depict the CL attributes.

Figure 8 shows that settlements within a one-kilometre radius of Kit Mikayi CL are sparsely populated, with large homesteads characterizing most parts of the rural landscape. The immediate southern part is hillier and mostly rocky, with less human habitation.

Landscape Attributes

Abindu CL
Abindu CL consists of rock formations composed of different rock shelters. According to a tour guide who has engaged with several local elders familiar with the site's history, there are different engravings that depict various aspects. These include the map of Africa, the shape of a fish and twelve loaves of bread.

The site also contains several indigenous plant species. According to the tour guide, most of the tree species within have leaves and roots of



(a) **(b)** **(c)**

FIGURES 6a-6c
(a) Kisumu–Bondo tarmac road showing a murrum road branching off to the site, (b) Posho mill business with tree cover in the background, and (c) Indigenous tree species along the site access road
Source: Author, 2026



(a) **(b)** **(c)**

FIGURES 7a-7c
(a) Agricultural farmlands within a homestead, (b) Bananas, and (c)Blue gum species
Source: Author, 2026

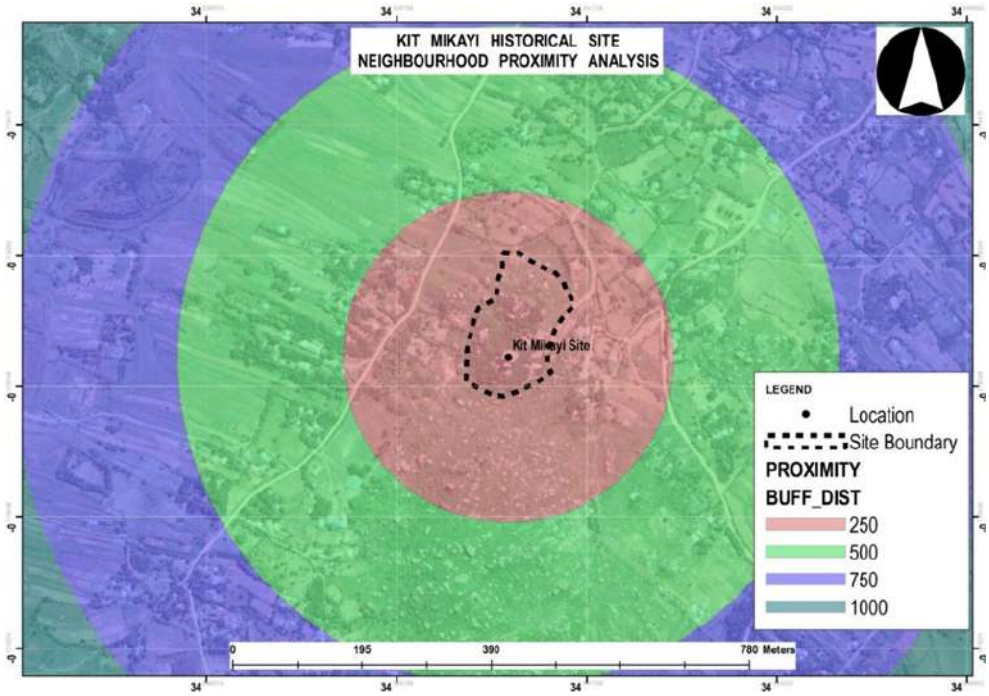


FIGURE 8
Kit Mikayi CL neighborhood
Source: Author, 2026

great medicinal value (**Figures 9a** to **9c** and **10a** to **10c**). The medicinal plants include Makhamia lutea, Azadirachta indica, Euphorbia candelabra/ ingens, Boscia coriacea (Akado in the local Luo language), Albizia coriaria, Ficus sycomorus and Vepris nobilis among others.

There is a threat of encroachment, as villagers access the site to seek remedies for ailments from these rare medicinal plants within the CL.

According to a KI-CGK official, Abindu CL faces the problem of land grabbing and encroachment. The sentiments were:

"I am aware of land boundary issues at Abindu. Currently, I know there is a local denomination church structure that is under construction within this site. The county cannot put up infrastructure improvements on land that does not belong to it. There is need to replicate the infrastructure facilities done at Kit Mikayi on Abindu CL, probably in the next financial year" (KI-CGK).

