

# The Okiek of Kenya

CORINNE A. KRATZ Emory University and the University of Nairobi

## Introduction

The name Okiek ( Okiot - sing.) includes roughly two dozen groups of hunters and honey-gatherers, mostly living in forested highlands in west central Kenya. Local groups also have more specific names, e.g., Kaplelach, Kipsang'any, Kapchepkendi. One group, the Akie, live much further south, around the Maasai Steppe in Tanzania (Kaare 1997, in press). Okiek is also the mother tongue of most Okiek people, a Kalenjin language of the Southern Nilotic group. Several groups (e.g., Digiri, Omotik, and some eastern Mau groups) now speak Maasai as their first language. Okiek have often been called Torobbo, Dorobo, Ndorobo, or Wandorobo, all derogatory names deriving from "Il Torobbo," the Maasai term for hunters and poor people without cattle. Torobbo names have also been applied to other hunting peoples in eastern Africa and to Maasai who have lost their cattle, confusing efforts to determine relations among these peoples. One of Kenya's smallest ethnic groups, Okiek live in local groups dispersed throughout the highlands, typically near one or more other Okiek groups and adjacent to more populous ethnic groups. In some areas these non Okiek neighbours are Maasai, in others Kipsigis, Nandi, or Kikuyu; many Okieks learn their neighbours' language in addition to their own. Okiek groups thus have distinctive histories of interaction with one another, with their neighbours, and with local government administration. Modes of social organization and linguistic patterns also vary among Okiek groups. This chapter concentrates on two Okiek groups in Narok District, on the western Mau Escarpment: Kaplelach and Kipchornwonek Okiek. Some contrasts with other Okiek groups will be noted. The baseline for description is the mid- 1980s.



Naoroy enole Kwonyo, a skilled Okiek potter, making a cooking pot, 1983. Foto: Corinne A. Kratz.

## History

Knowledge of Okiek history before 1900 is limited. Some Okiek, for example the Kipchornwonek, recount short migrations southward in the late 1800s; others, like the Kaplelach, recall no other place of residence. Okiek participated in regional trading networks wherever they lived. Those near Mount Kenya provided ivory, through middlemen, for early traders.

Colonial administration affected Okiek groups in very different ways. Between the 1920s and 1940s, many northern Okiek lost land to colonial game and forest reserves, and to European settlement. Some returned home repeatedly, despite being removed to other areas (Huntingford 1929). Further south, in a different district, Kaplelach and Kipchornwonek retained their land. Initially they had limited direct government interaction, but felt colonial policies directed at their neighbours. Colonial treaties in 1904 and 1911 moved their Maasai neighbours. Okiek groups gradually diversified their economy, adding agriculture and/or herding after about 1930. The timing and history of these changes varied among Okiek groups, in response to specific regional and government relations.

Huntingford first published extended descriptions of Okiek life in articles on Kipkururek and Kapchepkendi north of Nakuru (1929,1954). Blackburn's later research in 1968-9 produced articles on Okiek on the Mau Escarpment ( 1976,1982). Field research by Kratz on Kaplelach and Kipchornwonek is the most extensive to date ( 1981,1994). Recently, Marshall studied ethnoarchaeology with Piik aap Oom (1994).

## Ecological setting

The western Mau Escarpment where Kaplelach, Kipchornwonek, and several other Okiek groups live is a forested slope, roughly 66 km long, rising in altitude from 1800 to 2800 m. Okiek recognize five altitudinally related ecological zones. Ranging from open bush forest below 2100 m (soyua) to high, dense bamboo forest between 2400 and 2600 m (sisiyuet), each zone is distinguished by its most common plant and animal species. Zones have different honey-producing species and honey seasons which have determined Okiek patterns of mobility.

### Population

The total Okiek population is difficult to estimate because national census information combines Okiek with other people who have been called »Dorobo.« Okiek live in about two dozen dispersed local groups of about 600 – 900 people each.

