

The Ogiek of the Mau Forest: reasoning between identity and survival¹

ABSTRACT

The Ogiek of the Mau forest are a hunter-gatherer group speaking a Kalenjin language very close to Nandi. Aim of this paper is to describe their extreme flexibility as a conscious choice to avoid a total fusion with neighbouring, more prestigious people (Maasai and Nandi). In this perspective, flexibility must be intended as the key characteristic of the Ogiek's linguistic, ethnic and cultural identity. In the era of globalisation and under the pressure of thousands of new immigrants attracted in the region by fertile lands, the historical Ogiek strategy of adaptation appears insufficient to avoid a final dissolution in what Baumann (2000) defined a fluid society. The only strategy for them to survive as a distinct ethnic group, seems to be a claim for indigenosity, which, however, bears the risk of crystalizing the Ogiek original flexibility in an improvable mythological uniqueness.

Keywords: Ogiek, African linguistics, identity studies, indigenosity.

Introduction

In this paper I will make an attempt to present the Ogiek identity as a fluid, flexible one, which, after centuries of non-traumatic and conscious internal modifications, is now running the risk of disappearing in the liquid form of the current globalized world.

The echo of Zygmunt Bauman lays obviously in the background and it is not a fortuitous case, rather a theoretical provocation. Bauman's theory of 'liquid identity' (BAUMAN 2000) represents an overt critique of our current way of living, and against the chronic instability and inequality of the post-modern, Western globalized world, which is due, according to the scholar, to a quite universally accepted

shift of focus from production to consumption, both in social and in economic transactions.

The discussion of the menace represented for the Ogiek by the recently introduced values of globalisation will be the object of the last part of this paper.

The first sections will focus on two key elements of the behaviour the Ogiek historically adopted in front of neighbouring people: *flexibility* and *adaptation*. These two characteristics allowed the Ogiek to survive as a discrete group and to maintain intact their ethnic identity until very recently.

In the past, anthropologists used to consider phenomena as contact and adaptation, or risk and vulnerability, as menaces to the survival of hunter-gatherer² societies, but luckily

the monumental work *Hunters and Gatherers*, edited by Ingold, Riches and Woodburn in 1988, which marked the starting point of a renewed interest in HG studies all over the world, reversed completely this way of thinking.

On that occasion, thanks to a brilliant researcher, who worked on the Naikes of India and whose name was Nurit Bird-David (vol. I, chap. 2, in INGOLD, RICHES and WOODBURN 1988), scholars of HG studies started for the first time to consider contact and adaptation no longer as external, disturbing elements, but rather as internal, structural factors.

The new perspectives opened by this new approach are still productive today.

Thanks to many other innovative contributions to the

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² From now on the expression hunter-gatherer will be substituted in the text by the acronym HG.

same volume, then, since the '90s scholars have moved another very important step forward, and luckily abandoned the anachronistic idea of hunter-gatherers communities as being ideally isolated and pristine.

On the basis of the numerous evidences brought to the light not only by anthropological fieldwork, but also by archaeological investigations, the scholars' community has started to assume as obvious the basic observation that, in many cases, hunter-gatherers have been experiencing social, cultural and economic relationships with their farmer or pastoralist neighbours since millennia by now. In addition to this, researchers came to recognize that most of the times social change and evolution, even in small scale societies, derive from internal rather than from external factors. As a consequence of all this, the idea that the extreme fluidity and social flexibility of modern HG groups could just be seen as an independent choice of adaptation to a given environment, started to be considered as a possibly good one.

The case I will illustrate in this paper will show that this was exactly the case of the Ogiek of the Mau forest, at least until one generation ago.

Later, the first effects of globalisation, the reduction of their original ecological habitat, the realisation of new infrastructures, the introduction of technological devices, the presence of many new and

rich communities of bantu immigrants, together with the wish to get "modernized", have mined at the basis the Ogieks' possibility of survival as a distinct group.

As the reader will see throughout the paper, even though their material culture and daily activities have remained quite the same as before, their current tendency is however to abandon their ancient hunting and gathering way of life in order to adopt a more modern and profit-making agricultural style. Therefore, the efforts of new actors on the Mau forest scene, like national and international NGOs working in the field of human and social rights, which promote the birth of a new and shared sentiment of ethnic pride, cannot but be welcomed. But not all that glitters is gold. The risk, now, is in fact the creation of something that never existed: a fixed, crystallized Ogiek mythology.

The Ogiek of the Mau forest, or better of Mariashoni, are in fact on the way of avoiding the recognition of the close relationships with their farmer and pastoralist neighbours as a constitutive element of their own identity.

This, as we will see, strongly contrast historical evidences.

In history, in fact, the very essence of being an Ogiek in the Mau forest laid in his/her symbiotic relation with neighbouring communities, which allowed him/her to barter basic goods, in order to grant one another's survival in a dif-

ficult habitat. Thus, *flexibility* had always represented the real key choice for the Ogiek's survival.

The question now is: how can we preserve these days the Ogiek's flexibility, recognizing the people in any case a peculiar ethnic and cultural identity for themselves?

In this paper I will try to bring to the light some elements I suggest to consider in order to find out in the future more appropriate (or at least better) ways to manage the issue of the safeguard of ethnic and linguistic minorities like the Ogiek, in a time in which their historically tested modalities of adaptation and survival seem to be destined to get lost.