Figures 11a–11d shows the internal spatial features of Abindu cultural landscape, including



(a)



(b)



(c)

FIGURES 9a-9c
(a) Chain link fence, gate, signage, intruder church structure, (b) Temporary church structure, toilet block, and (c) Two large rocks, and vegetation immediately after the gate area
Source: Author, 2026



(a) (b) (c)

FIGURES 10a -10c

(a) Rock formations with surrounding vegetation, (b) View of the southern neighborhood from the site, and (c)Layering of rocks with vegetation in between

Source: Author, 2026



(a) (b) (c) (d)

FIGURES 11a -11d

(a) Passage between large rocks, (b) narrow passage to one of the caves, (c) Space between the rocks, and (d) a cave below the rocks with a worshipper asleep underneath

Source: Author, 2026

passages between rocks and cave spaces used for worship and meditation.

According to the volunteer tour guide, respondent AS 1, Abindu CL has several caves that have been given different names. The caves within Abindu CL are a source of multiple community narratives and are believed to have supernatural healing powers, resulting in visits by local witchdoctors and herbalists. He explained:

"Abindu CL has five different caves with different names. Cave 1 is accessed by going up between the rocks and then down into the cave. The rocks here have imprints of the left leg, the shape of a sword, and upside-down writings of various letters such as X, L, T, U, O that occur naturally. Many visit from Friday for prayers and dry fasting. This cave has the presence of yellow candles" (AS 1).

The presence of the second cave is evident with candles of different colours and can accommodate about 10 people. The fourth cave is large enough to accommodate about 100 people. On-site observation at this fourth cave showed a worshipper asleep on the flat rock surface that forms the floor between the large rocks creating the cave shade.

The fifth cave is a small space that is also used as a hideaway for prayers. On-site observations at Abindu revealed that the presence of the various caves offers a peaceful retreat from exposed areas and is used by worshippers for prayer, meditation and singing.

Kit Mikayi CL

Kit Mikayi is a huge rock formation consisting of three stones resting on top of each other. Its name is derived from the Luo dialect, meaning "The Stone of the First Wife." According to Perry et al. (2021), supported by field investigations,

it is a rock formation of seven boulders made of graphite stones that are uniquely layered.

The site has bat-dwelling caves that provide spaces for prayer and meditation among local worshippers who visit for fasting and spiritual activities. The CL is located approximately 12 kilometres from Kisumu City within a five-acre site, whose true boundaries are contested. According to a key informant who is a senior official at the County Government of Kisumu (CGK) Department of Culture, the site has boundary issues with neighboring homesteads, and the existing fence does not reflect the full original extent of the CL.

According to an 84-year-old tour guide who has known Kit Mikayi all his life, the narrative and myths surrounding this rare rock formation are as follows:

"There was an old man called Ngeso Kosanjo who arrived at this site and went to the stone area where people are praying within the cave. The presence of the caves made him happy and he decided to stay here briefly. He would later spend most of his time at this place away from his home. The old people decided to name it Kit Mikayi, meaning the stone of the first wife, after the beloved first wife in Luo culture" (KM 1).

According to the tour guide (KM 1), the CL has rare medicinal trees that are sought after by people from both local and distant areas. The site also has a central shrine within the largest cave, which is used by local religious denominations that camp at the site for most days of the week to seek spiritual blessings.

Field investigation photography as presented in **Figures 12a–12c** and **13a–13c** revealed infrastructure constructed by the County Government of Kisumu (CGK) to upgrade Kit Mikayi CL. These include signage at the gate, a gate with chain-link fencing and concrete posts, concrete seats, solar lighting, a security gatehouse, and a reception/customer care facility that also



(a) **(b)** **(c)**

FIGURES 12a -12c
(a) Signage and security gatehouse at the CL entrance, (b) Reception and resource centre, and (d) Toilets respectively
Source: Author, 2026



(a) **(b)** **(c)**

FIGURES 13a -13c
(a) Traditional resting place "Abila" (in the local Luo language), (b) Pavilion, and (c) Gazebo respectively
Source: Author, 2026

serves as a resource centre. In addition, a pavilion and gazebo have been provided for shading and for cultural performances such as dances.

