Colonial Roots of Environmental Degradation of the Elgeyo Escarpment and the Search for Livelihoods

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Abstract
The Keiyo who inhabits and occupy the southern part of the Elgeyo escarpment are the subject of this study. Before the 1970s, the escarpment was carpeted with lush, semi-tropical vegetation. But due to factors associated with human activities, a large part of the mountainous slopes has been destroyed together with its ecosystems. It is a study in historical context that traces the demographic profile of the Keiyo and the economic challenges that they have faced in search of livelihoods. The study is about understanding the relationship between history, environmental degradation and peasant livelihoods. The theoretical starting point is provided by Kirk's environmental perception mode and studies on human behavioural characteristics. The Keiyo are culpable of reckless destruction of their ecosystem with devastating consequences of death, deluge and destruction. Landslides that have become a common occurrence began from the 1980s. This has been blamed on wanton tree cutting for charcoal and the use of fire to clear land for the cultivation of maize.

Key words: Keiyo, livelihoods, degradation, landslides and peasants

Introduction
This study was motivated by the precarious, uncertain and perilous nature of the lives of the people who inhabit the Elgeyo escarpment ledges. As recently as 28th -31st December 2012, about thirteen people lost their lives through landslides in what the media described as 'Hanging valleys'. The term may not be exact, but it illustrates the perilous nature of the escarpment landscape where the Keiyo gravitated for over three hundred years. The Elgeyo-Marakwet County Commissioner after seeing the devastation caused by the landslides had this to say:

Large populations of people live along the escarpment and hanging valleys which expose them to grave danger in case of mudslides, said Birik. He blamed cultivation of the escarpment for the tragedy, saying it weakened the soil." We are making recommendations to the Government. Among them is converting the hanging valleys into water catchment areas and resettling the residents elsewhere to ensure no life is lost anymore as a result of the landslides". -Standard Team, Monday, December 31, 2012.

A range of factors have been suggested to explain the above deadly occurrence. First, the relationship between Keiyo livelihoods, escarpment degradation and poverty is the main hypothesis. This relationship is examined in a wider context of the man-environment relations within mountainous landscapes. The second premise is that due to population growth that escalated since the 1980s, this led to a serious shortage of land hence poverty. Finally, all these led to land fragmentation in the middle cultivable slopes, depletion of soil fertility and declining standards of living that have been factored through cultivation on treacherous escarpment ledges.

The Elgeyo escarpment has been susceptible to landslides since the 1970s when peasant cultivators began to gravitate on the escarpment ledges planting maize crops on the hanging valleys. This study is premised on the possibility that the shifted cultivators have become agents rather than the cause of the forest degradation and landslides. During the dry season, the peasants burn off the sloppy woodlands, patch by patch. Removal of vegetation led to imminent rain-wash off topsoil gradually eroding whole landscapes.

Who is the Keiyo?

According to Albert Distefano (1985) the name Keiyo has been used to describe the collection of central Kalenjin communities inhabiting parts of the highlands, the Eastern Uasin Gishu Plateau and the Elgeyo Escarpment. For this essay, the name Keiyo rather than Elgeyo is used. This is the current usage of the people themselves. It is also important to note that the Keiyo are one of the larger communities of Kalenjin people. The Kalenjin comprise of the Kipsigis, Nandi, Tugen, Marakwet, Terik, Pokot, Sengwer, Okiek, Kony, Bongomek and Sebei. The last three have been grouped together as the Sabaot. There are historical, cultural, and linguistic connections between all these groups (Ehret 1976: 1-20). In reconstructing Kalenjin identity, J.EG. Sutton (19765: 24) quite rightly says that 'any Kalenjin knew-and this is still the case-who was and who was not a Kalenjin. Not only the language, but also basic way of life and social system of the various Kalenjin "tribes" and sections, clearly named and distinguished them from all other peoples. We can speak then of the Kalenjin in the pre-colonial period-remembering, though, that they never called themselves by that name until the eve of Kenya's independence.