Trying to define who are the Ogiek of Mariashoni

If one looks for 'Ogiek' in the most famous ethno-linguistic database of Ethnologue (<http://www.ethnologue.com/language/oki>), he/she comes to know that Ogiek belongs to the Nilo-Saharan, Nilotic, Southern, Kalenjin group and that the Ogiek live in scattered enclaves between Kenya and Tanzania, where they are called the Akie.

Searching for a graphic view, he/she then can find this Ogiek ethno-linguistic identity very clearly reported on multicoloured maps (<http://www.ethnologue.com/map/KE> and <http://www.ethnologue.com/map/TZ>) easily visible in the internet, where borders be-

tween different ethno-linguistic groups are perfectly defined by severe black traits on the screen.

At this point he/she can be tempted to believe that he/she now knows all that is needed.

The issue is however much more complex than this, especially because an ethnolinguistic map cannot be but a simple, ideal sketch of reality.

A map cannot consider those sociolinguistic dynamics generated by cultural, economic and social contacts or the attitudes of mother tongue speakers towards their own language and the languages of prestige more commonly used in the area they live in.

A map cannot explain what exactly happens on the one side or the other of the border represented as a clear, indisputable line on the paper, and which position local governments adopt towards those people confined in a remote area far from the places where linguistic and social policies are decided.

Finally it is self-evident that language is just one of the multiple factors of which ethnic identity is composed, and this is true above all for minority groups in Africa, where, for example, to say that one is an Ogiot does not necessarily mean that he/she speaks Ogiek, and to say that one speaks Maa does not necessarily mean that he/she is actually a Maasai.

According to the 2009 census, in Kenya ca 79.000 people are Ogiek, but the ethnic and

actually Ogiek speaking population must be considered at least the half of it. There are no clear numerical evidence about the Akie of Tanzania, but what is sure is that they have no connection with their Kenyan counterpart, even though they essentially share with the latter the same mode of production and subsistence (cf. SCHÖPPERLE 2011) and the same kind of relations with the neighbouring Maasai.

Regarding those Kenyan Ogiek living in the Narok district, close to the Maa speaking Maasai, and the Tanzanian Akie, anyway, evidences show that all of them speak currently Maa, instead of Ogiek, in their family as well as outside of it (cf. Ethnologue http://www.ethnologue.com/language/oki/view/***EDITION***, SCHÖPPERLE 2011 and MICHELI 2014). Since language is not a real unifying factor, if one still wants to define who the Ogiek actually are, he/she thus needs to look for other elements.

In academic literature, however, he/she will find nothing more than some anthropological observations, the most important of which are for sure those by Huntingford dated mainly at the first half of the XX century (HUNTINGFORD 1927, 1929, 1931, 1951, 1954, 1955 and 1976) and those by Kratz dated at the '80s and '90s (KRATZ 1980, 1989, 1990, 1991 and 1993).

Those works, together with the current ethno-linguistic and anthropological study I am conducting in the frame-

work of the ATrA project³, point to the same direction, and put the Ogiek in that continuum of more or less lively HG tribes, stretching through large regions of East and Central Africa. Due to their relations with more powerful pastoralist and farmer neighbours, and to the lower social status they had, all HG groups of the macro-area had usually to adapt themselves to the others' languages. The HGs' evident lower prestige in terms of political, cultural and economical power brought their neighbours to define them *dorobo*. *Dorobo* is a Maasai term meaning at the same time *small* and *servant*. The same term was commonly used until recently also in scientific literature, and it suited perfectly that evolutionary perspective, according to which the *dorobo* constituted a parasite society, which, in an ideal process of subjugation and adaptation to contact people, irremediably lost its pristine and pure identity.

Even though this evolutionary interpretation is now surpassed, it would be interesting to have more detailed diachronic material, both linguistic and historic-anthropological, to have a clearer idea of the subsequent movements of peoples, languages and cultures in the macro-region, but getting to an idillic original stage is in fact impossible due to an unenviable lack of diachronic data.

Anyway, if nowadays it seems obvious that a common cultural *substratum* for all HGs

³ To have an idea of the project, visit www.africantransitions.it.

of East Africa must have existed⁴, it is *de facto* impossible to sustain that these similarities have to be intended as traces of the existence of a unique original group, speaking a common language, maybe affiliated to the Khoisan phylum. It is true that Di Stefano (1990) reports an Ogiek word containing a click sound, but it is to be noticed however that in a collection of more than 1.000 lexemes I recorded in the region of Mariashoni, there is no word containing such a sound. Clicks are also commonly documented in Hadza, but in my opinion this is not sufficient for sustaining in a reasonable way a historical hypothesis connecting the modern East and Central African HGs to the Khoisan groups.

Be it as it may, in any case nothing is farther from truth than the idea of HGs, especially in East Africa, as having traditionally been isolated communities. Rather, as Nurit H. Bird-David well explains (1988: 20): “the data we have suggest that contemporary hunter-gatherers have maintained contact with adjacent societies for centuries, indeed, according to an increasing number of scholars, possibly millennia. Contact, in other words, is now generic to their social system and not an exogenous factor”.