CGK has also constructed two ablution blocks for both genders next to the reception building. According to a CGK official, there is a need to replicate similar infrastructure at Abindu CL. The official further stated that the county is undertaking minimal interventions to avoid interfering with the naturalness of the heritage site within its rural landscape. Drainage works and paving should therefore be carried out with caution to preserve the integrity of the site.

On-site investigation revealed a round grass-thatched structure called "Abila," which symbolizes the private resting place for the elder in a homestead and houses a variety of traditional Luo artifacts representing different aspects of culture and traditions.

Artifacts displayed include a stool, clay cooking pots, water-fetching items, a foldable chair, a calabash, a gourd for storing and preserving milk, an arrow, a musical instrument known as "Orutu," and a horn instrument (**Figures 14a–14d**).

The author in this paper finds it important that local customs and traditions be relayed to both local and international visitors in order to foster knowledge that has defined cultural identity over time. The CL, therefore, through "Abila," fulfills a pedagogical (learning) value in addition to its heritage value, among others.

On-site observation along the nature trail that runs along the boundary fence revealed a serene environment with a dense presence of flora and fauna, including monkeys. Flora species as shown **Figures 15a–15d** include *Acacia xanthophloea*, *Euphorbia* species, and *Ficus sycomorus*, among other indigenous species that grow naturally,



(a) **(b)** **(c)** **(d)**

FIGURES 14a -14d
Layering of rock formations from different directions
Source: Author, 2026



(a) **(b)** **(c)** **(d)**

FIGURES 15a -15d
Nature trail along the boundary with indigenous tree species, including *Euphorbia candelabra/ingens* (b), *Euphorbia tirucalli*, and *Acacia xanthophloea* (d)
Source: Author, 2026

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creating a wilderness effect and intrinsic value.

Landscape Values

Field investigation through observations, interviews with on-site respondents, CL neighborhood respondents, and tour guides as key informants identified a total of thirteen landscape values. The landscape values for both CLs are summarized in **Table 1**.

TABLE 1

Landscape values based for the CLs

Landscape value	Abindu CL	Kit Mikayi CL
Economic value	The site offers a place for eco-tourism that generates revenue from local and international tourists.	-Revenue from sale of local crafts, cultural products that include baskets, hats etc. -Revenue from performing of traditional songs and dances. -Revenue from local and international tourists to the CL. -Revenue paid to the freelance local tour guides
Spiritual value	-The myths that surround this CL have significant cultural values. -Is visited by religious individuals and groups from far and wide for spiritual nourishment and blessings.	-Is associated with myths and legends about the local people and offers opportunity for religious and political figures to visit to enrich their lives based on solutions they seek.
Religious value	-The rocks tops and caves they form are sacred places for several individuals who visit to seek divine interventions. -Local denominations have faithfuls' praying, meditating, and fasting during their visits. -Traditional diviners draw sacred powers from the caves and the holy waters that they use for exorcism and purification purposes.	-Visited by members of several local denominations for praying, meditating and fasting within the rock tops and caves. -Traditional diviners draw sacred powers from the caves and the holy waters that they use for exorcism and purification purposes.
Cultural value	-Aspects of worship are imbued into the culture and practices of the local denominations.	-Several intangible traditional cultural practices take place within this CL including dancing, singing, sale of crafts, art festivals.
Recreation /Social value	The site offers great opportunities for outdoor recreation in terms of team building, bird watching, sightseeing, rock climbing, camping	The site offers great opportunities for outdoor recreation in terms of team building, bird watching, sightseeing, rock climbing, camping
Medicinal value	-Several rare indigenous plant species present within this CL are valued for their leaves, barks and roots that are highly medicinal.	-Several rare indigenous plant species present within this CL are valued for their leaves, barks and roots that are highly medicinal.
Environmental/ geological value	-The natural landscape consisting of natural rock formations within highly rugged and hilly terrain provides habitat for several flora and fauna. -The layering of the rocks that forms the natural caves at different levels is rare.	The natural rock formations within the high rugged terrain and hilly landscapes within and around present a natural landscape that provides habitat for several flora and fauna that is rare from the layering of the stones and growing of the trees between the rocks.