The origin of the term Keiyo is not fully proven. Respondents gave two terminological meanings of the term. The third is

provided by J.A. Massam is his book, *The Cliff-Dwellers of Kenya* (1927). While a fourth and final one is considered through a web-based site. An informant who was well versed with the traditional history of the Keiyo, Kipchamasis Tireito (1987), averred that one school of thought contend that the name Keiyo was given to them by Nandi women. The narrative goes on to state that barren Nandi women were able to conceive only when they migrated to the land of Keiyo hence Keiyo-land referred to as the place of the *Kip-Kee-iiyo* (associated with barrenness/emptiness). A second school of thought contends that the people we now know as the Keiyo were a self-centred people living individually on the escarpment ledges. As a result, their kinfolk the Tugen and the Nandi referred to them as the *Kip-Ke-ii-ya* (singular) or *Kipkeiinik* (plural), (secluded and frugal people). In the course of time, the above references were corrupted to read Keiyo. And finally, the colonial administrator cum anthropologist, J.A. Massam has argued that the term Keiyo was coined by the Maasai people. The Maasai who during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries inhabited the Uasin Gishu Plateau, and parts of the Elgeyo escarpment and therefore strongly associated with the Keiyo in war and peace; termed the inhabitants of the Kerio valley floor as the "II-Keyu". This was later corrupted by the Arab and Swahili traders to refer to Elgeyo. Weldon Kirui in "History of the Keiyo" (www.kalenjin.net, accessed on 11 September 2012) has correctly explained that the origin of the Keiyo is mainly relayed through oral traditions and genealogy. The narrative goes out that the original Keiyo trace their ancestry to *Mnyoot*, a supposed ancestor of the entire Kalenjin people. That while for example, the Kipsigis chose the task of reproduction-*Kosigis*, the Keiyo chose to practice milking of livestock hence the name, *Keii-syo*. In Keiyo parlance, *Keei* is to milk while *syo* is the act of milking. The name of *Keisyo* was later revered to the Keiyo according to the website. Whatever the case, the Keiyo have had a long history of moving along valleys, rivers, hills and the escarpment ledges. They preferred settling on foothills to avoid wild animals especially the cheetah (*Chebo Kerit*) which instilled a sense of constant fright in the psyche of the Keiyo people. Essentially, among the Keiyo, special environmental elements dictated that they use their territory and landscapes efficiently to get a maximum return.

Centrality of Landscapes in the Making of the Keiyo

According to Mwanzi, H.A (1975), geography may not explain fully why a people choose a certain area for habitation. But once settled in a given area, the geography of the area does affect a people's way of life. Keiyo territorial landscapes falls into three physical regions that run parallel to each other in a north-south direction. These are from west to east; the Highland Plateau, the Elgeyo Escarpment and the Kerio Valley. The highland plateau rises gradually from an altitude of 2,700m on the Metkei ridges in the south to the north culminating in the Kibargoi ranges which reach heights of about 3,000m at the northern Kaptarakwa boundary. To the east of the plateau, the land falls precipitously in a series of steep uplands and flat plateaus that make up the Elgeyo escarpment. Thereafter, it ends in the Kerio Valley that averages 1,000m above sea level. The Kerio valley is narrow, averaging 6.4 kilometres in width and runs 150 km from north to south (Republic of Kenya 1988). The Elgeyo escarpment is characterized by rugged hills, deep valleys, rock outcrops and incised gullies which form seasonal streams that drain into the Kerio River. During the pre-colonial period, the Kerio valley and the escarpment ledge was not easily accessible except through a limited number of passes. This offered the Keiyo a sense of protection. In addition, the people associated their historical identity through the naming of individual abode and habitation. Keiyo landscape history more than anything else has ensured the continuous perpetuation of traditional memory and history especially through the various clans. Virtually all Keiyo clans owned strips of land running from the highlands down to the escarpment into the Kerio valley floor. Such strips were often demarcated by a row of stones or a certain type of vegetation.