If this is true, as I think it is, contact with neighbouring, more prestigious cultures and languages must be seen as structural in HGs’ identity. Consequently, social, cul-

tural, and ecological *adaptation* must be treated as a key element in their living strategies and not as a risk factor for the maintenance of any idillic original identity. Always Nurit H. Bird-David (1988: 17) proposed “that hunter-gatherer relations with non-hunter gatherers should be understood in terms of role relationships within the hunter-gatherer social system”.

Again, and about the Ogiek in particular, Woodburn (1988: 42), wrote:

clear self-identification is for the Ogiek combined with an ability to pass comfortably between cultures, to speak in the languages and interact in the languages of their neighbours as well as in their own. [...] This must be confusing [...] but it must not be taken as an indication that such hunter-gatherers do not have a culture of their own.

In the last 20 years, scholars have finally agreed upon a fundamental point in HG studies, i.e. that HGs all around the world show a flux, flexible, uneasily describable identity. Many have been the interpretive framework for this fact: evolutionary, ecological, typological, structural and finally social. What is true, anyway, is that, because of the many ways in which this *flexibility* has been manifested, no theory, until now, has had the ability to explain its dynamics. All new data should therefore be considered in this perspective and, the starting point of any kind of research should be that

fixity and monolithic tradition are not to be considered pertinent to HG societies.

Trying to sum up, what we know as being true for the region of Mariashoni, which is the object of this study, is that the Ogiek community living in the area, is made of about 15.000 people, distributed in small locations of about 20 to 30 people, located sometimes at the fringes of the forest, sometimes inside the forest itself. Until one generation ago, they used to live as seminomadic groups, following the migrations of bees from the Highlands to the Lowlands of the Mau Eastern Escarpment, spending more or less six months on the one side and six months on the other. The core elements of their identity are their very close dependence from bees and honey, as well as their hunt system, both with bow and arrows and with traps, always with their dogs.

Today the Ogiek of Mariashoni are going through a very fast sedentarisation process and many have started farming and cultivating.

Historically, they have been encapsulated in Kipsigis and Maasai areas.

Making beehives, storing honey for a long time and smoking and smearing meat with honey in order to preserve it for many months and, in some cases even years, they surely have a delayed return mode of production.

This fact represents an exception. Usually, encapsulation goes actually hand in hand

⁴ Traces of this are the similarities in their practice of hunt with dogs, bow and arrows, the collection of honey and the domestication of bees, the importance of HG masters of ritual in pastoralist - Maasai - tribes

with immediate return modalities. This peculiarity had already been noticed by Woodburn (1988: 35), who wrote: “An important instance of a society to which the correlation does not apply is that of the Okiek or Highland Dorobo of Kenya [...]. They were encapsulated and yet had delayed-return organization”.

Contrary to their cousins of the Narok district and of Tanzania, the Ogiek of Mariashoni, both adults and children, still use their language in every moment of the day, inside and outside their houses. From this point of view, for some old people we can even speak of monolingualism in Ogiek. The language is structurally very close to Nandi, as described by Creider & Creider (1969), and it is inter-comprehensible with Kipsigis, as it is demonstrated by the sociolinguistic study I conducted in 2013 (MICHELI 2014) and by the still unpublished morpho-syntactic data I collected in the same period.

Identity, flux and flexibility in Mariashoni

In this section I will try to discuss some concrete examples of flux and flexibility in the case of the Ogiek of Mariashoni. I will focus on the mechanisms which rule the relationships between the Ogiek and their historical neighbours (Maasai, Nandi and Kipsigis) and I will do it analyzing the content of their oral tradition, the dynamics of the exchange of women, some aspects of tra-

ditional religion, commercial transactions and cultural contacts. My hope is to show how every assimilation of external cultural traits in the Ogiek way of doing things, is not the fruit of their capitulation in front of a dominant model, but rather a choice which they consciously made in order to obtain the maximum in a relationship which could not but be unequal.

Oral tradition

Concerning oral tradition, during my fieldwork in January-February 2013 and January-February 2014 I could collect, transcribe, analyze and translate 24 tales, 4 riddles and 6 songs. These materials were recorded with 10 different storytellers (4 women and 6 men) coming from different locations of the region. Only two men and one woman used a few Kipsigis words and, in rare occasions, Kipsigis syntactic structures in their narratives. Of these three people, the two men lived in locations very close to the Kipsigis, while the woman, an ex-primary school teacher, was reared in a Kipsigis context. All the other storytellers used a very pure Ogiek language.

Of the 24 tales, just one is evidently copied from the bantu tradition. It is in fact the only one in which there are wellerisms and anthropomorphized animals. The other 23 tales can be divided in three main groups according to their thematics:

1. Relations between Ogiek and supernatural beings living in the forest;
2. Relations between Ogiek and animals of the forest;
3. Relations between Ogiek and *others*.

In this last group of tales, the *others* are often referred to as enemies. Evidently enough, their consolidated co-habitation with the Ogiek, must have not always been that peaceful even though, as it is common in all documented cases, relationships had to be ruled by “certain normative conventions” which “guide the interaction between individual hunter-gatherers and individual neighbors” (BIRD-DAVID 1988: 27).