Landscape value	Abindu CL	Kit Mikayi CL
	-The CL is important in producing, renewing and preserving the local air, water and soil through their dense natural flora, presence of natural water at the tree roots	-The layering of the rocks that forms the natural caves at different levels is rare. -he CL is important in producing, renewing and preserving the local air, water and soil through their dense natural flora, presence of natural water at the tree roots
Aesthetic/Scenic value	The site due to high gradient on top of the rocks offers attractive sights that are panoramic towards the city and within the CL neighborhood that is hilly, rugged terrain of several rock formations	The site from the top of the rocks offers attractive sights that are panoramic towards the city and within the CL neighborhood that is hilly, rugged terrain of several rock formations
Learning value	-Local schools visit this CL to learn about the history, religious values, practices among other landscape values. -Used by scientists and researchers to undertake studies on local traditions, cultures and to learn about local indigenous plan species.	-Local schools visit this CL to learn about the history, religious values, practices among other landscape values. -Used by scientists and researchers to undertake studies on local traditions, cultures and to learn about local indigenous plan species.
Wilderness value	The site presents wildness through the large trees other vegetation, fauna and rock formations appearing in their naturalness	The site presents wildness due to its natural vegetation, fauna in addition to the rock formations, caves
Intrinsic value	The CL is valuable for its own sake no matter what, whether they are used or not.	The CL is valuable for its own sake no matter what, whether they are used or not.
Heritage value	The site has natural and human history about their presence that has existed for generations	The site has its narratives about its existence over the years hence natural and human history
Biological diversity value	The site is home to several fauna like monkeys, birds, snakes and other reptiles. Indigenous plant species valued for medicinal values among other uses.	The site is home to several fauna like monkeys, birds in addition to several indigenous plant species.

Source: Authors, 2026

Table 1 shows similarities in most of the landscape values based on their spatial attributes, which are largely influenced by vegetation and rock formations as the dominant landscape features.

The various landscape values at Kit Mikayi were emphasized by the tour guide KM 1, who stated:

"The trees next to the stones have leaves and roots with medicinal value. The site is known for cultural beliefs and is used for blessings, sacrifice of would-be couples and even politicians. The site is famous for prayers to avert calamities, end droughts and ensure good harvests" (KM 1, 84-year-old male tour guide and local resident).

Field investigation within the rock area showed several worshippers from the Legio Maria denomination praying, meditating and singing. They occupied various parts of the main cave and the rock surfaces above the side stones while dressed in religious attire. The faithful also undertook cooking and reading of their scriptures within the rock areas. Participants were of different ages and genders, indicating continuous and inclusive use of the site.

The cultural heritage value of the CL is further reflected in narratives provided by KM 1, who noted that falling water from the rocks symbolizes a bad omen associated with the tears of the first

wife. This phenomenon is interpreted as a signal that sacrifices are required to avert calamities. The respondent indicated that such narratives have been passed down across generations.

Recreational and physical activities such as rock climbing also take place, as visitors navigate the layered rocks within the hilly terrain.

The social and cultural importance of the site is further emphasized by its use as a gathering point for religious groups such as Roho, Luong Mogik and Legio Maria, as well as for political visits, community interactions and educational tours by schools and researchers from various regions.

An aspect of local perception was observed among residents within the Abindu CL neighborhood. One respondent (ACLN 3), a motorcycle operator, stated:

"We do not frequently visit the CL as residents, although we used to go there when we were younger. The place is always busy with visitors for prayers and tourism. Some visitors come with high-end vehicles and stay from Friday to Sunday for fasting and prayers."

The respondent further noted that local transport services benefit economically from the site through ferrying visitors, providing a source of livelihood.

DISCUSSION

The Kenya National Museums & Heritage Act (2012) Cap 216 envisions CLs as landscapes used for religious purposes and as community resources that can be utilized for economic and social development. This calls for tapping into their latent potential as drivers of rural development. Expert opinion from an anthropologist, sociologist and regional planner underscores the importance of caves, rock formations, flora and fauna in contributing to the landscape values identified in this study.

