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### Forest user perceptions of today's forests in Western Kenya

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### Background and Objective

The human nature relationship within Africa is often marked by overuse and destruction of forests. There are numerous studies in the field of natural science about forests and forest management (e.g. Stave et al. 2005, Hitimana et al. 2004). They focus on the utilitarian perception of forests. However, there is a high number of other ways to perceive the forest. The symbolic, aesthetic and religious perceptions of forest related stakeholders are often neglected and underestimated. Values related to these perceptions can play a vital role in the protection and management of forests (Byers et al., 2001). However, there are nearly no scientific studies in this field. This paper focuses on the perception of forests in Western Kenya. The objective is to highlight the remains of traditional forest perceptions with emphasis to the intangible values. In contrast to traditional values of three cases the professional forest managers' intangible values will be considered. Furthermore suggestions for further forest management shall be derived.

### Method and study area

The study has an explorative, qualitative character<sup>1</sup>. Beside participatory observation and literature review on the value structure of the professional forest manager, qualitative interviews among 3 different ethnic groups have been conducted. The data are analysed following the Grounded Theory Approach (Strauss & Corbin 2003). To structure the values the Ordered Adaptive Structure of the culture anthropologist Bargatzky (1986) is applied. The study areas were situated in Western Kenya around Kakamega forest and Mt Elgon forest.

- (1) Case study I was carried out among the Isukha on the south western border of Kakamega forest, a tropical rainforest consisting of indigenous and exotic tree species. The Isukha are traditional farmers. They are Christians although they still practice a few traditional ceremonies in the forest. Beside Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) like medicine and fruits, firewood is used on a daily basis. The influence of modern life in terms of infrastructure (e.g. roads, electricity) is relatively high.
- (2) Case study II is situated on the south eastern edge of Kakamega forest. The interviewed group, the Tiriki have nearby their villages so called sacred forests consisting of indigenous tree species. They are farmers and hunters and follow the Traditional African Religion (TAR) or Christianity. One remarkable characteristic is their common sense based on age

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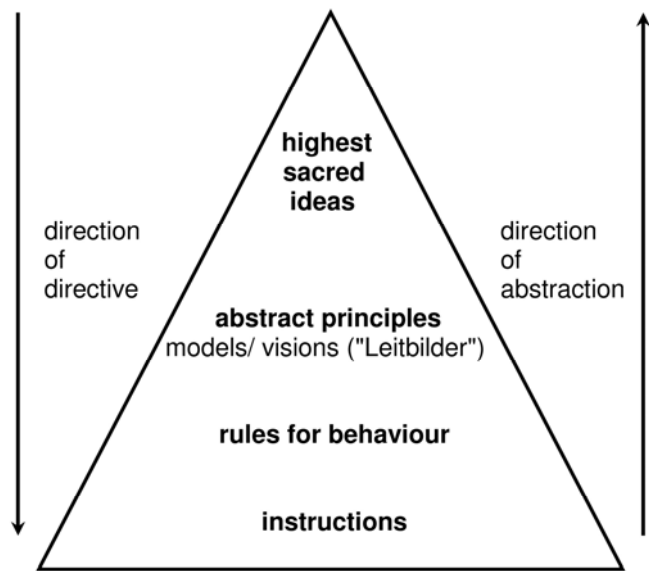
<sup>1</sup> The results are part of an ongoing PhD project of the author with the working title „Values, norms and attitudes of forest stakeholders in Western Kenya“.

groups and their strong traditions. The sacred forests are used to practice initiation rites every 5 years. The influence of modern life is moderate.

- (3) Case study III lies on the foothills of Mt Elgon. The forest is a mountain rain forest consisting mainly of indigenous tree species with a few plantations on the lower hills. The Ogiek, Kenya's largest hunter and gatherer group, live today also as farmers within or adjacent to the forest. They are believers of TAR as well as Christians. They use honey and other NTFPs, but honey has traditionally the highest preference. The influence of modern life is low.

### Forest perception by the Isukha, Tiriki, Ogiek and professional forest manager

To classify and structure the more hidden and not obvious noticeable intangible values the model (Figure 1) of Bargatzky (1986) will be applied. The pyramid consists of several hierarchically



**Figure 1: Ordered Adaptive Structure Bargatzky (1986) slightly changed by Irrgang (2005)**

arranged layers, whereby the layers of the lower level denote specific and exact tasks. Changes of these tasks will occur relatively fast. On the top of the hierarchy the most abstract ideas are located. They are at the same time the most lasting ones. Changes of these highest sacred ideas take time. On the other side - once disturbed or destroyed - the highest sacred values can't be re-established within a few days.

The Isukha perceive the forest on the highest level as a help and as their heritage or with other words as long lasting support. This is based on the abstract principle that the forest is a resource for their daily needs.