Be it as it may, we know that the Ogiek of Mariashoni have lived relatively undisturbed until some thirty years ago. Their habitat, the Mau forest, was in fact not really interesting for their farmer and pastoralist neighbours and this fact represented their luck, because violence was usually limited to some very sporadic episodes.

Of this opinion is, for example, Woodburn who reported in his paper (1988: 47) what Blackburn wrote in 1982 (BLACKBURN 1982: 293-6):

[...] the Okiek survived the waves of pastoral invasions which decimated, scattered or assimilated other peoples in the area. The Okiek survived because they lived in the highland forests, areas of no interest for grazing and ideal as places in which to hide; because they kept no cattle or other stock to

attract raids; and because they were useful as providers for valued honey. Nowadays, Maasai warriors sometimes act aggressively towards Ogiek individuals or small groups whom they happen to meet when traveling. The Ogiek, aware of their numerical weakness, tend not to retaliate for fear of attracting retribution.

Marriage

It is not my intention here to give a detailed description of the mechanisms ruling kinship and marriage alliances inside the Ogiek group itself, which will be material for a future paper. Here, I will instead focus on some details of the dynamics underlying those marriages celebrated by the Ogiek with people external to their tribes.

A passage of women from low status to higher status groups was, and actually continues to be, very common all around the world, and this is particularly true in the relations among East African HGs and their pastoralist or farmer *masters*, in our case from the Ogiek to their Maasai, Nandi or Kipsigis neighbours.

Until recently, women were considered little more than a good to be traded. Lower status women were a second choice for their wealthier husbands⁵, but their reproductive capacity and their good attitude towards hard work were anyway characteristics for which they were sought after. For this reason such marriages were usually coincident with the subscription of politi-

cal and social alliances which could grant protection and the illusion of political stability to the less powerful part.

Of course, when such marriages were celebrated in the region of Mariashoni, the Ogiek women went to stay in their husbands' locations and their children grew up, respectively, as Maasai, Nandi, or Kipsigis. This sacrifice of women and offsprings represented a conscious choice for the Ogiek, and was used as a means to preserve an Ogiek autonomy, establishing at the same time a privileged channel for lucrative economic transactions.

This strategy was common also to other HG tribes all around the world. Nurit Bird-David (1988: 23), for example, wrote on this point referring to the Niakens of India:

Much of the contact between Naikens revolves around economic transactions, involving transfer of goods or provision of labor. However, this is not to the exclusion of social contact; indeed, in some cases economic interactions take place because of pre-existing social ties.

In the Ogiek case this was true for both their Maasai and Nandi neighbours.

Exchanges of women in the opposite direction, that is from Maasai or Nandi to Ogiek, was not admitted at least until the introduction of sheep and cow rearing in some Ogiek communities around 1930 (cf. HUNTINGFORD 1929 and 1951). In any case, this possibility rep-

resents still today a very marginal reality.

This situation, and the fact that Ogiek women were usually given to Maasai and/or Nandi men in exchange for lucrative economic ties and protection, is well described in a song I recorded in Mariashoni in February 2014.

The song was sung by the Ogiek women some days after the conclusion of the initiation rituals. On that occasion, recently excised girls were presented to the community to be chosen as wives. The major part of the text is genuine Ogiek, but it contains one Kiswahili loan (*Karibu*), and some Kalenjin (probably Nandi) syntactic structures. The content of the song is quite simple, but very interesting as far as the issue we are discussing is concerned.

Let us look at it in detail. Here, the full text transcribed and translated. In the footnotes some linguistic, lexical and morphosyntactic observations.

Title: Asa! Igo!
Hi! Hi!

Chorus: Asa! Igo!⁶ Asa! Igo!
Asa ቸገሩይገሁገ, asa!
Igo!

Chorus after each line

Solo voice:

1. ቸገሩይገሁገ ገሩይገሁገ ገሩይገሁገ⁷ ገሩይገሁገ ገሩይገሁገ⁸, asa! Igo!
2. ገሩይገሁገ ነገ ገሩይገሁገ⁹, asa! Igo!
3. ገሩይገሁገ ገሩይገሁገ¹⁰ ገሩይገሁገ, asa! Igo!

⁵ Woodburn (1988: 43) wrote on this point: "Hunter-gatherer women are often taken only as concubines or secondary wives or as the first wife of particularly low-status farmers".

⁶ "Asa!" "Igo!"; Lit.: "Hi!" "Hi!". Simple greeting among friends with answer.