Keiyo exploitation of the three varying ecological zones considered the difficult ecological and environmental character. The Kerio Valley floor was basically used for grazing, although cultivation was done along the flood plains of the Kerio River. The yearly floods of the Kerio River were always a welcome relief for they brought fresh fertile soil and moisture for planting and the growth of grass for livestock grazing. Hunting and honey collection were possible in the open woodlands of the Kerio-valley. Cultivation was practiced on the upper slopes of the Kerio-valley and the foothills of the escarpment. It was here that villages and hamlets were set up because the escarpment was cooler than the valley floor and free from mosquitoes and tsetse flies. Secondly, the zone was more defensible and therefore secure from attack. Habitation of the highland plateau began in the later part of the nineteenth century.

Virtually the entire Keiyo territory is hilly, steep and precipitous. The environment around the Elgeyo escarpment has contributed to the emergence and consolidation of a Keiyo identity. These physical features have more than anything else contributed to the emergence of Keiyo identity. The lifeline of Keiyo livestock and people were the rivers draining to the Kerio River. The Kerio River was itself a permanent source of water for people and their domestic animals. Salt licks were available nearby. Occasionally Keiyo country would be extremely harsh and desolate because of rainfall failure. The Keiyo during such times abandoned their homes and fled to Nandi, Kipsigis or Maasai land in search of food. Consequently, the Keiyo experienced devastating challenges in their historical process of materialization. Geography has thus shaped the Keiyo identity. It guided their choices for habitation, technologies used and access to battles with their neighbours for expansion to new territories. The escarpment ledge had a cool climate and could easily be defended hence functioned as a sanctuary to famine refugees, barren women rejected by their communities found comfort and in the twentieth century the escarpment became a haven for people in flight from the tax-collector. Having found sanctuary in the escarpment ledges, the Keiyo set about interacting with the environment. Until the early part of the twentieth century, land was not commodified among the Keiyo. It is the arrival of British colonialism that introduced land ownership occasioning land shortages among the Keiyo forcing them to gravitate on the escarpment ledges. The most serious was Keiyo land loss from 1904.

Keiyo Land Loss and Reaction 1904 to 1939

As far as Keiyo-European contact was concerned, the first European settlement on Keiyo lands began in 1904. The earliest application by Europeans for land on the Uasin Gishu Plateau was made in 1904 by W.F. Van Breda on behalf of himself and his two brothers. The three brothers had arrived from South Africa in February 1903, and each obtained ten thousand acres of land. They then went ahead to the plateau to make their selections around the Sergoit rock. Besides farming one of the brothers engaged in surveying for the administration. The Van Breda Concession was the first grant of land on the Uasin Gishu Plateau to Europeans. The

success of the Van Breda brothers persuaded other settlers to stake claims on the Uasin Gishu Plateau. One of these was Major Arnold who was so impressed with the reports of the plateau that he came at once from South African and settled with his family in the same year. He was accompanied by John de Waal who bought land from the Van Bredas in 1905, and later became one of the leading Afrikaner farmers on the plateau. The largest single South African group to move to Uasin Gishu was that of Jan Van Rensburg, a prominent Transvaal farmer (Groen, 1974:32-54).

Isaiah Chesang (1973) examined the consequences of land alienation on the Keiyo. He argues that following the settlement of the Uasin Gishu Plateau by Europeans, there emerged a competition among the Keiyo for grazing grassland, a competition which ended with the colonial office making the Keiyo *subservie*nt and *integral* to the colonial settler economy (emphasis his). Evidence shows, however, that the Keiyo were made only partially subservient and were never fully integrated into the settler economy. Most Keiyo were never dependent on the settler economy save for labouring to get grassland and to obtain tax money. This is illustrated by the fact that the Keiyo laboured on the settler farms and estates for not more than two months per year. This was a phenomenon that greatly distressed both the settlers and the colonial administration. In other words, those who prolonged their stay as squatters did so purely for the purposes of accumulating wealth through stock rearing. Thus, the Keiyo squatters used the settlers for their own ends.