### Location

Most Okiek live in forested highlands in west central Kenya (Mau Escarpment, Tindiret area, highlands north of Nakuru). A few groups live on savannah plains Maasai. One group, the Akie, live in Tanzania near the Maasai Steppe.

South and east of the escarpment stretch savannah plains where pastoral Maasai live. Agropastoralist Kipsigis and Nandi live in open, rolling hills to the escarpment's west and north.

## Settlement patterns, economy, and land tenure

Until recent land reforms, Kaplelach and Kipchornwonek divided land into lineage-owned tracts (konoito) stretching along the escarpment slope. Tracts transected four or five ecological zones, giving families access to honey during each season. Some Okiek, e.g., Piik aap Oom, had similar arrangements based on clan membership.

Okiek moved to different forest zones according to three main honey seasons, sometimes moving within zones. They hunted animals available where honey was ripe. Residence groups were small extended families, patrilineal cores that might be joined by affines and matrilineal relatives. Six to ten adjacent lineages constituted a named local group, a significant unit of cultural identity and history, though not associated with unique rights.

Making beehives, collecting honey, and hunting were all considered men's work. Honey was eaten, stored for future use, brewed into beer, traded, and sold. The animals hunted once included bushbuck, buffalo, elephant, duiker, hyrax, bongo, and giant forest hog (the most common quarry). Okiek hunted with dogs, bows and arrows, spears, and clubs, using poison for buffalo and elephant. Men also set traps. Women's work included processing and cooking food, building traditional houses, maintaining firewood and water supplies, most childcare, and making leather bags, straps, and, at one time, clothing. Unlike many other hunter-gatherers, Okiek gathered little plant food; they relied on a diet of meat and honey, supplemented by traded grains. With abundant rain and rich volcanic soil on the escarpment, few plants require the large tubers, nuts, and meaty fruits so important to hunter-gatherer diets in drier areas.

Kipchornwonek and Kaplelach began diversifying their hunting and honey-gathering life in parallel ways, ten to fifteen years apart. Kipchornwonek planted small millet gardens in the late 1930s-1940s; Kaplelach began later with maize. Initially, this made little difference in their living patterns. Over the next twenty years, however, agriculture became more important. Okiek began to settle more permanently in mid-altitude forest and to keep their few domestic animals at home. During these decades, men continued to hunt and collect honey regularly, travelling out from these settlements.

Kenya legislated general land demarcation in 1969. Before that, a group-owned ranch policy was developed for Maasai-dominated districts. Located in Narok District, Kaplelach and Kipchornwonek land was included, though their forests differ from semi-arid Maasai grasslands. Group-ranch demarcation began in the 1970s, crossing lineage land boundaries, incorporating non-Okiek into some groups, and registering some Okiek land to individuals who had never lived there. The highest forests became forest reserves. In the 1980s, Okiek began subdividing group-ranches into individually owned plots. Settlement patterns shifted again as people moved to live on their own land. Subdivision enables individuals to sell or lease land; most have done so, attracting many settlers from other parts of Kenya.

## Domestic organization, kinship, marriage, and gender

For Kaplelach and Kipchornwonek, patrilineages are central in land holding and residence, legal matters, inheritance, and marriage arrangement. Matrilineal and affinal relations are important for ceremonial occasions, in some residential and work groups, and in emotional terms. For some Okiek groups, for example the Kapchepkendi, patrilineages define social life and land rights more than patrilineages.

Until the late 1980s, lineage representatives arranged most Kipchornwonek and Kaplelach marriages. Women married soon after initiation into adulthood, at about age sixteen, living with the husband's family; men usually married in their twenties. Families arranged marriages during visits to the bride's family, discussing the match and bridewealth property given by the groom's family (today an average of six or seven cows). Elopement - not always successful - was one alternative to arranged marriage. Recently, more young Okiek have refused arranged marriages, instead eloping or delaying marriage. These shifts are related to demographic and economic changes in the area.