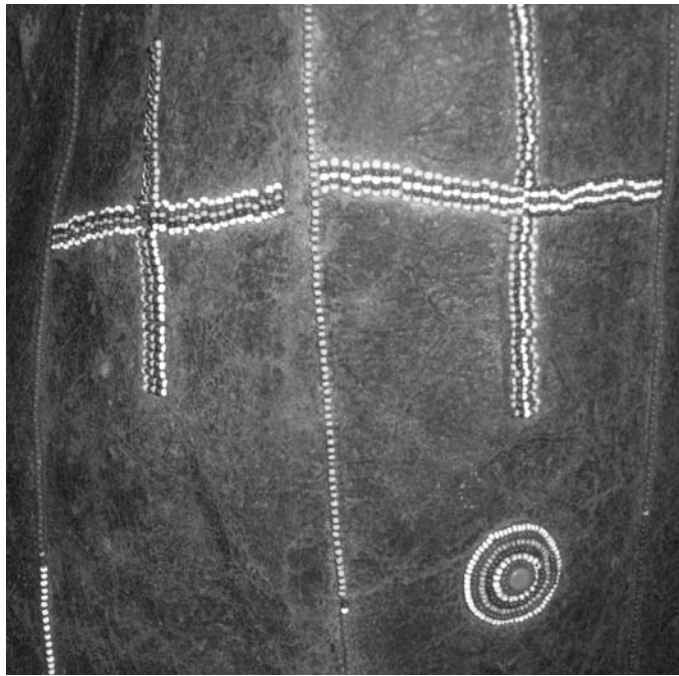
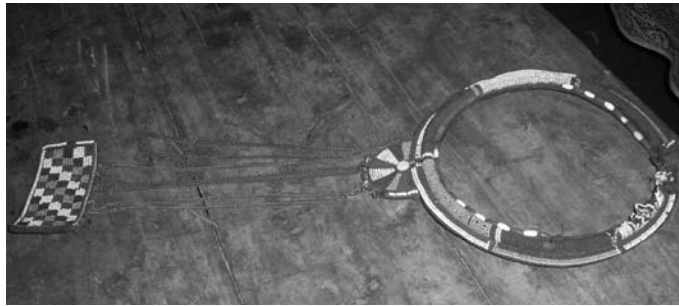
⁷ Ké:sòm: to borrow, to ask for.

⁸ *Gwe* is just a syllable used to keep the rhythm.

⁹ Ké:βáíbai / ké:ḡèrɛf: to be happy.

¹⁰ Lit.: visitor; pl. ገሩይገሁገ.

Table 1 and 2: Ogiek old bride's jewelry and beads decoration on a bride's skirt. Pictures by Iliaria Micheli.



of being Ogiek. In line 20, where the Ogiek claim to be the very ethnic group which gave birth to the most famous Kenyan long-distance runners, they use a Nandi (?) syntactic structure. Looking at the biographies of those runners they refer to, it comes out that all the champions were actually Nandi. If this means that this piece of song has been borrowed from the Nandi, or that the Ogiek of Mariashoni do not really distinguish themselves from the Nandi, remains yet an open issue. Be it as it may, I am quite sure

that the *visitors* to whom this song is mainly addressed are the Maasai, who in the region, at least until recently, represented the most powerful group.

To sustain this hypothesis I can add an apparently insignificant, but finally precious, detail.

Ogiek ceremonial women's jewels were in fact shaped according to the Maasai fashion. Rich and gaudy necklaces and earrings were made with the most famous Maasai multi-coloured beads and the same beads were used to decorate the

goat skin skirts and mantles the girls used to be wrapped up in, on the special occasions of initiation and marriages (see table 1 and 2).

Observing the male Ogiek fashion, on the contrary, at least in the region of Mariashoni, it is impossible to find any Maasai 'loan'. No red mantle and no gaudy jewels. Ogiek males used to wear only their *ɔ̄guriét ab nderit*, a mantle made of hyrax skin which allowed them to protect their heads from bees when collecting honey from their beehives in the forest. Adopting Maasai male dresses or jewels was useless for the Ogiek males of Mariashoni, since no Maasai woman would ever get married to an Ogiot.

Adopting Maasai women's fashion and jewels was instead a clever choice, which made the Ogiek women more attractive at the eyes of possible Maasai richer and wealthier husbands. The adoption of Maasai-style women's set of jewels was thus functional to have access to a more convenient marriage, both for the girl and for her family, which in this way could grant a more important flux of economic exchanges and a meaningful protection against external raids.

Today this alliances are no longer that important to grant socio-political stability and commercial possibilities to the Ogiek and, therefore the Ogiek girls in the region of Mariashoni have stopped using Maasai-style jewels and decorations for their initiation ceremony

dresses, although they still undergo initiation and they still get married to the men who ask for them during the public presentation of initiates a few days after *tumd5*²⁰.

Concerning marriage practices in general, anyway and interestingly enough, the Ogiek of Mariashoni must be seen much closer to their northern neighbours, the Nandi, rather than to the Maasai. In common with the Nandi they have, or better, they used to have, the very peculiar custom of a marriage between women. Huntingford observed this practice in a Nandi *milieu* in the first years of 1900 and described it in his miscellaneous report on the Nandi and Kony tribes, published in 1927:

The Nandi has a custom whereby a widow who has no children may “marry” a young woman and become her legal “husband”. The “wife” is bought by the widow just as a man would buy his wife, and the “wife” works for her “husband” just as if she were a man. The “wife” may have intercourse with a man, and any children she may bear are the property of her “husband” (HUNTINGFORD 1927: 434).

During my fieldwork in January 2014, speaking with a group of old women in Mariashoni, I was told that quite the same thing happened among the Ogiek of their group, but under very special conditions, which were not mentioned by Huntingford.

In Mariashoni, actually, an adult woman could “marry”

a young girl and become her “social husband” only when she was already married to a man and the couple was sterile. Not any girl could become the wife of a sterile old woman. This was a destiny reserved to young girls who eventually got pregnant before their initiation. When their pregnancy was noticed, those girls underwent specific rituals, were initiated and immediately married either as second (or third or whatever) wives of the man who made them pregnant, or to the sterile old wife of another man. When marrying a sterile woman, the girl could not have sexual intercourses with the woman’s husband. The old woman herself used instead to choose a young man inside her clan and let him have sex with her “wife”. In this case, the children eventually born were considered as belonging to the sterile couple.

