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## **Influence of culture on forest perception and use among the Ogiek in Kenya**

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### **Background**

The interaction of human and nature that has shaped and constantly continues to shape the condition of forests has attracted the interest of researchers and development practitioners. Understanding the cultural perception of specific forest users and their local world view is seen as a precondition to assess their forest related behaviours and activities. It sharpens the insight that for the formulation of appropriate and effective interventions and policies for sustainable natural resource management an integration of a sustainable cultural resource management is inevitable. The relationship is investigated based on a case study among the Ogiek, which is a forest dweller community living in the highland forests of Western Kenya.

This ethnic group has to struggle with the insecurity of the political situation as well as with unclear land ownership. This has led to political and economic marginalization. Nonetheless these forest dwellers have still a close connectedness to the forest which they have inhabited for centuries.

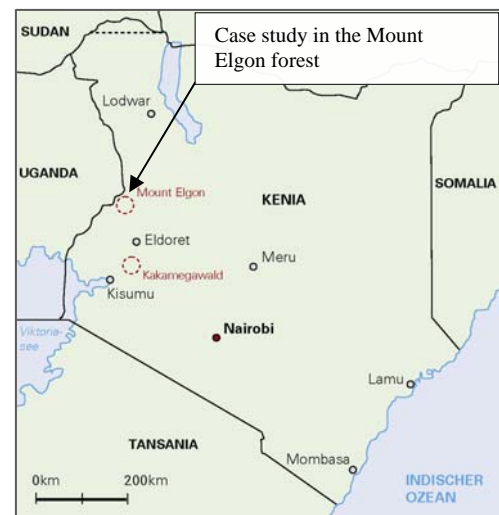
### **Objective**

This paper aims to illustrate how local values and attitudes among the Ogiek determine their forest perception and use. Beside this the changes of their lifestyle in accordance with the change of their culture will be examined. It is investigated how this change influences their forest perception and use.

### **Methods and study area**

The primary data for this paper originate from 4 qualitative episodic interviews (Lamnek 2005, p. 362) administered among the Ogiek in the Mount Elgon region in Western Kenya (Fig.1) in 2007. The focus of the interviews was on forest definitions, forest perception and meaning, feelings inside the forest, forest use, religious and customary rules.

Interviewees have been chosen according to their age



**Figure 1** Location of study area

(34/37/74/81years), lifetime spent in the Mount Elgon forest and gender (2/2). Due to the explorative character of the study<sup>1</sup> this selection follows the principle of maximal contrast and aims to obtain a wide spectrum of answers. During the 3 month lasting field research participatory observation has been carried out. The recorded interviews were translated by a local translator from Ogiek into English. If possible the interviews have been performed in English. The interviews were then transcribed and have been analyzed using the software MaxQda2. The data are categorized and grouped using the Grounded Theory approach. The Ordered Adaptive Structure of Bargatzky (1986) is applied as interpretation model.

## Results and discussion

The obtained first and second degree coding categories are summarized in Table 1. General categories are the meaning of the forest today, the traditional forest life and the perceived changes. In the following chapter selected categories will be discussed.

**Table 1 First and second degree Coding Categories and Frequency of Occurrence**

| <b>Coding category</b>                        | <b>total frequency</b> | <b>number of involved interviewees (max. 4)</b> |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <b>meaning of the forest</b>                  | <b>78</b>              | <b>(4/4)</b>                                    |
| honey                                         | 13                     | (4/4)                                           |
| wild animals                                  | 11                     | (3/4)                                           |
| resource - every part in the forest is useful | 10                     | (4/4)                                           |
| good place - home                             | 10                     | (3/4)                                           |
| history                                       | 7                      | (2/4)                                           |
| brings rain - water catchment area            | 5                      | (2/4)                                           |
| human dependence on nature                    | 3                      | (1/4)                                           |
| future heritage                               | 3                      | (2/4)                                           |
| gift                                          | 3                      | (2/4)                                           |
| place to teach the children                   | 3                      | (2/4)                                           |
| trees are helpful in the cultural setting     | 3                      | (3/4)                                           |
| natural vegetation                            | 2                      | (2/4)                                           |
| beauty                                        | 2                      | (2/4)                                           |
| protects our animals                          | 2                      | (1/4)                                           |
| life                                          | 1                      | (1/4)                                           |
| <b>traditional forest life</b>                | <b>101</b>             | <b>(4/4)</b>                                    |
| vivid ceremonies and traditions               | 17                     | (4/4)                                           |
| use of forest products                        | 17                     | (4/4)                                           |
| obey rules strictly                           | 16                     | (3/4)                                           |
| sustainable hunting                           | 13                     | (3/4)                                           |
| collection of dead fire wood                  | 7                      | (3/4)                                           |
| rules and reasons                             | 6                      | (3/4)                                           |
| no formal school                              | 6                      | (3/4)                                           |
| protection of the indigenous forest           | 6                      | (2/4)                                           |
| importance of honey                           | 3                      | (2/4)                                           |
| no form of cultivation                        | 3                      | (1/4)                                           |
| variety of wild animals                       | 3                      | (2/4)                                           |
| sometimes no food                             | 2                      | (2/4)                                           |
| during that time we were moving               | 1                      | (1/4)                                           |
| sometimes insecurity                          | 1                      | (1/4)                                           |
| <b>changes</b>                                | <b>40</b>              | <b>(4/4)</b>                                    |
| rare domestic animal                          | 8                      | (4/4)                                           |
| school education and additional knowledge     | 5                      | (2/4)                                           |
| life outside of the forest in villages/farms  | 5                      | (2/4)                                           |