Rules for behaviour and instruc-

tions are based on traditional and science based forest management. The Tiriki have a different perception of their forests. Their highest sacred value is the identity to be a Tiriki that has been initiated within a sacred forest. Therefore the abstract principle for these forests is to have an ideal place for initiation rites, a dense forest consisting of indigenous tree species. To protect these values only traditional rules and instructions are important. The Ogiek perceive the forest on the highest level as their home. Their ancestors have lived in the forests since time immemorial and divided the forest in parts that belong to a certain clan. The ownership of such an area is the precondition for the Ogiek's honey production. Honey is a highly valued cultural good. The Ogiek have the abstract principle in mind that the forest continues to be an undisturbed forest ecosystem. The rules and instructions are based on their traditions. The professional forest manager does not have highest sacred ideas about the forest. The ideas as described here are from the ambitious forest policy guidelines of the government. The practical implementation is often not very advanced. However the forester tries to reach a sustainability of the social, economic and ecological level. Furthermore he should apply participatory forest management tools. A synthesis of the perceptions and the resulting forest management practices is given in Table 1.

**Table 1: Synthesis of forest perception by the 4 groups**

Ordered Adaptive Structure <sup>1</sup>	Isukha (Case study 1) <sup>4</sup>	Tiriki (Case study 2) <sup>4</sup>	Ogiek (Case study 3) <sup>4</sup>	Professional forest manager (literature review) <sup>2/3</sup>
<i>Highest intangible values</i>	Long lasting support	Identity	Home	
<i>Abstract principles</i>	Resource	Ideal place for rituals	Undisturbed ecosystem	Sustainability <sup>2</sup>
<i>Rules for behaviour/instructions</i>	Traditional and science based forest management rules	Strong traditional rules	Traditional rules	Instruments for policy implementation <sup>3</sup>
	↓	↓	↓	↓
<b>Forest management:</b>	Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) for the forest protection, environmental education, botanical garden, cooperation with the Forest Department (FD)	Clear and easy to understand rules, active (aggressive) forest protection by the elders/ community, cooperation with FD if they accept the traditional rules	More “passive” forest management, no disturbance, coexistence with the FD	Participatory forest management, poverty reduction - improvement of socio economic frame conditions

Source: <sup>1</sup>Bargatzky (1986), <sup>2</sup>Mission and Vision of the Kenya Forest Service (2009), <sup>3</sup>Republic of Kenya (2007), <sup>4</sup>Field research (2006/07)

As explained above the 4 groups have different intangible values. In case study I it is the long lasting support that determines the behaviour of the Isukha. They obey the rules of the forester as well as the remnants of their traditional rules. Their strategies to maintain the forest are the establishment of NGOs for forest protection, environmental education and the cooperation with the FD. The Tiriki see their forests as important for their identity and ideal places for the initiation rituals. They accept only their strong traditional rules which are easy to understand. Furthermore it has led to quite aggressive forest protection via social control by the village community. The Tiriki cooperate with the authorities if their traditional rules are accepted. The Ogiek compared to the Tiriki are much more passive. They try to minimize any disturbance and coexist with the FD. They can't “protect” the forest like the Tiriki because the forest size is larger and their life style more hidden and concealed. The professional forest manager should have sustainability in mind. His management should lead to participatory forest management, reduction of poverty as well as improvement of the socio economic conditions.

### Outlook and Suggestions

This last part will focus on the question how to manage forests with a focus on values, perceptions and traditional structures. Forests are classified in four types (Figure 2):

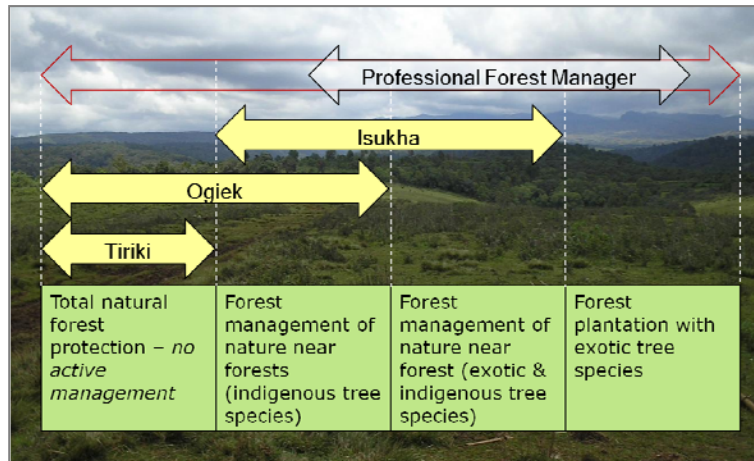
- Nature near forests (total forest protection)
- Managed nature near forests (indigenous tree species)
- Managed nature near forests (indigenous and exotic tree species)

- Forest plantation with exotic tree species.

The professional forest manager should be able to manage all these forest types. In practice he is often limited in his scope due to lack of political, economic and personal power. To achieve a “win-win” situation he could get assistance from the local people in the following areas:

- The Isukha will accept exotic trees, but they need also indigenous species. The management should be adapted to these forests and give the Isukha the possibility to participate not only in the protection, but also in the financial income from wood harvesting or tourism.
- The Tiriki would be able to efficiently manage and by this way protect small indigenous forests in their surroundings, bound to the vivid ceremonies inside these forests. This is a stable fundament for long term co-management of the forests between state and Tiriki community with the objective to conserve both, biodiversity of the forests and the culture of the Tiriki.
- The Ogiek accept forest management activities if the forest continues to be a well structured forest with indigenous tree species and if they are allowed to continue with honey harvest. With that motivation they will assist the forester in fire protection.

This way of stakeholder centered forest management may foster a better acceptance and participation on a high level compared to the top down approach that was common in the past, being a result of colonial history.



**Figure 2: Suggestion for joint forest management**

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