According to my informants, this practice has now been abandoned and this must have happened some times ago, since only the oldest women of the group remembered the custom, and not all of them agreed upon every detail about it.

Given the different specificities under which the marriage between two women could take place in the different communities (Nandi and Ogiek), in this case I guess we could speak of something that could be considered more as deriving from the same cultural *milieu*, rather than determined by contact, but of

course we cannot exclude this eventuality.

Only further researches on the same point in other Ogiek (or Akie) communities more distant from the Nandi, could eventually reveal us the right way to take the issue.

Iron and weapons

In this section I will focus on a couple of elements which bear witness of the mechanisms of adaptation of the Ogiek exchanges with neighbouring tribes according to their actual opportunity and/or necessity.

The Ogiek themselves never developed the necessary skills to extract iron or to manufacture it from the beginning, but it is true that, since iron tools were introduced by someone else in the region, they easily found the way to obtain it. This is basically what happened in many other HG communities all around the world, as stated in Hall (1988: 140):

“Iron Age” and “Stone Age” technological sets are not as discrete as is often assumed. Although Hunter-gatherers do not seem to have manufactured iron implements themselves it has been argued that, once the new technology was available, metal implements were used by hunter-gatherers, perhaps over considerable periods of time.

The issue of iron in the Ogiek community of Mariashoni is quite interesting, because it is representative of the

²⁰ The name *tumd5*, could derive, or have the same origin of Nandi *tim*: circumcision (cf. HUNTINGFORD 1927: 426).

Table 3 and 4: anvil, nail and a perfect Ogiek point of an arrow. Pictures by Ilaria Micheli.



Ogiek general attitude towards a form of dependance from their sedentary, technologically more advanced neighbours.

During my fieldwork in February 2013, I had the opportunity to work with many hunters and to interview one of the most skilled blacksmiths of Mariashoni. When I went to visit him in his location, he accepted to show me his technique of production of arrow points.

After more than one hour of thorough disquisitions about the Ogiek hunting lexicon, we finally moved from the quite shadow of his hut, to the bright light of the sun in his

courtyard, where my host had lit some fire in the morning. Once there, he took a hammer, a huge nail, like those used in house building, a corn cob and a piece of iron, stolen from the royal British railway running from Nakuru to Molo and dismissed since long. Then he put the nail in the corn cob, what allowed him to keep it on the embers without burning himself. When the nail became red, he started to hit it with the hammer on the piece of rail, which actually represented a very good anvil, and after some few minutes, the nail became a perfectly shaped point of an arrow.

After this practical demonstration, I dared ask my host what happened in ancient times, when the railway was still working and the Ogiek had no money to buy nails and anvils at the market.

“In those times”, he answered, “iron was simply another of the precious goods Ogiek obtained bartering honey or other forest products with their Maasai neighbours. It was an economic custom which implied a very strong dependance of the Ogiek from their *masters*, and for this reason it was happily and very quickly abandoned as soon as the Ogiek found a way to obtain the same good independently from a relation with “outsiders”. Of course, if in the future the Ogiek will have the same necessity, they will not hesitate to ask again their neighbours for trade”.

This story is, in my opinion, a good example of how, in the Ogiek mentality, the construction and dissolution of economic relations with *others* were subjected to an occasional “opportunity”, rather than to a “stable tradition”.

Dogs

Concerning the relationships the Ogiek of Mariashoni have with their dogs, one is the element which has to be analyzed, since precious for our reflection on the concept of *adaptability* in the Ogiek tradition.

According to the actually very poor oral history I could

Table 5: Ogiek dog puppies.
Pictures by Ilaria Micheli



record in Mariashoni in 2014, when the Ogiek first appeared in the Mau forest, they already happened to be there with their dogs. Be it as it may, since the Ogiek dogs are very similar to the dogs living with other HG tribes of East and Central Africa, like the Pygmies, we can reasonably suppose that the domestication of those animals and their living together with humans, must really date back to a very ancient past.

Dogs help hunters in many ways in the region. Ogiek dogs are small in size, with semi-long hair and fluffy tails rolled up high over their back. They are very silent and very quick and are able to move in the forest without making any noise. Following their smell, they lead the hunters in the part of the forest where preys are, keeping a position which is contrary to the wind, in order not to be perceived by forest animals.

In order to make their dogs get used to the smell of their favourite preys, the Ogiek rear them, from their first days of life, with a kind of a pap made

with their mother's milk mixed with the preys' blood and a small amount of the preys' dung.

This could be considered a real Ogiek traditional way of doing things. There is no evidence of this practice as having been borrowed from another ethnic group, what is anyway really not very admissible, being the Ogiek the only HG group living in the Mau forest. Therefore we can, at least in this case, speak of an Ogiek original *identity marker*, born inside the Ogiek tradition and still vital today.

As we said in the previous sections, since the beginning of 1900, the Ogiek started to introduce, as accessory activities, a little agriculture, and sheep (from the Nandi) and cattle rearing (from the Maasai).