<sup>1</sup> This research is part of an on-going PhD project on “Stakeholder Value Systems, Attitudes and Acting - the case of forest management in Kenya“ at the Institute of International Forestry and Forest Products, Technische Universität Dresden.

|                                                          |   |       |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---|-------|
| circumcision today                                       | 4 | (2/4) |
| government controls the forest                           | 3 | (2/4) |
| resources (wild animals and forest area) are reduced     | 3 | (3/4) |
| wild animals                                             | 3 | (3/4) |
| loss of local knowledge                                  | 2 | (1/4) |
| perception of the forest differs due to school education | 2 | (1/4) |
| new religion                                             | 2 | (1/4) |
| forest has not changed much                              | 1 | (1/4) |
| use of plastic                                           | 1 | (1/4) |
| reduced hunting frequency                                | 1 | (1/4) |

The first, and of all interviewees mentioned, aspect of forest meaning is the honey. One of the interviewees simply said:

*“When I hear of the forest I think of honey” (Interview 73, p.3)*

This forest product is perceived in various dimensions and with a symbolic background. The profane use as food during starvation time is mentioned as well as the medicinal value and the ceremonial dependence on the availability of honey. The importance of honey is underlined by the often mentioned rules how to harvest honey without any destruction of trees. This should ensure the further sustainable use of the desired exquisiteness. Forest dwellers perceive the honey time traditionally as a more independent time compared to the close group work during hunting season (see Turnbull 1968, p.263). The honey time in the Mount Elgon forest is restricted to two month (March-April). A local specified ceremony called *Korose* is still conducted to express ones thanks to God. The 74 years old interviewee, traditional African believer, said:

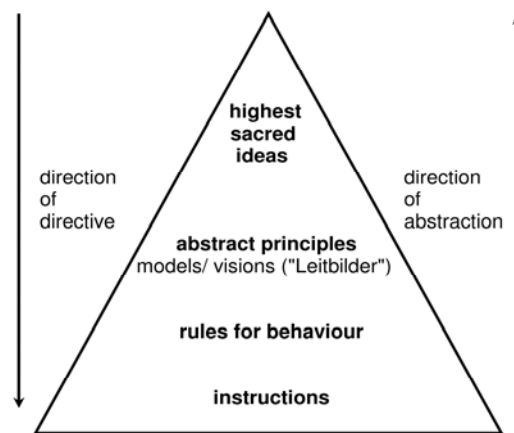
*“Then we have a big fire then we have to drop all the flowers that we have found from the old trees, ..., symbolically this means that when we have, eh, now done like that it will now if it is honey, mh, we will get plenty. That now we have blessed the forest to give us more. That is our traditional it is called Korose. .... And is now like, eh, blessing the forest to give us more. Mh. Give us more nectar to give us more honey. ... That if the smoke has gone up, of those flowers that means we have told god that you have given us what we are eating” (Interview 72, p.9)*

Till today the importance of honey is expressed in the practiced honey harvest and the number of beehives that are looked after by an adult man. The traditional land tenure system was organized by family related areas for honey harvest. It has been eroded by the colonial and independent governmental management of the forest. Reduced forest size and forest plantations with exotic tree species are viewed from the perspective of not existing suitable flowers for the bees to produce honey. From this perspective the value of indigenous trees is higher.

Another expression of the forest meaning is that the forest as a whole is perceived as home and place to feel comfortable, to feel good. In the interviews it has been emphasized that the former life was much more appropriate for both, culture and nature. Without the forest environment the complete culture of the Ogiek declines, because it can't be practiced anymore.

On the other side the respondents mentioned that the forest life is determined by sometimes strain moving and food instability, famine as well as insecurity. These findings correspond with Kratz (1994, p.149).

To understand the more hidden and not obvious visible intangible values the Ordered Adaptive Structure is applied (Fig. 2). The ecological anthropologist Bargatzky (1986) used this model to classify and to structure values. The pyramid consists of several hierarchically arranged sub-systems. The sub-systems of the lower level denote specific and exact tasks, e.g. who is allowed to harvest honey in which area of the forest or who will stay in which part of the forest. On the top of the hierarchy the most abstract ideas are located. They are at the same time the most lasting ones. The ideas about the sense of the world or God are placed there. Here we will find the expression that the forest and the honey have been given by God to the Ogiek. Changes of these highest sacred ideas take time. Changes of the lower level will occur much faster. On the other side - once disturbed or destroyed - the highest sacred values can't be re-established within a few days. Therefore as long as the Ogiek perceive honey in its various expressions as a cultural important symbol, it is advisable to maintain these cultural perception. It will benefit the forest and the people.



**Figure 2 Ordered adaptive structure (Bargatzky 1986) slightly changed by Irrgang (2005)**

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