By 1929 the Annual Report (KNA/ELGM/1/1,1928-1932) report showed that there were over one thousand Keiyo squatters who held one third of the total cattle population on the European farms. Signing on as squatters was thus a way of obtaining pasture for their livestock. In fact, most Keiyo preferred squatter labour to wage labour. As squatters, they had right to cultivate part of the land and to use it for grazing their livestock. The grazing grounds found in settler farms were generally referred to as kap-blue (a Keiyo-term for grazing lands available in settler farms). Living in a marginal area sometimes forced the Keiyo to seek employment on European farms, especially during periods of famine usually brought on by severe droughts common to the area. The famines of 1918-19, 1926 and 1930 are remembered as having been the most severe. It is, however, important to note that unlike the Kikuyu, squatting for the Keiyo was viewed as a temporary measure. It did not involve a complete severing of physical ties with their original homelands. The Keiyo had their feet in two camps, their places of work and their areas of origin.

Those who were not willing to register as squatters devised ways and means of grazing their cattle on settler farms or in the forest grades. Popular for those bordering the farms or the forest was to graze their cattle in the Grogan Concession amid the danger of confiscation or imprisonment. Mzee Chebaige moved with his father's cattle to Wellwood's farm near Kipkabus in the 1930s. The farm being so wide, he was able to graze the livestock unnoticed for a whole week. Then he claims he was betrayed by a kipnyapara (supervisor) accompanied by his fierce dogs ambushed him. The dogs attacked with him tearing his clothes. His father's livestock were confiscated by Wellwood. He was charged in an Eldoret court and sentenced to nine months for trespassing.

One cannot, however, ignore the fact that the Keiyo were fully co-opted into the settler economy as illuminated by an exceptional case of one informant, Arap Kandie. A scourge of smallpox wiped out his whole family long before the *boriet ab Jerman nebo tai* (First World War). He managed to survive alone and sought refuge among the Nandi. On his way a settler nicknamed Kipukan (Van der Heyden) offered him employment. He was then about ten years old and served the settler until 1963 when the settler left the country after independence. Arap Kandie was one individual who developed himself economically outside the reserve and became quite successful despite the odds. As he put it:

I began by washing dishes, and then a garden boy. I was promoted later to a chief cook. This is where I got married and raised a family. Trouble began when I sent my children to school in the 1930s. The settler was not amused. He began slapping me daily and threatened me with eviction, if I did not withdraw my children from school. My friend Kiptoo Chirchir got me a farm in Chepkorio in case the threat became real. If I grew maize on the farm, he would wait until they ripen before destroying the crop by firing from his gun. Despite everything, I have managed to educate my 24 children to a minimum of form four level

Keiyo became squatters, while others were content to remain in the reserve trespassing to graze on the settler farms.

There were indeed other Keiyo who could not fit into the above scheme, so they emigrated with their livestock to Cherangany hills. Sometime in the 1920s the colonial government informed the Keiyo that Cherangany hills had been added to their reserves. There was a wave of migration with information reaching the Keiyo reserve on the availability of sufficient grass. However, the hopes raised by the government proved to be immature. None of the lands were to be exchanged and the Keiyo were barred from emigrating to Cherangany. It was argued by the colonial administration that the Native Lands Trust Ordinance made no provision for exchanges.[87] However, before the halt in emigration to Cherangany one of my informants claims that:

I went to Cherangany in the early 1930s. My land in the reserve was not sufficient to graze my eighty head of cattle. Chief Cheptorus arap Lenja was also forcing us to reduce our stock. They were even telling us to get employment on settler farms. I had never cultivated in my life and could never do so. That is for women and weaklings. All the time they were threatening us with imprisonment. I distributed my cattle among my brothers and moved to Cherangany despite the restrictions on the number of stocks. There, I acquired a huge chunk of unclaimed land. I married from the neighbouring Pokot and became accepted

Another possibility open to the Keiyo was to rent grazing grounds. Depending on the attitude of the various conservators of forests, the Keiyo paid twenty cents in a Concession per cow per month to graze. Those with goats were not allowed, and prices were increased in the case of a large number of applicants. A small group rented grazing land, while others who could not afford the rent devised ways of circumventing those unfavourable colonial policies. The Keiyo could graze at night or early in the morning when least likely to be caught and arrested. They could cut the wire fence to enable their stock to get through. According to one of the affected settlers, J.W. Reid of Kipkabus, the Keiyo would always take the risk of being caught to graze their livestock.