With the introduction of pastoralism, and the need to use their dogs as allies also in this new activity, the Ogiek started to differentiate the education of their puppies in order to provide for both hunter- and shepherd-dogs.

Wishing to obtain dogs

suitable for the two tasks, they started to separate, some days after birth, those puppies which were aggressive and strong, from those which were slow and accommodating. The former were destined to become hunters, while the latter were chosen to become shepherds. Hunter-dogs continued to be reared as I described above, while the way of rearing shepherd-dogs was literally copied by the way of rearing the hunters.

The Ogiek started in fact to nourish shepherd-puppies with a pap made with their mother's milk, mixed with the milk and a small amount of dung of their master's cattle and in this way they were sure that their dogs would learn to identify the exact smell of their master's cattle and avoid guarding someone else's herd.

This is, in my opinion, a good example of the conscious reshaping and adjustment of a traditional knowledge to a different, newly adopted practice derived from an imported economic activity.

Traditional religion

The last point of this brief review of material and immaterial cultural elements the Ogiek, in their even recent history, have given proof to negotiate, shape and reshape continuously, cannot but concern traditional religion.

Unfortunately on this subject I do not have very much data. During my fieldwork in January-February 2013 and

January-February 2014, I have tried many times to bring some religious matters at the centre of my discussions with my interlocutors in Mariashoni.

Every time I finished to fall on a very slippery field.

I tried, for example, to investigate my informants' ideas about death and life, about illness and healing, about pregnancy and birth, about witchcraft, supernatural beings living in the forest, the concept of the *evil eye*, God, *jinns*, human practitioners of magic or masters of rituals in general, but what emerged remains few and not very useful.

My personal perception, when discussing such items, was that either people, by purpose, avoided giving me the "right" answer, or that they really did not have very clear ideas for themselves.

It is true that the answers to the sociolinguistic survey I conducted in 2013 show that 99% of the Ogiek of Mariashoni declared to be Christian, and it is true that, in the four months I spent in the region I did not have any occasion to take part to traditional rituals. The only ceremony which is still practiced, no matter if in contrast with their Christian faith, seems to be *tumɔs*, i.e. female and male initiation.

What shocked me very much was especially the impossibility to recall with my informants their traditional beliefs regarding death and life. According to what I have recorded, I should say that today the Ogiek of Mariashoni

adhere completely to a Christian idea of life after death and have no memory of what was their traditional belief on this point. All my informants, interviewed in different situations and in different locations, declared that the Ogiek did not traditionally believe that human beings come from anywhere outside this world, and, similarly, they did not believe that there is something like a soul which continues to live in another world once its bearer dies.

Even very old members of the community insisted on this point, and added that, when they were young and no Ogiek was Christian, they did not celebrate any form of funerary ritual. When someone died, they just brought very quickly his/her body in the forest, where they abandoned it in the wild without performing any ritual action. There were no special purification even on the hut or the location where death had come, but when at least three people died in a short while in the same hut, the Ogiek abandoned the hut and the place and moved quickly to another location.

But if this is true, this is also contrary to the existence of some other (very few, actually, and apparently not interconnected) social figures, traditional practices and, clearly enough, underlying beliefs, which I will try to describe in a while and some of which belong without any doubts to the Nandi (and Kipsigis?) tradition.

Like the Nandi, the Ogiek of Mariashoni call God *Asista*, the sun (with the same secondary form of the name *Asis* "sun" + definitive article *ta*; on this point see HUNTINGFORD 1927: 418), but if you try to ask them which are the characteristics of this God and the relationships between this God and human beings, they just do not know how to answer. "If the Sun was not there, the world could not be there, no plant would grow, no person would be born and live, no animal would be on earth", was the most articulated answer I could record.

It is true that in all traditions based on orality it is quite impossible to discuss verbally complex philosophical issues and that, most of the times, you can reconstruct the underlying way of thinking just starting from the observation of concrete practices and the recordings of myths and cosmogonical narratives. I tried this way, but, still, I was not very lucky.

The specific Ogiek lexicon I could record, anyway, contains at least three distinct names for three different practitioners, who still have some specific roles in ritual situations.

These terms are: *kibiso*, *tyébkirífo* and *kipsigis*.

The *kibiso* is a male figure, who performs propitiatory rituals when a new house/location is opened. During the ritual, he pours cereals and honey brew on the ground and sacrifices a cow, a goat or a sheep. The performance, which has

more Kikuyu and other Bantu farmers, in search of new land for their crops and now, in those towns, the most widespread languages are in fact Kikuyu or Kiswahili.

In the very last years, and thanks mainly to the action of different local and international NGOs, the Kenyan government has improved its efforts to contrast illegal wood cutting and has officially taken in care the safeguard of the forest cover and of the forest people, giving only to the Ogiek, and to the Maasai “indigenous” tribes the permission to live in their traditional settlements inside the forestal areas.