Household labor is allocated largely by gender and age. Division of forest-related labor was discussed above; agricultural work such as planting, weeding, and harvesting can be done by men and women alike. Men do most heavy garden clearing and manage family herds. Children help with farming, domestic work, and tending herds. Wives in polygynous families have their own houses and fields.

## Political organization

As discussed above, lineages, clans, and local groups are the main sociopolitical units of daily Okiek life above the household level. Further units are the age-sets, named cohorts of men, all initiated into adulthood within a specified period of time, usually at age fourteen. Age-sets



Kishoyian and Sanare leboo climbing a tree in pursuit of wild honey. Kishoyian is blowing bees from a comb before handing it down to Sanare, 1985. Photo: Corinne A Kratz.

create relationships of friendship and respect among members, crosscutting relations defined by lineage and clan. Women have no separate age-sets, but become associated with male age-sets through relatives.

Political and legal matters are discussed in meetings of men. Depending on the issue, gatherings involve men from one lineage, several lineages, or a large neighbourhood. All adult men have the right to attend and speak at meetings, though older men often speak more extensively. Women were traditionally excluded from formal councils; they recently began to attend some meetings called by government officers. Okiek had no ranked political offices until a few individuals became government officers. An Okiot assistant chief was first appointed among Kipchornwonek and Kaplelach in the late 1970s.

## Religion and aesthetics

Okiek believe in a beneficent god (Torooret or Asiista) and ancestor spirits who can bring misfortune if they are forgotten or if wrongs are committed. Major Okiek ceremonies celebrate stages of social maturation: a headshaving ceremony where a child receives a new name; an ear-piercing ceremony at age twelve to fourteen (now rarely practised); and initiation into adulthood. Performed around age fifteen, initiation is composed of four ceremonies. The first is the most important, elaborate, and dramatic ceremony (Kratz 1994). Boys and girls are both initiated, though separately. Genderspecific secrets and appropriate adult behaviour are taught during initiation seclusion. Other Okiek ceremonies concern peace, marriage, and pouring libations to ancestor spirits.

Christian missionary activity is relatively recent in Kaplelach and Kipchornwonek areas, quickening after 1980 with the influx of new settlers who purchased land. Churches have had greater influence on Kipchornwonek. Other Okiek groups have had longer involvements with Christian churches.

Okiek artistry produces a rich range of verbal art, oratory, and song as well as diverse material objects. Beaded personal ornament, made by women and worn by men and women, is among their most aesthetically striking creations (Klumpp and Kratz 1993). Okiek women also make tightly woven baskets and a variety of rouletted ceramics. Men's craftsmanship centers on weapons and tools, though they once fashioned bangles, animal ornaments, and snuff and tobacco containers from wood, horn, and ivory. On ceremonial occasions, young Okiek now paint and decorate houses elaborately.

## Current situation

The first primary school opened in the Kipchornwonek area in 1978; schools in the Kaplelach area followed in the early 1980s. Prior to this, children had to leave home to attend school. Schools are poorly equipped, but general attendance has increased since the late 1980s. A handful of Okiek from these areas have now gone to secondary school, a few continuing to trade school or university. Other Okiek groups, for example Maresionik, had earlier involvement in schooling.

The increase in Kipchornwonek and Kaplelach schools has gone hand in hand with the establishment of small trading centers and the planning and building of roads. Government services for agriculture, livestock, and development usually follow these changes. Some Okiek have taken up small-scale trading or opened kiosks. New settlers in these areas have given impetus in all of these developments.

Within five years of purchasing Kipchornwonek and Kaplelach land, which began about 1980, buyers started to settle and clear their new farms. The process began among Kipchornwonek; in some cases they helped Kaplelach find clients. Many buyers were Kipsigis people from further west, though Okiek in other areas sold land to Kikuyu. By 1990, the forests were severely reduced. Once virtually alone in the forests, Okiek were outnumbered by settlers by three or four to one.