ICOMOS (2008) Principle 3 (Part 4) states that "the surrounding landscape, natural environment and geographical setting are integral parts of a site's historical and cultural significance" (ICOMOS, 2008). Shen and Chou (2021) argue that landscape characteristics arising from natural and human interactions form key resources for CL development. Similarly, Kosieradzka and Ludwig (2016) emphasize that documenting spatial attributes strengthens their value, while Tirnakci (2021) highlights the need for inventory and assessment of landscape characteristics. The observed similarities in both CLs, particularly rock formations, caves and indigenous flora, contribute to their wilderness character and associated landscape values.

While both Abindu and Kit Mikayi share similar landscape attributes such as rock formations, caves and indigenous vegetation, notable differences emerge in terms of infrastructure development, management and utilization. Abindu is characterized by limited infrastructure, encroachment challenges and weaker formal management structures. In contrast, Kit Mikayi demonstrates relatively improved infrastructure, including fencing, reception facilities and visitor amenities, reflecting more advanced site development and management interventions. This suggests uneven levels of valorization between the two CLs, despite their comparable heritage potential.

According to Perry et al. (2021), cultural heritage within CLs is a pathway to economic development, infrastructure improvement and community participation in rural planning. Tourism is identified as a key driver of such development. The promotion of Abindu and Kit Mikayi as tourist destinations highlights the need for infrastructure investment, including improved access roads and support for local economic activities such as crafts and cultural performances.

However, the findings also reveal critical challenges that may limit the realization of this potential. These include land encroachment, lack of coordinated policy frameworks, and uneven distribution of infrastructure between sites. Without addressing these issues, the valorization of CLs may remain partial and may not fully translate into sustainable rural development outcomes.

Perry et al. (2021) further note the lack of coordinated policy frameworks for cultural heritage at the local level, which limits recognition of the diversity of heritage values. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8 (target 8.9) calls for policies that promote sustainable

tourism through local culture and products, while Goal 11 (target 11.4) emphasizes protection and safeguarding of cultural and natural heritage (United Nations, 2022).

The author in this study therefore opines that the importance of both Abindu and Kit Mikayi CLs should be strengthened through the formulation and implementation of comprehensive policies and planning frameworks that support their valorization for rural development.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that cultural landscapes (CLs) such as Abindu and Kit Mikayi possess significant landscape attributes and values that can support rural development. Both sites share similar characteristics, including rock formations, caves and indigenous flora, which contribute to their cultural, spiritual and economic importance. However, differences in infrastructure development and management highlight uneven levels of valorization between the two sites. The findings emphasize that CLs are not only heritage assets but also potential drivers of local economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability. There is therefore a need to integrate CLs into rural planning frameworks to fully unlock their potential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To fully unlock and tap into the latent potential of CLs within rural areas, more needs to be done in terms of valorization. The following key points are suggested:

Management and Governance

- The County Government of Kisumu should train local CL representatives on valorization.
- The county government should carry out rural appraisal and inventory CL sites.
- The national government should offer financial incentives for infrastructure provision.
- The county government should brand and market CL sites to promote heritage tourism.
- Policies should be formulated and implemented to support regular inventorying and conservation of CLs.
- Partnerships with tourism organizations should be initiated and strengthened.
- Rural planning should incorporate heritage tourism strategies linked to CLs.
- Awareness campaigns should be conducted to promote local cultural heritage tourism.

Planning and Design

- Feeder access roads to both CLs should be improved through long-term tarmacking.
- A cultural resource centre, security gatehouse, reception and pavilion should be developed at Abindu CL.
- Electricity and water should be connected to improve security and user convenience at Abindu CL.
- Regular maintenance of boundary fences should be undertaken at both CLs.
- Online platforms should be used to market and brand the sites for tourism promotion.
- Cleanliness should be improved through regular maintenance and provision of litter bins.
- Curio shops should be established to support the sale of traditional crafts such as baskets and pottery.

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