The problem of survival is however urgent and real. Many traditional forest plants, flowers and trees, which were fundamental for the presence of bees and for the production of honey, have in the meanwhile disappeared, many game has run away and the Ogiek struggle, day in day out, for survival and are forced to integrate their traditional activities with a bit of farming and stock rearing in order not to starve. NGOs like the Kenyan NECOFA and the Italian Manitesa, Ethnorêma and the province of Bolzano, are promoting projects of reforestation, sustainable agriculture, mixed traditional and modern beekeeping and horticulture, but things are really not easy. Climate change, pollution and a noticeable growth in immigrant population, together with the import of luxury goods in towns, which are

now obviously desired and requested also by the Ogiek themselves, have contributed to reach a point of no return in the process of “modernization”. People are now attracted, as elsewhere, by the current ideology of consumerism, which represents, this time it is true, a real menace to the Ogiek survival, in front of which the Ogiek, as well as other traditionally living tribes, like the Maasai, are unprepared and helpless.

In front of the needs of mass consumption, more differentiated food production, money and other luxury goods possession, such traditional societies seem just to be inexorably destined to die out in a severe form of what Zygmunt Baumann (BAUMANN 2000) has defined a *liquid society*.

The question now is: how can this process of dissolution be stopped or at least a bit contained? Is it possible to find a viable way out to the risk of ethno-cultural extinction?

Answering this question is not an easy task. It implies of necessity to consider the prickly definition of what are *indigenous* tribes and people, and which is the right way to handle with them.

Taking the issue from this point of view, it could be said that, in the case of the Ogiek of Kenya, the first step has already been moved. The Ogiek have actually been officially inserted in the list of the Indigenous peoples of Kenya in the last MDG report for 2008:

Indigenous peoples in Kenya are hunter-gatherer and pastoralist communities; they are the Awer, Boni, Borana, Burgi, Elmolo, Endorois, Ilchamus, Gaaljecel, Gabra, Maasai, Malakote, Munyayaya, Ogiek, Orma, Pokot, Rendille, Sabat, Sakuye, Samburu, Sengwer, Somali, Talai, Turkana, Watta, Munyayaya and Yakuu²².

But what does this actually mean?

As D.K. Ndagala (1988: 72) puts it in general terms, for example: “What should be the definitive category when looking at hunting and gathering societies as minority? Should it be their subsistence strategy or their ethnicity?”

In the specific case of the Ogiek of Mariashoni: who can be defined Ogiek today? What are those characteristics which make someone an Ogiot without any doubt? His/her language? His/her production strategy? His/her material culture? His/her religion? Can those Ogiek living in the region of Mariashoni and speaking currently Ogiek be considered more Ogiek than those Ogiek living in the Narok district, speaking Maa, rearing their livestock in stable settlements and dressing like Maasai people, even though still claiming an Ogiek origin? Is it really possible to identify by these means an ethnic identity which, as we have seen in the previous sections, has made of *accommodation*, *adaptation* and *cultural mixing* its only constant strategy for survival?

Of course not.

²² In MDG Report and Indigenous People: A desk review, Nr 3, February 2008, p. 7 prepared by Bonney Hartley for the Secretariat of the UNPFII.

If we agree that this is, as I think, the only possible answer, we must be conscious that in the process of recognition and safeguard of the Ogiek as a Kenyan indigenous people, we should be very careful and try to avoid what would be the worst and most ethnocentric of the possible solutions, i.e. to crystallize the Ogiek in a mythic, monolithic identity, which has never existed and which would never correspond to truth.

This is not the place to discuss the general issue of the invention of tradition, about which I refer the reader to the still very illuminating work edited by Hobsbawm and Ranger in 1983²³.

Concerning the concrete question of the Ogiek of Mariashoni, anyway, some observations have to be made.

First of all, the attention to the community's (indigenous) voices, demonstrated by the different NGOs on the field in Mariashoni, brought in a first phase to the birth of a "spirit of identity", a "proudness of being Ogiek", the Ogiek themselves had never exactly felt, having been used for ages to be considered just *dorobos*, both by outsiders and by themselves, i.e. just as a humble, quite insignificant, low status group, when compared to their neighbours.

Secondly, this newly born "Ogiek proudness" led the community leaders to create the MACODEV (Mariashoni Development program), which has fixed as one of its

priority the creation of an Ogiek cultural centre, in order to preserve and promote *the* Ogiek traditional culture. Out of any doubt, this is a very important and positive initiative, but both people in Mariashoni and NGOs' volunteers should agree upon the fact that what they are trying to do is not to preserve *the* Ogiek identity *tout-court*, but *a single and locally marked variant of the many different other possibilities of being equally Ogiek* in other places, times and contexts.

More, in their claim of being *the* "indigenous" tribe of the Mau forest, the Ogiek should remember that, historically, they have always coexisted in the region with their neighbours: the Nandi, the Kipsigis and the Maasai at least, who are therefore as much *indigenous* as the Ogiek in the area. As a matter of fact, it should be constantly remembered that, "traditionally", being Ogiek implied for sure being *dorobo* of, that is *complementary* to, someone in the Nandi or Maasai neighbouring tribes, and this should not be forgotten in this new process of stabilisation of a *pure* Ogiek tradition.

I wish that in this process of re-thinking and re-formulating a new identity for themselves, the Ogiek of Mariashoni would not forget that, in their whole history, the most successful strategy they adopted to survive was not an inflexible adherence to a mythical fixed model, but rather its contrary,

i. e. a *flexible, unstable, negotiated, negotiable, shaped and re-shaped, modified and modifiable* ethnic, linguistic and cultural external surface. This strategy only, allowed them to maintain intact their core identity of independent hunters.

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