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Influence of Culture on Forest Perception and Use among the Okiek in Kenya

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Abstract

The Okiek, a traditional hunter and gatherer community in Kenya, have inhabited the highland forests of the country for a long time. Their traditional forest use that has supported their livelihood is hunting and gathering. The Okiek had to stop their hunting activities due to changing political frame conditions, and instead added small farming and livestock keeping to their livelihood activities during the last decades. Yet, honey collection is one of the traditional practices that still possess major socio-economic importance today and simultaneously represent an important symbol of Okiek cultural identity. For example, celebrating the flowering period of certain tree species in different altitudes of the forest still constitutes a vivid tradition that is related to the promise of a plentiful honey harvest and availability of honey-wine, used in most traditional ceremonies. The importance that is assigned to honey production also prohibits the inappropriate use of fire in the forest.

Taking particular reference to the practice of honey gathering, this paper aims to examine how traditional values and attitudes among the Okiek determine their forest use and perception. The adaptive hierarchical structure that displays the order of abstract, long lasting values and guiding principles as well as the real behaviour serves as the theoretical framework of the research.

Participatory observation and qualitative interviews among the Okiek were conducted in 2007. The recorded interviews were transcribed and have been analysed using the software MaxQda2. An intensive secondary literature study, mainly of anthropological literature, has been performed.

The results reveal that values and perceptions are traditionally rooted. They are closely connected to traditional belief systems and an undisturbed social structure. The paper shows which underlying cultural values exist for each step of the honey production. Furthermore the results demonstrate how traditional elements of forest use are integrated in current land use systems and how these elements contribute to sustainable and livelihood oriented land use systems.

Keywords: Traditional forest use, Kenya, hunter and gatherer