At times, however, reaction from the settlers took a violent turn. Kiptoo Chirchir recalls how Bwana Ulaya (Mr. C.J. Theunissen) would go around beating the herds boys and at times demanding compensation. One day, he apprehended a herds boy and tied him up outside his granary for three days without food. In cases where the culprit was not apprehended villages under headmen were forced to pay a levy. As it were, the imposition of a levy was vehemently rejected by the Keiyo. In the 1930s, Daniel Sawe Kibiab, a head man and later chief, together with Chesire arap Chepnyakwol, a member of the L.N.C. argued that such generalized levies would not stop people from grazing in the concession.

The colonial administration at Tambach was not, however, averse to settler victimization of the Keiyo. For instance, there was the case of G.J. Macdonald of Sergoit who was cautioned by the District Commissioner Tambach in 1939:

Your remedy of trespass does not lie in impounding the offending animals and you are not within your rights in demanding immediate compensation. You must understand that you cannot go on shooting goats and young steers. Please realize that farm cattle do stray into the reserve

Macdonald was infuriated and claimed that the District Commissioner, Mr. Storr-Fox was a 'Pro-native':

Since your support the natives in sabotage and theft by denying there had been any, I shall have to deal with it myself, whether you like it or not. Now I refuse to meet you in anyway and my boys have orders not to give you any information but to report to me if you should visit the farm again. The attitude of Tambach who in my experience behave like a hen with one chick renders life extremely difficult.

True to colonial policy of supporting the settlers, the District Commission was very remorseful.

Should you be able to come to Tambach while I am at home – I will see that there are adequate stocks of home bread mead which is the stuff which made our ancestors grow those wings on the huts, to make us forget any quarrels which we might ever have had.

The District Commission was thus ready to compromise Keiyo interests to please European settlers. Storr Fox had learnt a lesson that no amount of appeasement would lessen settler intimidation of the Keiyo.

Coupled with the problem of a shortage grazing land was the denial of access to water and salt licks. Lake Sergoit and the salt lick at Kipkabus had all along provided the Keiyo with their requirements. However, with the establishment of settler farms, all the access routes were blocked. Arap Chelangat recounted the great losses he suffered. The only other available salt licks were found in the Kerio Valley at Ng'entui and Chebilat. The distance travelled led to the deaths of a large number of livestock. The obstructive presence of settlers drove a serious wedge between the Keiyo, the settlers and the various district officials. In all cases of dealing with access to the salt licks and watering points, the settlers prevailed by claiming that Keiyo cattle were infected with ticks and could infect their own. The colonial administration went further and through the veterinary department imposed a quarantine on the movement of cattle during the 1930s and 1940s. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 placed further demands on the Keiyo. They were called upon to hand over livestock and to labour in the settler farms as their contribution to the 'war effort'.

Conclusion

This study is a about the way in which the Keiyo people have interacted with the natural environment throughout their history by variously adapting, exploiting and recently by destroying it. This investigation was done within the framework of social and environmental history. The main objectives included: To understand the historical process of the interaction between the Keiyo and their unique environmental feature; evaluate the impact of population growth and the demographic profile on land use and consequences on peasant livelihoods; Investigate the relationship between land, labour and poverty among the Keiyo and the impact of colonialism on forest conservation and finally to suggest far-reaching possibilities of reclaiming the picturesque escarpment that was historically used to be carpeted with lush, semi-tropical vegetation on the slopes.

Data Availability

Oral data and Archival sources that formed the basis of this study have been deposited at the Kenya National Archives, Nairobi

Conflicts of Interest

"The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper."

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