Many land sales are technically illegal, made before group-ranches were divided (in 1994 some ranches still were not divided). Many sales were at ridiculously low prices, before Okiek learned about the market value of their land. Many Okiek sold land without knowing how much ranch land division would bring them. The future is sure to bring protracted disputes and severe land shortage for the Okiek.

Okiek have used some income from land sales to build tin-roofed houses, to invest in small businesses, and to satisfy household needs and clothing. Much of the income, received in small installments, has been spent on liquor. The amount of drinking has skyrocketed, especially among Okiek men; in Kipchornwonek areas, church influence tempered alcoholism to some extent in the 1990s.

Other Okiek groups are in different situations, having lost their territory during colonial times, and have been involved in the land struggle for decades. Again, in 1990, Okiek were chased from their homes in what had become the Southwest Mau Nature Reserve. Various government settlement schemes have been implemented or promised, but many Okiek have found no resolution to their land problems.

## Organization for resistance

Kaplelach and Kipchornwonek have yet to take community action to arrest land sales and forest clearing in their areas. In theory, individual Okiek women could protest with government offices to prevent their husbands from selling more land, but in practice this is difficult to do. On several occasions in the 1990s, Nairobi newspapers reported that elders from Okiek groups near Nakuru had protested about delayed settlement schemes and distribution of their settlement land to non-Okiek, even marching to State House. There is no organized resistance at a pan-Okiek level yet, though in the mid-1990s some Okiek from that area formed an organization to work for community and land rights.

»If you see these forests in future, phuuu! I hey will be lost.«

Kirutari araap Meitukut, February 1985.

»Any Kipsigis [buyer] that comes, I usually tell them, 'Aya, so you've come now to buy your children a farm. And my own? Where will they go? There is no other place [left]. The high forest there has become forest reserve. Where indeed will we still go to ourselves?' ...Do the children know now that the money of the land has been eaten? A very big argument is coming."

Laato enole Leboo, September 1993.

## Reading list

- Blackburn, R. (1976) . Okiek history. In B. A. Ogot (ed.), Kenya before 1900. Nairobi: East African Publishing House.  
(1982) . In the land of milk and honey. In E. B. Leacock and R. B. Lee (eds.), Politics and history in band societies, pp. 283-305. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huntingford, G. W. B. ( 1929) . Modern hunters: some account of the Kamelilo-Kapchepkendi Dorobo (Okiek) of Kenya colony. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 59:333-76.  
(1954). The political organization of the Dorobo. *Anthropos* 49:123-48.
- Kaare, B. ( 1997). The symbolic construction of community identity of the Akie hunter-gatherers of northeastern Tanzania. Doctoral dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science.  
(In press). Coping with state pressure to change: how the Akie hunter-gatherers of Tanzania seek to maintain their cultural identity. *Nomadic Peoples*.
- Kenny, M. ( 1981) . Mirror in the forest: the Dorobo hunter-gatherers as an image of the other. *Africa* 51 (1):477-96.
- Klumpp, D. and C. Kratz ( 1993) . Aesthetics, expertise, and ethnicity: Okiek and Maasai perspectives on personal ornament. In T. Spear and R. Waller (eds.), *Being Maasai*. London: James Currey.
- Kratz, C. A. ( 1981). Are the Okiek really Maasai? or Kipsigis? or Kikuyu? *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 79(20):355-68.  
(1994). *Affecting performance: meaning, movement, and experience in Okiek women's initiation*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Marshall, E (1994) . Food sharing and body part representation in Okiek faunal assemblages. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 21 (1) :65-77.
- Rottland, E and R. Vossen ( 1977) . Grundlagen für eine Klärung des Dorobo-Problems. In W. J. G. Mohlig, E Rottland, and B. Heine (eds.), *Zur Sprachgeschichte und Ethnohistorie in Afrika*. Berlin: Dietrich Verlagen.

## Film

No commercial or educational films have been made about Okiek. C. Kratz has deposited raw Super 8 footage from her research with Kapelach and Kipchornwonek Okiek in the Human Studies Film Archives at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History.

